

Marching to different drums:
The consequences of intra-party divisions
on party and voting behavior

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Abstract

As complex organizations, political parties often internally disagree over key policy issues. These divisions have become increasingly relevant for European politics. Yet, dominant theoretical approaches to party competition still assume that parties are unitary actors. I posit that this assumption is empirically unfounded and limits our understanding of important political phenomena. By theorizing the effects of intra-party divisions, the dissertation helps us understand why parties and voters often behave in ways that go against the predictions of the dominant approaches.

The first part of this dissertation theorizes and empirically tests how intra-party divisions shape party behavior. I find that parties generally avoid divisive issues but may also change or blur their divisive positions. External pressures exerted by niche rivals can, however, push mainstream parties towards issue engagement and accommodation of the niche party's positions. These insights improve our understanding of why parties accommodate in the first place. The second part of the dissertation examines how intra-party divisions affect voting behavior. I argue that divisions condition the electoral success of party policy shifts. First, I offer an answer to the question of why mainstream party accommodation of niche rivals often backfires. I show that voters punish divided mainstream parties for accommodation, while united parties suffer no such penalty. Second, I answer the broader question of why observational research finds little evidence that voters reward parties for aligning with their policy preferences. I demonstrate that the intra-party contestation of policy shifts provides a partial explanation for this missing responsiveness reward.

Sammanfattning på Svenska

Som komplexa organisationer präglas politiska partier ofta av interna menings-skiljaktigheter i centrala politiska frågor. Dessa splittringar har blivit alltmer betydelsefulla i europeisk politik. Trots det utgår de dominerande teoretiska perspektiven på partikonkurrens fortfarande från att partier är enhetliga aktörer. Jag hävdar att detta antagande saknar empirisk grund och begränsar vår förståelse av viktiga politiska fenomen. Genom att teoretisera kring effekterna av interna partisplittringar bidrar avhandlingen till att förklara varför partier och väljare ofta agerar på ett sätt som strider mot de dominerande synsätten.

Den första delen av avhandlingen teoretiserar och prövar empiriskt hur splittringar inom partierna formar partiernas beteende. Jag finner att partier generellt undviker kontroversiella frågor, men att de också kan förändra eller göra sina kontroversiella ståndpunkter mindre tydliga. Externa påtryckningar från nischkonkurrenter kan dock driva mainstream-partier att engagera sig i dessa frågor och anpassa sig till nischpartiernas ståndpunkter. Dessa insikter förbättrar vår förståelse av varför partier överhuvudtaget anpassar sig. Den andra delen av avhandlingen undersöker hur interna partisplittringar påverkar röstbeteendet. Jag hävdar att sådana splittringar påverkar den valmässiga framgången för partiers politiska kursändringar. För det första besvarar jag frågan om varför mainstream-partiers anpassning till nischkonkurrenter ofta slår tillbaka. Jag visar att väljare straffar splittrade mainstream-partier för deras anpassning, medan enade partier inte utsätts för något motsvarande straff. För det andra besvarar jag den mer övergripande frågan om varför observationsstudier inte finner några tydliga belägg för att väljare belönar partier som anpassar sig till deras politiska preferenser. Jag visar att intern partikonflikt kring politiska kursändringar delvis förklarar varför denna belöning för lyhördhet uteblir.

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1

Introduction

On the 29th of January 2025, the German center-right *Christlich Demokratische Union* (CDU) under the leadership of then-chancellor candidate Friedrich Merz introduced a parliamentary motion to severely restrict immigration into Germany. As an opposition party, the CDU only managed to pass the motion with the votes of the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), breaking a long-standing embargo of any form of collaboration with the party (“*cordon sanitaire*”). This marked a high point in the CDU’s shift towards accommodating the highly restrictive immigration position of their far-right rival and was met with intense public protests and widespread news coverage. Even within the CDU, the shift and the violation of the *cordon sanitaire* faced significant criticism. Former CDU leader and long-time chancellor Angela Merkel returned from political retirement to criticize Friedrich Merz in an unprecedented, highly publicized statement. Regional CDU leaders further announced that they would sink the motion in Germany’s other parliamentary chamber. The motion eventually failed in its second reading, partly because of the abstention of several CDU Members of Parliament (MPs).

The case of the CDU is just one out of many examples of parties internally disagreeing over important political issues. Not only are these divisive issues commonplace, but internal turmoil resulting from their increasing relevance has already had major societal consequences. These are best illustrated by the case of Brexit. The Eurosceptic UK Independence Party (UKIP) managed to successfully reintroduce the issue of European integration into party

competition, highlighting major ideological disagreements within the mainstream parties. Within the then-ruling Conservative Party, these disagreements manifested in significant infighting and, ultimately, resulted in then Prime Minister David Cameron calling for a nationwide referendum on European Union (EU) membership to resolve those conflicts (Bale 2018). What came after is, of course, well-known. Not only did the UK leave the EU, necessitating the restructuring of entire economic and political systems and relationships, but it also ended with the eventual takeover of the Conservatives by hard Eurosceptics with far-right sympathies.

While these anecdotal examples clearly suggest that intra-party divisions matter, we still know surprisingly little about their consequences for party and voting behavior. The dominant theoretical approaches to party competition have, so far, sidelined intra-party dynamics. Instead, they tend to assume that parties are unitary actors, where leaders set strategy without internal constraints. As Adams (2012: 403) aptly puts it: “virtually all spatial models specify parties as unitary actors that announce their policy intentions to the electorate”. Most of the time, this assumption is not explicitly stated, but it is implicitly integral to all studies that conceptualize parties as single homogeneous units. Simplifying assumptions are often needed to help our theories focus on what is most important for understanding some phenomenon. The unitary actor assumption is, however, in many cases, not only unfounded but also crucially limits our ability to theorize and study party competition (Fagerholm 2016: 506). I instead view parties as complex organizations where ideological disagreements are par for the course. In this dissertation, I thus set out to answer the overarching question of how intra-party divisions on important political issues affect party and voting behavior.

The dissertation is situated within a growing literature questioning the unitary actor assumption. Much of this emerging literature has focused on the consequences of variation in the broader organizational party structures, such as intra-party democracy (Lehrer 2012; Lehrer *et al.* 2017; Marini 2025;

Schwenk 2024), leadership domination (Koedam 2022a; Schumacher *et al.* 2013; Schumacher and Giger 2018), and factionalism (Budge *et al.* 2010; Harmel and Tan 2003). In contrast, I am interested in ideological divisions on specific contentious issues, such as immigration. Issue-based divisions present a unique type of factionalism, which has become increasingly important over the last two decades, fueled by the rise of so-called “issue entrepreneurs”. Issue entrepreneurial parties have successfully managed to disrupt established party systems by running on issues that divide their rivals and give them a competitive edge (De Vries and Hobolt 2012; Hobolt and De Vries 2015; van de Wardt *et al.* 2014). This phenomenon is best exemplified by the rise of far-right parties, like the AfD and UKIP, which prominently campaign on restrictive immigration policies and their opposition to the EU. Divisive issues like these are now front and center of many elections throughout the European continent. So, what are the consequences of these issue-based intra-party divisions?

My overarching argument can be broken down into two components. First, I argue that issue-based intra-party divisions not only shape the strategic calculus of party leaders who need to manage them but also have unanticipated consequences, which affect party behavior. Specifically, divisions push parties towards distinct behaviors, such as issue avoidance, position change, and blurring. External pressures can, however, counteract these tendencies and prompt issue engagement. Second, issue-based divisions can have profound negative electoral consequences by affecting voter evaluations of parties. I posit that divisions are particularly harmful for parties that try to change policy positions, as they undermine the credibility, competence, and persuasiveness of these shifts in the eyes of voters.

The dissertation is divided into two parts with two papers each. In the first part, I theorize and empirically test how intra-party divisions affect party behavior. In Paper I, I argue that parties avoid divisive issues as well as change and blur their internally divisive issue positions. The paper contributes to the

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dominant spatial, salience, and blurring approaches to party competition by developing an integrated theoretical framework that accounts for the non-unitary nature of parties.

Paper II examines how the interplay of external pressures and intra-party divisions shapes party behavior. I argue that the electoral success and issue entrepreneurship of “niche” parties, such as the AfD or UKIP, can lead divided mainstream parties to accommodate the issues and positions of these challengers. This has the paradoxical implication that while parties generally avoid divisive issues, niche pressures can steer them towards issue engagement. The paper improves our understanding of why parties compete on issues that are, in theory, disadvantageous to them and how policy shifts can be an unanticipated consequence of intra-party dynamics rather than strategic vote-seeking behavior.

In the second part of the dissertation, I focus on how intra-party divisions shape voting behavior and citizens’ evaluations of parties. Paper III investigates how intra-party divisions shape the electoral success of mainstream party strategies on niche issues, such as European integration and immigration, typically associated with Eurosceptics and the far right. I argue that divisions prevent parties from successfully accommodating the positions of their niche rivals. Voters who favor accommodation may doubt the credibility and competence of divided accommodators, while voters who do not favor accommodation are unlikely to be persuaded by these parties. The paper contributes to our understanding of when policy shifts fail, despite dominant theories of party competition predicting their electoral success.

Paper IV extends these insights to propose a broader theory of how divisions affect the electoral success of party policy shifts. I argue that voters reward policy shifts that align parties with their personal preferences less when they are publicly contested by key intra-party actors. Intra-party contestation not only negatively affects shift credibility and party competence evaluations but also leads to voter misperceptions of the new position. The paper provides

causal evidence of the negative electoral consequences of issue-based intra-party divisions. It also improves our understanding of when voters do not behave in line with expectations from dominant spatial voting models.

By breaking with the unitary actor assumption and specifically focusing on the consequences of issue-based intra-party divisions, my dissertation thus contributes to several contemporary academic debates in the fields of party competition and voting behavior, with the ultimate goal of better understanding a range of monumental political phenomena.

The remainder of the introductory chapter will be structured as follows. First, I discuss the key concept—intra-party divisions. Then, I review the different literatures that the dissertation contributes to and introduce the theoretical framework. After discussing data selection and methodological choices, I summarize the four papers that form the core of this dissertation. I conclude by discussing contributions, limitations, and avenues for future research.

What are intra-party divisions?

To theorize any potential consequences of intra-party divisions, it is imperative first to discuss what the concept entails. The conceptual literature on party divisions is scarce, but three contributions stand out. Klingelhöfer and Müller (2024) develop the concept of intra-party (dis-)unity, characterized by two dimensions. The homogeneity-heterogeneity dimension indicates whether party actors substantively agree on “policy, ideology, personnel, and strategy” (Klingelhöfer and Müller 2024: 208). The harmony-hostility dimension indicates how different claims are communicated. In their conceptualization, hostility is a necessary condition for intra-party conflict. Heterogeneity without hostility is simply described as a “broad-appeal” strategy that can help boost the electoral appeal of parties (Somer-Topcu 2015).

My conceptualization of intra-party divisions builds on this work with some notable differences. Klingelhöfer and Müller (2024) are primarily interested in the harmony-hostility dimension and the resulting intra-party conflict. I view the harmony-hostility dimension as a way of capturing how issue-based divisions are handled and thus endogenous to party behavior. Broad-appeal strategies offer one possible harmonious way to deal with preference heterogeneity but are, in my view, conceptually distinct, and can also be employed by homogeneous parties to appeal to a divided electorate (Koedam 2021: 663; Rovny 2012: 271).

I am instead interested in ideological divisions on specific policy issues (“issue-based divisions”) and focus my attention on the homogeneity-

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heterogeneity dimension. Accordingly, I understand intra-party divisions as the presence of preference heterogeneity within a political party on a given issue. This minimalistic definition encompasses anything from a minor difference of opinion between two members of a local party branch to major public infighting between political elites. The highly publicized disagreement between former German Chancellor Angela Merkel and current Chancellor Friedrich Merz over immigration policy exemplifies the latter. The important part is that the involved actors hold heterogeneous issue preferences. To better understand division, it can also be helpful to think of its polar opposite—unity. I conceptualize unity as the complete absence of divisions or, in other words, complete agreement (preference homogeneity) of all intra-party actors on a specific political issue. Empirically, parties are unlikely to reach this utopian state of complete unity on any relevant issue. It is, therefore, much more useful to think of a unity-division spectrum that encompasses strong variation across several dimensions. But which dimensions are the most relevant?

The first dimension—intensity—is the most trivial. By intensity, I simply refer to the level of preference heterogeneity, ranging from complete preference homogeneity to insurmountable differences in issue preferences. Consider the example of abortion policy. At one end of the spectrum, two party actors may disagree over the number of weeks after gestation that abortion should be accessible without constraints. One may favor 12 weeks, the other 14. At the other end of the spectrum, they may disagree over whether abortion should be legal in all cases or banned in all cases. Intuitively, one would expect that minor differences in opinion are likely to have lesser consequences for party and voting behavior than major disagreements.

Bolleyer and Kölln's (2025) conceptual contribution highlights the importance of an additional dimension—publicity. Using slightly different terminology, they divide the overarching concept of what I refer to as intra-party divisions into three hierarchically organized sub-concepts (Bolleyer and Kölln 2025: 6). The lowest level of divisions is friction, characterized by simple

preference heterogeneity between different party actors. To reach the next level of disagreement, the diverging preferences need to be publicly expressed. The final level of conflict necessitates that the party officially address the matter.

I adopt the publicity dimension from their conceptualization. For my purposes, the dimension captures the extent to which divisions are displayed publicly. Divisions can range from private disagreements to conflicts confined to the backrooms of party conferences, all the way to major mediatized confrontations (see CDU example). The publicity dimension may thus matter a great deal for whether citizens perceive divisions.

The final key conceptual contribution concerns the types of actors involved in intra-party divisions. Examining ideological and hierarchical factions in Sweden, Kölln and Polk (2024) show that the two do not always coincide. Instead, preference heterogeneities exist across the party hierarchy. The actor type dimension thus taps into who disagrees with whom. In the introductory example, party elites, personified by former Chancellor Merkel and other leading CDU figures, disagreed with the party line set forth by leader Merz. In other cases, the rank-and-file or party activists may disagree with the leadership. I mainly differentiate between party elites and the party base as the primary two intra-party actors of interest that may disagree with the party line and each other.

To summarize, I build on the conceptual literature on intra-party divisions to derive three key dimensions, which I expect to shape party and voting behavior. The dimensions covered in this dissertation are intensity (“how strong?”), publicity (“how public?”), and actor type (“who is involved?”).

Throughout the dissertation, I explore variation in these dimensions of intra-party divisions. It should be noted that the three are likely intertwined. Minor disagreements are unlikely to be interesting enough to attract massive media scrutiny, whereas major conflicts better lend themselves to attention-grabbing headlines. Some levels of division intensity can thus be seen as a

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necessary condition for (higher) levels of publicity. Publicity is also likely related to actor type. Minor disagreements involving two key public figures within the party, such as two competitors for party leadership, may generate more public attention than major disagreements between two local activists. These interrelations are important to consider for the eventual empirical operationalization of the division concept.

In the theory section, I discuss how the different division dimensions vary in their potential to shape party and voting behavior. In the data and methods section, I detail how the different empirical measures of intra-party divisions used in the dissertation correspond to my conceptualization.

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Party competition and voting behavior

In this section, I discuss spatial and salience theory—the two dominant theoretical approaches in the field of party competition and voting behavior. I provide an overview of empirical research within the two frameworks and discuss recent advancements in their integration. Throughout the literature review, I highlight different theoretical puzzles. These are instances in which parties and voters behave in ways that defy the dominant theoretical approaches. My main claim is that we can solve these puzzles and markedly improve our understanding of party and voting behavior in contemporary European politics by breaking with the often-implicit unitary actor assumption, which undergirds most extant theories (Adams 2012: 403; Fagerholm 2016: 506). To advance debates in the field, I thus propose an integrated spatial and salience theoretical framework that views party competition through the lens of intra-party dynamics.

3.1 Spatial theory

Scholars working within the spatial tradition are primarily interested in how parties position themselves in a given policy space. Building on the seminal work of Downs (1957), basic spatial theory posits that voters cast their ballot for the party that best represents their policy preferences on

one or several dimensions. Rational parties thus position themselves to maximize their vote share. Accordingly, election outcomes are determined by the interplay of party positions and voter distributions. In the following, I review the spatial literature in two parts. The first covers empirical research on the drivers of party policy change, and the second focuses on spatial voting.

3.1.1 Spatial theory and party behavior

Empirical research on the determinants of party position-taking can broadly be divided into two main strands, respectively emphasizing the role of 1) public opinion and 2) rival parties. Scholars have tested several empirical implications of the core spatial theoretical proposition that parties position themselves to maximize their vote share. Adams *et al.* (2004) find that parties shift their positions to align with public opinion when the public shifts away from them. Building on this insight, a vast literature on party responsiveness to public opinion has emerged. With some exceptions (Dassonneville *et al.* 2025; O’Grady and Abou-Chadi 2019), most research supports the initial finding that parties are responsive to the evolving preferences of the public. It remains, however, contested to whom parties respond. Early findings suggested that mainstream parties respond to the general electorate, whereas niche parties only respond to partisan constituents (Adams *et al.* 2006; Bergman and Hjerimitslev 2025; Bischof and Wagner 2020; Ezrow *et al.* 2011; Ferland 2020; Hjerimitslev and Bergman 2025). These findings have been challenged by several studies showing that mainstream and niche parties follow the partisan constituency model and adapt their positions to align with their supporters (Ibenskas and Polk 2022a, 2022b, 2024; Lehmann 2026b). Other work suggests that party responsiveness to public opinion is conditioned by left-right ideology

(Adams *et al.* 2009), exposure to economic markets (Ezrow and Hellwig 2014), voter turnout (Ezrow and Krause 2023), electoral volatility (Dassonneville 2018), information uncertainty (Lindvall *et al.* 2023), electoral systems and referenda (Steenbergen *et al.* 2007), party size (Williams and Spoon 2015), objective conditions, and rival parties (Vrânceanu 2019).

The second strand of research argues that parties shift in response to rival party shifts. Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009) demonstrate that parties shift their position in the same direction as their rivals, especially if they are ideologically proximate. Another part of the literature on rival influences asks how the emergence of niche parties affects the positions of mainstream parties. Empirical findings demonstrate that mainstream parties shift towards more anti-immigration (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020; Atzpodien 2022; Han 2015; van Spanje 2010), Eurosceptic (Meijers 2017), pro-welfare (Krause and Giebler 2020), and welfare chauvinistic positions (Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016) in response to the electoral success of the far-right. This can be referred to as “spatial accommodation” (Wagner and Meyer 2017).

3.1.2 Spatial theory and voting behavior

There is strong evidence that voters cast their ballot for ideologically proximate parties (Duell *et al.* 2026; Flavin and Law 2022; Kamphorst 2024; Tomz and Houweling 2009). Most studies find that proximity voting dominates other voting models (van der Brug 2004; Tomz and Houweling 2008) and that ideological proximity outclasses other explanations of vote choice (Dai and Kustov 2024; Lehrer *et al.* 2024). The obvious implication for parties is to adjust their positioning to continuously align with voter preferences. As evidenced by the review of the party responsiveness literature, parties do follow this logic to some extent.

Yet, the observational literature on the electoral consequences of policy shifts has found little evidence that voters reward parties for these responsive shifts (Adams 2012; Ferland and Dassonneville 2021; Luypaert *et al.* 2025). At best, studies indicate that parties may receive small electoral rewards for shifting towards the mean voter after a time lag (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009b) or when in opposition (Bawn and Somer-Topcu 2012). At worst, research even suggests that niche parties tend to get electorally punished for moderating their positions to align with the mean voter (Adams *et al.* 2006). Based on the observational findings, it appears that the spatial equation is incomplete. Parties seem to largely behave in line with dynamic spatial theoretical expectations, but voters do not. In stark contrast, experimental studies consistently show that voters reward responsive shifts that bring parties closer to their personal preferences (Croco 2016; Croco and Gartner 2014; Doherty *et al.* 2016; Nasr and Hoes 2024; Tomz and Van Houweling 2010, 2014). This leaves us with a first theoretical puzzle.

Puzzle 1: Why do observational studies, against the predictions of standard spatial theoretical models, find little evidence that voters reward responsive shifts, while experimental studies do?

Likewise, the literature on the electoral consequences of spatial accommodation suggests that, against the expectations of dominant spatial theoretical models (Meguid 2005), voters tend not to reward parties for shifting towards anti-immigration (Abou-Chadi *et al.* 2022; Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2020) and Eurosceptic positions (Meijers and Williams 2020). Instead, these shifts may even strengthen the accommodated far-right parties (Dahlström and Sundell 2012; Down and Han 2020; Krause *et al.* 2023).

Similar dynamics apply to mainstream accommodation of green parties on the environment (Grant and Tilley 2019).

It should be noted that a few studies do find that spatial accommodation can be beneficial for left parties (Spoon and Klüver 2020), center-right parties (Downes *et al.* 2021), and in the presence of a *cordon sanitaire* (van Spanje and de Graaf 2018). Hjorth and Larsen (2022) provide the best evidence for the merits of spatial theory. With an experimental design, they show that an anti-immigration shift by the Danish *Socialdemokraterne* increased left bloc support. Voters with anti-immigration attitudes displayed a higher probability of voting for the party, whereas pro-immigration voters, if anything, tended to switch to other left parties. Two experimental studies from Germany similarly show that spatial accommodation of the far-right can help mainstream parties win over far-right voters (Chou *et al.* 2021; Kollberg 2026). However, this comes at the cost of losing voters who do not hold preferences in line with the accommodated positions, which, for most parties, erases any benefits of accommodation. To sum up, the spatial literature on mainstream-niche party competition leaves us with two theoretical puzzles.

Puzzle 2: Why do observational studies tend to find that accommodation does not have the intended electoral effects, despite dominant theories predicting its success?

Puzzle 3: If accommodation tends to fail, why do parties continuously default to the strategy?

3.2 Salience theory

The main theoretical competitor of the spatial tradition is salience theory. Scholars working within this tradition are less concerned with how parties position themselves but rather with which issues they emphasize. The basic salience theoretical framework postulates that parties have a competitive advantage over their rivals on certain issues (Budge and Farlie 1983), referred to as “issue ownership” (Petrocik 1996). This advantage can either be based on the party’s perceived competence in handling an issue or on an association of the party with a particular issue (Walgrave *et al.* 2012). To electorally benefit, parties compete over the issue agenda, trying to raise the salience of the issue they own. Voters then vote based on whom they view as the best party to address the issues that they care about (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; van der Brug 2004; Lachat 2014). Election outcomes are thus determined by which issues capture the attention of voters, and which parties own them. In the following, I will review empirical research in the salience tradition, split into its party and voter components.

3.2.1 Salience theory and party behavior

The empirical literature on the drivers of party issue emphasis strategies can be divided into three main research strands, focusing on 1) issue ownership, 2) the party system agenda and rival parties, and 3) public issue attention. The second strand closely corresponds to spatial research on rival party influence and mainstream-niche competition, whereas the third strand relates to the spatial research on party responsiveness to public opinion.

First, there is a well-developed literature arguing that, in line with the basic tenets of salience theory, parties emphasize issues that they own. Most empirical research indeed finds a strong connection between issue ownership and issue emphasis (Dolezal *et al.* 2014; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010, 2015; Kriesi *et al.* 2026; Petrocik 1996; Schwarzbözl *et al.* 2020). Especially smaller and policy-oriented parties emphasize owned issues (Wagner and Meyer 2014).

Kristensen *et al.* (2023) interject that parties cannot always simply focus on issues that they own. Following their argument, the effect of issue ownership on issue emphasis is crucially conditioned by real-world problems. For example, when the economy is in severe trouble, all parties, not just the issue owners, will be forced to talk about their proposed solutions for this misery. It should further be noted that issue ownership, while relatively stable over time (Seeberg 2017), can be successfully improved and contested (Dahlberg and Martinsson 2015; Seeberg 2020; Stiers and Dassonneville 2024; Stubager and Seeberg 2016).

It thus quickly becomes clear that the issue ownership approach is not unchallenged. Scholars have pointed out that issue ownership cannot be the single explanation for which issues parties pay attention to. If that were the case, parties would simply talk past each other and never mention issues owned by other parties. Intuitively, we know this is not the case. Besides the role of real-world problems, an alternative view stipulates that party salience strategies, much like policy shifts, are influenced by the public.

The “riding the wave theory” claims that parties adjust their salience strategies to align with public issue attention (Jones *et al.* 2009). Empirical findings demonstrate that parties tend to increase their emphasis on issues in response to increases in their public salience (Abou-Chadi 2018; Klüver

and Sagarzazu 2016; Klüver and Spoon 2016; Spoon and Klüver 2014, 2015). Schwörer (2024) illustratively argues that mainstream parties' emphasis on the environment is primarily driven by the public salience of the issue.

Yet, this view is also far from uncontested. Just like in the spatial literature, another contingent of salience researchers instead emphasizes how party strategies are influenced by rival parties or, more broadly, the entire party system. When issues are salient within the system, parties are unable to completely avoid them (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010, 2015; Schwarzbözl *et al.* 2020). Grossman and Guinaudeau (2025) go as far as to suggest that parties closely monitor their rivals to not give them any edge by failing to include an issue in their platform, which may be important during the next election. Parties that are mainstream, large, and in government are influenced the strongest by the party system agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010, 2015). Integrating this perspective with the issue ownership framework, Seeberg (2022) posits that parties focus on their own issues for most of the electoral cycle but are forced to engage with rival party issues as elections draw close.

Apart from the overall system, party salience strategies are also influenced by single rival parties. Research on issue entrepreneurship highlights that parties losing on the currently dominant dimension of political competition attempt to politicize issues that cut across this dimension (De Vries and Hobolt 2012; Hobolt and De Vries 2015, 2020). They do so by emphasizing issues, such as European integration, where they present a distinct position within the party system (Hobolt and De Vries 2015). In this vein, Grande *et al.* (2019) find that far-right issue entrepreneurs are driving the politicization of immigration in Western Europe. This

literature helps explain the initial conditions for the emergence of mainstream-niche competition.

While niche issue entrepreneurs may be the actors trying to reshape party competition around their favored issues, they would be unlikely to find success in this endeavor without the help of mainstream parties (Braun and Grande 2021; Grande *et al.* 2019; Hutter and Kriesi 2022). Several studies have therefore set out to examine how the emergence and issue entrepreneurship of niche parties affect mainstream party salience strategies. Findings generally suggest that mainstream parties accommodate niche parties not only spatially but also by increasing their emphasis on niche issues (Spoon *et al.* 2014; van de Wardt 2015), which can be referred to as “salience accommodation” (Wagner and Meyer 2017). Illustratively, Spoon *et al.* (2014) demonstrate that the electoral success of green parties leads other parties to increase their emphasis on the environment.

3.2.2 Salience theory and voting behavior

There is convincing evidence that voters vote for the party they see as best suited to address the issues that are most important to them (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; van der Brug 2004; Lachat 2014). To illustrate, the far right tends to electorally benefit from the salience of immigration (Dennison and Geddes 2019) and European integration (Dennison 2020; Vasilopoulou and Zur 2024). The question then arises, why do parties engage with issues owned by rivals? A straightforward answer would be that they can simply take over their issue ownership (Meguid 2005). However, there is no strong empirical evidence that this works as intended. Research instead indicates that spatial accommodation, which is often associated with increased issue engagement, has the potential to bolster the issue ownership

of the niche party (Down and Han 2020; Seeberg 2020). In addition, Williams and Hunger (2022) show that far-right issue entrepreneurship and mainstream anti-immigration shifts drive the public salience of immigration, which likely further benefits the far-right issue owners. This makes it even more surprising that parties do frequently engage with issues owned by rivals, leaving us with a similar theoretical puzzle as present in the spatial literature.

Puzzle 4: Why do parties engage with issues owned by rivals, despite the theoretical and empirical evidence that this strategy is electorally disadvantageous?

3.3 Integrated frameworks

While spatial and salience theories were conceived as competing approaches to understanding party competition and voting behavior, an emerging literature has started to integrate them. In these integrated frameworks, parties compete through both position-taking and issue emphasis. Research within this relatively novel tradition, for example, shows that mainstream parties tend to accommodate the far-right on immigration (Abou-Chadi 2016) and the broader liberal-authoritarian dimension (Wagner and Meyer 2017) by concurrently shifting toward its positions and engaging with its issues. Conversely, Malet and Thiébaut (2024) argue that mainstream parties adjust their position in line with increasing public Euroscepticism but pair these responsive shifts with decreasing emphasis on the issue.

Another part of the literature examines how rival party salience strategies shape party behavior. Findings show that mainstream parties shift

Eurosceptic in response to successful Eurosceptic parties emphasizing the EU issue (Meijers 2017) and far-left parties emphasizing government control of the economy (Williams and Ishiyama 2018). Gessler and Hunger (2022) find that, during the so-called “refugee crisis” in 2015, mainstream parties did not shift towards anti-immigration positions but increased their engagement with the issue of immigration in response to the issue entrepreneurship of far-right parties. Issue salience has further been linked to party responsiveness. Abou-Chadi *et al.* (2020) show that mainstream parties adjust their positions on immigration and the environment in accordance with public opinion when these issues are salient within the party system.

A final part of the integrated literature studies how the interplay of spatial preferences and issue salience shapes voting behavior. Research consistently shows that ideological proximity is particularly important on issues personally salient to voters (Flavin and Law 2022; Kamphorst 2024; Tomz and Van Houweling 2010).

The literature integrating spatial and salience approaches offers a more comprehensive assessment of how party behavior is shaped by public opinion and rival parties. Yet, the key theoretical puzzles outlined throughout the literature review remain unaddressed. The four puzzles can be summarized under two domains—one relating to voting behavior and one to party behavior.

Voting behavior: Against the prediction of dominant spatial theoretical models, most observational studies find little evidence that voters reward parties for shifting positions to align with their personal preferences (puzzle 1) or shifting positions to accommodate niche challengers (puzzle 2).

Party behavior: Despite the apparent failure of spatial and salience accommodative strategies, parties continue to use them (puzzles 3 and 4).

In other words, parties and voters continue to behave in ways that defy standard theoretical explanations. My main claim is that there is one common puzzle piece missing from the dominant theoretical approaches, which can help us make sense of these dynamics.

The vast majority of the discussed salience and spatial theoretical literature, as well as the integrated frameworks, have in common that they rely on the assumption that parties are unitary actors (Adams 2012: 403). This is usually not explicitly stated (Fagerholm 2016: 506) but rather an implicit assumption that informs theoretical development and empirical testing. In essence, all contributions that do not theorize or model intra-party dynamics in some way assume that parties are unitary actors. In this dissertation, I develop an integrated spatial and salience theoretical framework that breaks with the unitary actor assumption and instead views party and electoral competition through the lens of intra-party dynamics. This is not to say that intra-party dynamics are the only or even best answer to each of the theoretical puzzles. What I hope to achieve with this dissertation is to show that the framework provides a useful lens that substantially advances our understanding of party and voting behavior in 21st-century European politics.

4

The consequences of intra-party divisions

To reiterate, standard spatial and salience theoretical approaches, implicitly or explicitly, assume that parties are rational unitary actors pursuing vote-, office-, and policy-seeking goals. This assumption *de facto* ignores the complexity and multi-actor nature of parties as organizations, leaving no theoretical space for intra-party dynamics to shape party and voting behavior. To shed new light on the theoretical puzzles outlined in the previous section, I break with the unitary actor assumption and instead view party and electoral competition through the perspective of intra-party dynamics. I am, of course, not the first to challenge this key assumption. In the following, I review the literature on the consequences of intra-party dynamics and derive my theoretical model.

4.1 Organizational intra-party divisions

One major strand of research that breaks with the unitary actor assumption is interested in how intra-party organizational structures affect party behavior. The central findings of this literature are that leadership-dominated parties tend to be more responsive to the public (Koedam 2022a; Schumacher *et al.* 2013) and more prone to change strategies (Marx and Schumacher 2013; Schumacher and Giger 2018). In contrast, parties with high

levels of internal democracy tend to be less responsive to public opinion (Lehrer 2012), less likely to change positions (Marini 2025), and more influenced by rival parties (Lehrer *et al.* 2017). Other organizational aspects, such as changes in the dominant party faction (Budge *et al.* 2010; Harmel and Tan 2003) and leadership (Demker 1997; Harmel *et al.* 1995; Harmel and Janda 1994), have likewise been linked to party policy change (but see Bille 1997). Although this line of research shares my interest in how intra-party dynamics affect party and voting behavior, its focus centers on broader organizational differences. I am, instead, interested in ideological issue-based divisions.

4.2 Ideological intra-party divisions

4.2.1 Intra-party divisions and party behavior

The extant literature is relatively scarce. Its best-developed part examines how divisions affect party salience strategies. Scholars of European integration have long argued that divisions lead parties to avoid the issue. Most empirical research broadly supports this idea (Adam *et al.* 2017; De Vries and van de Wardt 2011; Spoon 2012; Steenbergen and Scott 2004), albeit with several noteworthy exceptions that find either no consistent evidence for the avoidance hypothesis (Adam and Maier 2016; Lehmann 2023; Netjes and Binnema 2007; Rauh 2015) or even support for the opposite (Hellström and Blomgren 2016; Rauh and De Wilde 2018; van de Wardt 2014). Only a few comparative studies venture beyond the EU issue. They consistently find that parties devote less attention to internally divisive issue dimensions (Gatti 2025; Steiner and Mader 2019).

The spatial literature on the consequences of intra-party divisions consists of only a handful of studies. In a series of qualitative case studies,

Orhan (2025a, 2025b, 2025c) details how intra-party divisions on the issue of immigration have shaped the spatial strategies of the German and Danish social democratic parties. In addition, two comparative contributions on the issue of European integration stand out. Adam *et al.* (2017) argue that internally divided pro-EU parties shift Eurosceptic in response to contestation by Eurosceptic parties. Similarly, Spoon and Williams (2017) posit that only divided parties are responsive to Eurosceptic public sentiment, whereas united parties do not shift in line with the public on the issue. The apparent scarcity of comparative research, especially beyond the EU issue, calls for broader theory development concerning the relationship between divisions and party positioning.

4.2.2 Intra-party divisions, political attitudes, and voting behavior

Another strand of the literature is concerned with the consequences of intra-party divisions on political attitudes and voting behavior. Here, it is useful to distinguish between the consequences of general and ideological party divisions. Concerning the former, the literature shows that parties that are perceived as divided suffer from a valence disadvantage. Voters tend to view divided parties as less competent and credible (Greene and Haber 2015; Johns and Kölln 2020). This has both direct and indirect effects on vote choice. Directly, appearing divided negatively affects the electoral fortunes of parties (Greene and Haber 2015; Lehrer *et al.* 2024). Indirectly, division perceptions prevent parties from successfully utilizing broad-appeal strategies (Lehrer and Lin 2020; Lin and Lehrer 2021).

On the issue level, divisions are also associated with several adverse consequences. A rich literature on the issue of European integration shows that divided parties are limited in their ability to shape voter preferences on the issue (Gabel and Scheve 2007; Ray 2003; Steenbergen *et al.* 2007).

Furthermore, some studies argue that voters misperceive the positions of divided parties (Imre 2023). On the EU issue, Jung and Somer-Topcu (2022) show that voters do not correctly update their perceptions of policy shifts by divided parties but do perceive shifts by united ones.

What stands out from this literature is the apparent lack of attention to how issue-based divisions affect electoral behavior. Most studies focus only on voter evaluations of parties. Evaluations should notably precede voting behavior in the causal chain. There is thus convincing evidence that voters punish parties that they generally perceive as divided, but almost no studies that focus on how voters respond to issue-based divisions. Two exceptions are worth noting. For one, Ferrara and Weishaupt (2004) show that intra-party divisions on the issue of European integration have negative electoral consequences in European Parliament (EP) elections. In addition, Duell *et al.* (2026) study how partisans want their party to respond to new challengers competing on issues previously excluded from party competition. They find that supporters strongly prefer when parties present a united front on the challenger's issue, punishing issue-based divisions. Their focus on party supporters, however, only allows for limited generalizability to the effects of divisions on voting behavior more broadly.

Given the overall lack of previous studies, I mostly draw on the literature on general division perceptions to theorize the mechanisms through which ideological divisions may affect voting behavior. In the following section, I draw on the extant literature to create an overarching theoretical model of the consequences of intra-party divisions, which I test throughout the four dissertation papers.

4.3 Theoretical model

Standard rational choice approaches to party competition assume that parties are unitary actors with vote-seeking, policy-seeking, and office-seeking ambitions (Strøm 1990). Most frameworks allow for parties to combine all three goals, but some parties are assumed to prioritize one (or two) over the others. For example, niche parties are viewed as primarily policy-seeking actors, whereas catch-all mainstream parties are thought of as vote- and/or office-seeking actors (Adams *et al.* 2006; Bischof and Wagner 2020; Ferland 2020). Conversely, some frameworks assume all parties to be entirely policy-seeking (Adams and Merrill 2006; Merrill and Grofman 2019).

Theoretical frameworks that drop the unitary actor assumption have maintained a focus on the same three party goals. The main difference is that they allow intra-party actors to pursue different goals. In their simpler forms, these approaches assume that party activists are policy seekers, whereas party leaders and elites seek office and votes. In turn, leadership-dominated parties are more likely to pursue vote-seeking strategies, while activist domination fosters policy-seeking behavior (Koedam 2022a; Marx and Schumacher 2013; Schumacher *et al.* 2013; Schumacher and Giger 2018). While these accounts assume that parties comprise multiple actors with conflicting ambitions, they retain the assumption of preference homogeneity within these sub-groups. Empirically, this assumption is highly questionable. Kölln and Polk (2024), for example, show that ideological factions exist across the party hierarchy.

I retain the standard assumptions of extant frameworks that parties, as rational actors, pursue vote-seeking, policy-seeking, and office-seeking ambitions, albeit to varying degrees. However, I also view them as non-

unitary actors, where ideological divisions can exist between and within all organizational units. Ideological divisions can have several negative consequences. First, they may carry negative electoral consequences, for example, by projecting a more general sense of disunity (Greene and Haber 2015; Lehrer *et al.* 2024; Lehrer and Lin 2020; Lin and Lehrer 2021). Second, ideological divisions can also have disastrous organizational consequences, such as party splits or even dissolution. To exemplify, many European far-right parties originally split from large center-right parties, often based on ideological differences. This includes parties like the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV), the Portuguese *Chega* (CH), and Spanish *Vox*, which all split from the main center-right parties in their respective countries to pursue far-right political agendas. Another example is the 1993 split of the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ), which, at the time, adopted the anti-immigrant platform it still has to this day. Internal disagreements over the new platform eventually resulted in the liberal wing of the party splitting and forming the *Liberales Forum* (LIF) (Lauber 1995: 318).

Given their electoral and organizational consequences, parties plagued by ideological divisions are likely to struggle to achieve their vote, office, and policy ambitions. Parties thus need to manage their ideological divisions. I claim that they do so by seeking intra-party unity. I understand unity as the complete absence of preference heterogeneity. The easiest way to achieve this would be to throw anyone out of the party who ideologically disagrees with the leader on any issue. This obviously makes little sense because unity is not as much a self-contained goal as it is instrumental to achieving other ambitions. Just as parties may instrumentally seek votes to gain office or seek office to implement policies (Strøm and Müller 1999), they may primarily seek unity to realize their other goals.

Instead of carelessly throwing out dissenters, a better way for parties to manage divisions is thus to minimize intensity and publicity through programmatic adjustments. As concerns intensity, party leaders are likely much more concerned about major disagreements over the ideological direction the party should take on a given issue than minor differences of opinion on a specific policy proposal. A minimum level of intensity can thus be seen as a necessary condition for divisions to meaningfully affect party behavior. The same cannot be said for publicity or actor type. Skilled party leaders may strategize to preempt divisions from escalating to public infighting. It is, however, reasonable to expect that public disagreements have stronger effects on party behavior than private ones. Concurrently, no matter if party elites or the base disagree with the party line, leaders are incentivized to address these divisions and prevent them from escalating. Drawing on the integrated salience and spatial literature, I posit that party leaders utilize three programmatic strategies to minimize division intensity and publicity: issue avoidance, position change, and position blurring. I view these as three complementary party behaviors, which can theoretically be used concurrently.

First, to avoid putting a spotlight on internally divisive issues, party leaders can just try to avoid them. They can do so by exercising their agenda control, keeping these issues out of internal communications, such as party meetings or conferences, and external communications, like manifestos, media appearances, press releases, or plenary debates. One way to achieve the latter is by constraining MPs from expressing dissent in parliament (Castanho Silva and Proksch 2022). Issue avoidance is unlikely to affect division intensity but instead is likely to reduce publicity. In the long term, issue avoidance may even foster intensity, as new members join without considering the party's ideological composition on the avoided

issue. Second, party leaders can shift positions towards a compromising and more amicable stance. By doing so, they can reduce the intensity of disagreements over the party line. Different party actors may still hold the same heterogeneous preferences, but, on average, are positioned closer to the party line. This, in turn, may also have the potential to reduce division publicity. Third, party leaders can remain strategically ambiguous about their party's position and avoid taking a clear stance that may upset parts of the party. They can do so, for example, via ambivalent statements that give credit to both sides of an issue or via vague statements that lack substantive content (Gunderson 2024; Nasr 2023). Like issue avoidance, leaders can adopt strategic ambiguity both in internal and external communications. When successful, strategic ambiguity may reduce the publicity of divisions by instilling party actors with the feeling that the leadership is on their side of the debate. Conversely, ambiguity is unlikely to affect division intensity.

For the three strategies described above, party leaders deliberately manage party behavior. Truly breaking with the unitary actor assumption, however, necessitates abandoning the idea that party behavior is the exclusive product of top-down strategic calculations. Instead, the behavior of non-unitary parties can both be a function of deliberate leadership strategy and an unanticipated consequence of intra-party dynamics. These two often steer party behavior in the same direction. To illustrate, a party may change positions, not because of a deliberate leadership decision, but because of an escalation of ideological divisions, which results in significant organizational change, such as the replacement of the dominant party faction or party leadership. One example of this is the remarkable takeover of the hard Eurosceptic wing of the UK Conservative Party under the leadership of Boris Johnson (Evans *et al.* 2023). These major shifts may have

their origins in ideological disputes, but the resulting behavioral changes should rather be viewed as the byproduct of infighting rather than as purely strategic maneuvers from vote-seeking party leaders. Likewise, blurring cannot only be the result of strategic ambiguity but also the consequence of different party actors publicly communicating their diverging preferences (Duell *et al.* 2026: 4). A party leader may communicate one stance during a media appearance, while other party actors express their diverging views in parliament. Issue avoidance is unlikely to be an unanticipated consequence of ideological divisions. On the contrary, escalations should be much more likely to result in issue engagement, as different actors publicly communicate their diverging views. Issue avoidance should thus indicate some level of intentionality. To recap, I expect that intra-party divisions will steer parties towards issue avoidance, position change, and blurring. I test these unconditional effects of intra-party divisions on party behavior in Paper I.

Building on these initial insights, I posit that the interplay of divisions with specific external pressures can lead to different behavioral outcomes. I test how intra-party divisions condition the response of parties to external pressures in Paper II. More specifically, I apply the intra-party framework to the puzzle of why mainstream parties continue to respond to the emergence of niche parties by utilizing spatial and salience accommodation, despite the evidence that these strategies tend not to benefit them electorally (puzzles 3 and 4). I argue that the effect of niche party pressures on mainstream party behavior is conditional on the level of intra-party divisions.

In general, the electoral success and issue entrepreneurship of niche parties are likely to make mainstream politicians feel threatened and instill a feeling in them that some reaction is necessary. For mainstream parties

that are divided on the niche issue, these threat perceptions are then likely to strengthen the parts of the party that align closer with the niche party's preferences. These niche-aligned ideological factions may then pressure the leadership to accommodate the issues and positions of the niche party. There are several reasons as to why niche-aligned factions may push for accommodation despite the potential electoral costs. For one, they may simply prioritize their policy-seeking ambitions over electoral considerations. Relatedly, niche-aligned factions may want to seize the opportunity to increase their internal power. It is, however, also possible that these factions genuinely believe that their policies will yield electoral gains. It is easy to see why they may think so as external pressures grow. Niche party success and issue entrepreneurship represent strong signals of electoral viability, which these factions are primed to seize upon due to their ideological predispositions. One key implicit assumption in the literature on mainstream accommodation is indeed that the electoral success of the niche party can be understood as an imperfect proxy for how popular its core issue positions are within the electorate. The more popular the position, i.e., the more successful the niche party, the stronger the argument for the niche-aligned faction that their preferred position is the optimal vote-seeking strategy. As the strength of the niche party increases, so should the pressure within divided mainstream parties, given that the balance between vote-, policy-, and unity-seeking ambitions shifts in favor of the niche-aligned faction.

Under these mounting pressures, the party leadership may follow through on accommodation to maintain control. Here, it is important to consider that the internal costs of accommodation are comparatively lower for divided parties, especially when the niche-aligned faction is increasing in strength. United parties, by definition, lack the dissenting faction that

could push the leadership towards accommodation. Even if party leaders strongly feel that accommodation could be electorally advantageous, shifting against the ideological preferences of a united party is, in most cases, politically dangerous. The resulting internal backlash may already offset the potential electoral payoff from accommodation. Optimally, party leaders thus need to unite the party behind the accommodative shift before following through with it. The case of the Danish *Socialdemokraterne* demonstrates that this is possible (Orhan 2025b), but it is also extremely difficult and prone to failure (Orhan 2025a, 2025c). Most leaders of united parties are thus unlikely to forsake unity for a futile attempt at accommodation. This dynamic further highlights the constant tension between the vote-, policy-, and unity-seeking ambitions of political parties, where an imbalance between the three may result in severe adverse consequences.

Besides resulting from deliberate leadership actions, accommodation can also be an unanticipated consequence of divisions. If the party leadership resists, mounting internal pressures due to niche party emergence may ultimately result in the niche-aligned faction taking over the party leadership and position as the dominant party faction.

Both pathways to accommodation can be seen in the case of the UK Conservative Party. In 2015, against the backdrop of an electorally successful and issue-entrepreneurial UKIP, then Prime Minister David Cameron gave in to pressures by Eurosceptic backbenchers to call the Brexit referendum (Bale 2018). Later, the transformation of the Conservative Party was completed with the takeover of the hard Eurosceptic wing under Boris Johnson (Evans *et al.* 2023). These dynamics thus provide an answer to the puzzle of why parties accommodate the issue and positions of niche parties, irrespective of any short-term vote-seeking ambitions.

Given the issue-based framework of the dissertation, I exclusively consider programmatic responses to divisions. It is plausible that party leaders can also utilize organizational changes (beyond carelessly throwing dissenters out of the party) to seek unity. It is not unlikely, though, that these organizational changes affect division intensity and publicity through programmatic changes. For example, leaders could try to organizationally strengthen their control over party policy or candidate selection. As a consequence, they may be better able to avoid divisive issues or even take a less internally contentious position.

Next, I move on to the second part of the dissertation, which examines how intra-party divisions shape voting behavior. On the voter side, I adopt a modified Downsian framework (Downs 1957). I assume that voters are rational utility-maximizers who vote for parties that represent their spatial preferences. Deviating from the pure spatial framework, I add a valence component. Utility-maximizing voters are not only interested in whether parties align with their preferences but also in whether they do so credibly and competently. My framework also allows voters to change their preferences over time. When it comes to the division dimensions, I assume that a minimum level of intensity and publicity are necessary conditions for divisions to affect voting behavior. Voters are unlikely to punish divisions that they cannot perceive.

In Paper III, I apply the intra-party framework to the second accommodation puzzle, which asks why voters do not reward spatial accommodation, despite the predictions of dominant theories (puzzle 2). I theorize that intra-party divisions shape the electoral success of accommodative strategies. I argue that internally united parties can accommodate the positions of niche rivals more successfully than divided parties. There are two main reasons for this. In line with basic spatial theoretical models, voters who

hold preferences that align closer with the niche party should respond positively to mainstream accommodation. Yet, I claim that these voters are not solely interested in spatial representation, but they also want parties to credibly and competently represent their favored positions. As highlighted by several studies (Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004; Greene and Haber 2015; Johns and Kölln 2020), divided parties lack these valence attributes. Niche-aligned voters are thus unlikely to reward divided accommodators as they fail to present a credible and competent alternative to their niche rivals. United accommodators, on the contrary, should be more successful in attracting these voters. While this logic applies to voters who already sympathize with niche party positions, those who reject these ideas should not be attracted to accommodation, especially not if they expect it to be credibly and competently followed through. However, accommodation may convince them through an alternative mechanism. In line with the large literature on party cueing (e.g., Druckman *et al.* 2013; Pannico 2020; Slothuus 2010), I do not assume that voter preferences are fixed. Instead, parties are able to shape them through their communication. Extant research shows that, for this to work, parties need to send consistent messages. The problem for divided parties is that they may send mixed signals about their preferences to the electorate and thus fail to cue voters in the intended direction (Gabel and Scheve 2007; Ray 2003; Steenbergen *et al.* 2007). Based on this, I argue that voters, who are critical of the niche party's position, are less likely to be persuaded by accommodation attempts that are contradicted from within the party.

Next, I take on the puzzle of why observational studies find little evidence that voters reward parties for shifting their positions toward their personal preferences (puzzle 1). I posit that intra-party divisions can help explain the lack of observed responsiveness pay-off. I extend the

theoretical framework from Paper III to develop a more general theoretical argument as to how intra-party divisions affect the success of party policy shifts. I theorize that the relationship runs through four main mechanisms. First, I argue that when responsive shifts are contested by intra-party actors, voters question their credibility. Second, I argue that voters doubt the ability of parties to competently implement their new policy position, as dissenting intra-party actors may serve as roadblocks to passing legislation. Third, I argue that voters perceive divided parties as more likely to shift again in the near future due to internal pressures or organizational changes in the leadership or dominant faction of the party. Fourth, I argue that divided parties send mixed signals that lead voters to misperceive their position. The theorized lack of credibility, competence, perceived longevity, and accurate perceptions may, in turn, lead voters to be less inclined to vote for a party, even if it promises to represent their spatial preferences. I also theorize that actor type matters for voting behavior. The reason for this is that party elites possess a greater capacity to undermine the policy agenda of their party leadership, for example, through leadership challenges or blocking votes in parliament. Voters should then be more likely to fear momentary reversal and question the ability of the party to competently implement its newfound preferences. Paper IV puts all these arguments to the test.

To sum up, my theoretical framework integrates spatial and salience approaches to party and voting behavior through the lens of intra-party dynamics. My overarching expectation is that voters will negatively respond to divisions. Parties, trying to balance their vote-seeking ambitions with the need for unity, will thus adapt their behavior based on intra-party dynamics.

5

Data and methods

5.1 Study design

I discuss the selection of appropriate study designs in two parts: first covering the two papers on party behavior, and then the two papers on voting behavior. When it comes to causal inference in the field of party competition, a major limitation is that parties as organizations cannot simply be exposed to experimental treatments. It is thus unsurprising that experimental designs are seldom used in the field of party behavior. One could expose party members or even leaders to different informational conditions, but these designs would be unlikely to have any plausible external validity for my purposes. The reason for this is that I view parties as more than the simple sum of their parts and do not assume that leaders have full strategic autonomy. Party behavior is thus a product of the complex interactions of different party actors within and outside the confines of the party institutions. This necessitates the use of observational data in the first part of the dissertation.

Quasi-experimental designs show some promise (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020). The main empirical issue with these designs is that they require strong assumptions and more statistical power than is available. The number of parties is limited to a few per country, and party strategies can reasonably only be measured once every couple of years or during election time. Papers I and II thus default to model-based inference. I try to maximize the external validity of the studies by testing the theoretical expectations on the most inclusive

selection of countries, parties, issues, and time points available. Where possible, I utilize panel designs to improve internal validity. I do my best to address endogeneity issues, such as reversed causality and selection effects, by implementing lag structures, incorporating fixed effects, and utilizing first-difference approaches. Given the observational nature of the material, endogeneity and confounding bias can, however, never fully be ruled out. Causal conclusions, therefore, need to be drawn with much caution.

When it comes to the voter part of the dissertation, I try to maximize the external and internal validity through a mix of study designs. Paper III draws on observational material to get as close as possible to examining voting behavior in the “real world”. The additional advantage of using observational material is that it allows me to examine a broad selection of cases within the scope conditions to maximize external validity. However, it is difficult to ensure high levels of internal validity with cross-sectional voting data. Paper IV thus complements the second part of the dissertation with a survey experiment designed to maximize internal validity and establish causality. This comes at the expense of narrowing the empirical scope. Together, the observational and experimental designs can provide strong evidence for the detrimental electoral effects of intra-party divisions as well as the theoretical mechanisms.

5.2 Case selection

5.2.1 Scope conditions and country selection

The different theoretical arguments made in the dissertation imply varying scope conditions. All have in common that they require some level of ideological and issue-based political competition. Where party competition is solely centered around charismatic leaders or valence issues, like corruption, party elites and voters are unlikely to care much about ideological divisions.

In that case, we should not expect divisions to have substantial effects on party or voting behavior.

Europe thus offers one of the best contexts to test my theoretical arguments. European party competition is increasingly multidimensional (Albright 2010; Caughey *et al.* 2019; Rovny and Edwards 2012) and issue-centered (Green-Pedersen 2007). This particularly applies to Western Europe (WE) but also to the Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states of the EU. While dimensionality and the degree of issue-based competition vary across the countries and regions (Boräng *et al.* 2024; Rovny and Edwards 2012), they both meet the minimum scope conditions.

The theoretical arguments concerning the unconditional effects of intra-party divisions on party behavior require the fewest additional scope conditions. Paper I thus covers all current or former EU member states. The study is not only one of the first to examine the consequences of intra-party divisions in both WE and CEE, but it also includes the widest selection of key political issues to date, and studies a timeframe of 25 years (1999–2024). The findings of the paper thus benefit from broad generalizability.

The theoretical arguments concerning the role of intra-party divisions in shaping mainstream-niche competition are notably less generalizable. They add the scope condition that party systems have something akin to mainstream or established parties. In party systems with extremely high party volatility, where new parties and electoral coalitions are formed at any given election, as is the case in some Central and Eastern European (CEE) and many South American countries, a sensible distinction between mainstream and niche/challenger parties may simply not exist. For Papers II and III, I thus limit the empirical investigation to 14 Western European democracies. All these countries have long-established mainstream parties whose electoral hegemony has, more or less recently, been uprooted by issue entrepreneurial challengers, like green, far-left, and far-right parties. This is not to say that other external pressures, apart from niche party emergence, do not interact

with intra-party divisions. The theory could thus be expanded to CEE countries within a more general framework centered on how divisions shape the responses of established parties to the rise and fall of new challengers (see Duell *et al.* 2026).

The theoretical argument that intra-party divisions negatively affect the electoral success of responsive party shifts should be generalizable across political contexts and issues, given that the minimum scope condition is fulfilled. The main added scope condition is that at least some voters do not reject party policy change out of principle. Research suggests that this condition is widely met across Europe (Hillen *et al.* 2025; Meijers and Dassonneville 2025).

Based on other requirements, such as contextual and language knowledge, Paper IV tests my theoretical arguments in the typical case of Germany (Seawright and Gerring 2008). The German case is representative of the broader European context in several ways. Just like in many other European countries (and beyond), voters in Germany can choose from a broad range of parties that, at any given time, will shift their positions closer to their own preferences on some issues and further away on others. The German case not only meets the scope condition that voters accept party policy change, but it is also representative of other countries in the level of acceptance. In the European context, German voters score in the upper middle in terms of favoring government responsiveness (Hillen *et al.* 2025) and acceptance of party policy shifts (Meijers and Dassonneville 2025). While well over 80% of Germans think that “governments should change policies in response to what people think,” Hillen *et al.* (2025) show that just over 50% of Danes think alike. Denmark presents a strong outlier, but it serves as a reminder that some voters may be more skeptical of this mode of democratic representation. A general dislike of party responsiveness would limit how much intra-party divisions can feasibly condition the expected positive effect of responsive shifts. Depending on the findings, future replications of the experiment could thus extend to least likely cases, like Denmark, to test their generalizability.

5.2.2 Issue selection

In terms of generalizability, I expect my theoretical arguments to be particularly pertinent for issues with some level of public salience. It is, however, plausible that party leaders strategically try to address intra-party divisions even on issues with low public salience levels. This may be the case when the issue is salient enough for party actors with diverging preferences, as divisions may then still escalate into major infighting.

Heterogeneous intra-party preferences alone should exert little to no effect on issues that are not politically salient to the party members. One fun example of an issue where party members are likely to hold strongly polarized preferences without any real conflict is pineapple on pizza. YouGov polling from 2017 indicates that 53% of British respondents like the combination, whereas 41% do not (Smith 2017). Assuming these numbers roughly translate to party elites, this would make it one of the most internally divisive issues imaginable. Yet, there is no political salience attached to it and, hence, no real risk of infighting. Accordingly, I do not examine any issues of such low political salience.

The theoretical arguments about the unconditional effects of intra-party divisions on party behavior are, again, the most generalizable across issues. Paper I thus examines a broad range of key contemporary policy issues. The arguments surrounding mainstream-niche competition require that the chosen issues are typically associated with niche parties. In Western Europe, the three main ones are European integration (far-right and far-left parties), immigration (far-right parties), and the environment (green parties). European integration stands out as Eurosceptic challengers come from both extremes of the traditional left-right divide (De Vries and Edwards 2009). Research demonstrates that EU issue voting is, by now, widespread (De Vries 2010; De Vries *et al.* 2011; Pannico and Costa Lobo 2023), and the salience of the issue holds enormous potential to shape voting behavior (Dennison 2020; Vasilopoulou

and Zur 2024). Accordingly, Paper II focuses on European integration, while Paper III examines both European integration and immigration. The theoretical arguments concerning the consequences of intra-party divisions for voting behavior strongly rely on the assumption that voters, at least partially, base their vote on considerations about the positioning, credibility, and competence of political parties on specific issues. For issues that do not politically matter to voters at all (such as pineapple on pizza), we should not expect to observe any strong effects of divisions on voting behavior. Paper IV thus tests the theoretical arguments on three issues with high public salience (immigration, climate change, and taxation).

Overall, two issues are particularly important cases for this dissertation: European integration and immigration. Both appear in three out of four dissertation papers. What makes these two issues particularly relevant is that they are a recurring source of intense intra-party disagreements in many Western European countries. European integration has, for example, sparked major rifts in the mainstream parties in the UK (Bale 2018), Scandinavia (Aylott 2002), and France (Hertner 2015). In addition, the German AfD has its origin as an anti-EU splinter of the CDU. The issue of immigration has similarly been a thorn in the side of many mainstream party leaders (Bale *et al.* 2010; Orhan 2025a, 2025c), causing splits in many center-right parties and the subsequent rise of several far-right parties, including the aforementioned Dutch PVV and Austrian FPÖ.

One reason why salient socio-economic issues, such as redistribution, do not appear to have the same potential for intra-party conflict is that party competition in Western Europe is structured around these very issues. Issue entrepreneurs, such as Eurosceptic and far-right parties, tend to be losers on this traditionally dominant dimension of competition and thus try to disrupt this structure to gain a competitive advantage based on the cross-cutting nature of their favored issues (De Vries and Hobolt 2012; Hobolt and De Vries 2015; van de Wardt *et al.* 2014). One plausible explanation of why European

integration and immigration appear to be particularly fruitful issues for this endeavor is that they offer a particularly high potential for conflict due to their nature as value-laden “principled” issues (Tavits 2007).

5.3 Measurement

5.3.1 Intra-party divisions

Intra-party divisions are a notoriously difficult concept to measure. I distinguish between three dimensions of divisions—intensity, publicity, and actor type. Most existing measures of divisions focus on capturing intensity, while publicity and actor type are frequently neglected.

As a reminder, to conceptualize different levels of publicity, I draw on research by Bolleyer and Kölln (2025). The lowest level is intra-party friction, where heterogeneous issue preferences do not necessarily reach the public eye. To reach the second or third level, disagreements must be publicly communicated (level 2) and sanctioned (level 3). As the final level is empirically rare, I summarize levels 2 and 3 into one concept of publicly perceivable disagreements.

Previous research has measured intra-party division in several ways. One pragmatic choice to capture publicly perceivable divisions is to use items from voter surveys (see Greene and Haber 2015; Jung and Somer-Topcu 2022; Lehrer and Lin 2020; Lin and Lehrer 2021). The main problem is that surveys that include these items have only been fielded in a few countries and time points, and mostly ask voters about their general perceptions of how divided a party is. I am unaware of any major comparative surveys that ask voters to assess issue-specific divisions.

Measures based on party congress data pose a similar challenge (Greene and Haber 2016). These indicators are only available for parties that regularly hold congresses, where policy can be openly discussed. This may introduce

biases due to missing cases. Besides, to derive division measures, I would require all key issues to be debated during the party congress, which is not always the case. The problem is that the absence of debate cannot be equated with the absence of preference heterogeneity, given that skilled party leaders may try to avoid divisive issues and remove them from the agenda. A lack of debate could thus be caused by unity, successful avoidance of a divisive issue, or low overall issue salience.

Other possibilities include division indicators derived from parliamentary speeches or social media. These would be excellent tools to capture divisions perceivable to the public. Unfortunately, they also come with strong biases. Parliamentary speeches are constrained by agenda-setting dynamics and leadership control (Castanho Silva and Proksch 2022). Measures based on social media are less constrained in these ways but still limited in terms of timespan and country coverage. Given these limitations, I contend that there is not one perfect measure of intra-party divisions. Instead, I rely on different indicators to capture the theoretically important dimensions and levels of divisions. I now outline the considerations that motivate my selection.

My first observational measure of intra-party divisions draws on data from the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS 2016, 2022, 2024). The CCS surveys party candidates running to become MPs. The division measures are derived from a battery of items asking about issue-specific preferences. The preferences of the responding MPs are then aggregated to the party level, and the standard deviation is taken as the division measure. The measure was introduced by Steiner and Mader (2019) and has since found some empirical applications (e.g., Imre 2023). It excels at capturing the intensity of issue-based intra-party divisions. Higher standard deviations in candidate attitudes indicate that party elites hold more heterogeneous preferences on a given issue. They do not, however, suggest that these diverging views are ever publicly expressed or even particularly salient to the candidates. Skillful leaders may successfully manage to keep these heterogeneous preferences latent and

prevent them from ever escalating into serious or public disagreement and infighting. The CCS measure thus provides a great encapsulation of intra-party friction (Bolleyer and Kölln 2025) but offers no way to tap into the publicity dimension. Another minor limitation is that not all European countries run candidate surveys and the ones that do have not yet covered enough elections to enable panel designs with a sufficient sample size.

Given the theoretical importance of the publicity dimension, especially when it comes to the effects of intra-party divisions on voting behavior, I also require a comparative measure of publicly perceivable disagreements. The observational measure that fulfills these requirements best is derived from CHES expert assessments (Jolly *et al.* 2022; Rovny *et al.* 2025). It is based on a series of items that ask experts to evaluate the degree of dissent on various issues/dimensions on a scale from 0, indicating complete unity, to 10, indicating extreme division (CHES 2024). The measure combines two or more dimensions of divisions. The degree of dissent can be understood as a rough proxy for division intensity. However, assuming that experts only perceive divisions with some level of publicity, the measure should only capture divisions with some level of publicity (“publicly perceivable disagreements”). Given that disagreements between some actors should be more likely to receive public attention, it can also not be ruled out that the measure relates to the actor type dimension.

The big advantage the CHES measure has over all the discussed alternatives, such as data from voter surveys, party congresses, or social media, is that it covers an extensive selection of (European) countries, parties, and key issues. It also covers an impressive time series, which extends all the way back to 1984 (Ray 1999), enabling panel designs. The measure has been widely used in previous research for well over 20 years (e.g., Gatti 2025; Hobolt and De Vries 2015; Rauh and De Wilde 2018; Ray 2003). Its reliability has been attested to through validation efforts (Hooghe *et al.* 2010), and it has been used to validate alternative measures (Castanho Silva and Proksch 2022).

Between the two observational measures, I expect that the candidate measure constitutes a harder test for my theoretical arguments than the expert measure. As discussed, the expert measure should capture public disagreements, whereas the candidate measure can pick up latent preference heterogeneity, which may never be displayed publicly.

Where theoretical arguments necessitate that the public can perceive divisions, I therefore exclusively rely on the expert measure. Where the intensity of preference heterogeneity is itself theoretically relevant, I utilize both. Even then, I expect the effects of public disagreements, as captured by the expert measure, to be stronger than the effects of preference heterogeneity. A major reason for this is that I expect some intensity of preference heterogeneity to be a necessary condition for public disagreements. It is difficult to imagine a realistic scenario where party actors are publicly disagreeing on a key issue while holding the exact same issue preferences. One can, however, imagine a situation where minor differences of opinion escalate into major public infighting. On average, I would expect a positive correlation between the intensity of preference heterogeneity and public disagreements.

Further comparing the two measures, the CCS measure should be more directly related to divisions at the level of party elites. Not all political candidates can reasonably be described as party elites, given that many run in completely unwinnable contests. Yet, a significant proportion of candidates, especially from the major political parties, which are more competitive and selective with their candidates, qualify. This means that preference heterogeneities that are strongly clustered within different parts of the party hierarchies (e.g., activists disagree with elites) may not be adequately captured. There is, however, empirical evidence that ideological divisions are not strongly related to hierarchical structures (Kölln and Polk 2024). For the CHES measure, it is difficult to disentangle on which level of the organization experts perceive the disagreements to take place.

Another interesting difference between the two measures is the level of leadership agency over division intensity. Apart from actively intervening in the process of candidate selection, leaders are unlikely to enjoy strong short-term influence over the level of preference heterogeneity on a single issue. In contrast, they may have more control over the public expression of disagreement. Leaders can adopt strict sanctioning regimes and enforce party discipline, especially on issues important to the party. Leaders may also avoid issues or change/blur issue positions and, by doing so, succeed in calming public disagreements or, at least, experts' perceptions thereof. This raises some concerns around potential endogeneity in the CHES division measure, in the form of reverse causality.

In contrast, issue avoidance could plausibly lead to higher levels of preference heterogeneity due to selection effects. Citizens with heterogeneous issue preferences may select themselves into the same party if that issue does not prominently feature in the party's communication. This is especially likely on issues that cut across the dominant dimension of political competition. In Western Europe, European integration and immigration are two illustrative examples. Most mainstream parties have tried to avoid these issues to avoid alienating their heterogeneous coalitions of voters and supporters (Green-Pedersen 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2009).

While all observational measures of intra-party divisions are necessarily limited in terms of which dimensions they can adequately capture, the experimental design of the final dissertation paper allows me to exogenously manipulate citizens' perceptions of all three dimensions. Given that I view some level of publicity as a necessary condition for divisions to affect voting behavior, I choose to hold this dimension constant and manipulate only intensity and actor type. First, I manipulate the intensity of divisions (i.e., the level of perceived preference heterogeneity) by exposing respondents to party shifts, which are either publicly supported or opposed from within the party. Second, I vary the intra-party actor, which publicly opposes the shift. Respondents

either read about the vocal opposition of party elites or the party base. This allows me to causally examine whether actor type plays a role in how citizens respond to public intra-party contestation of policy shifts.

5.3.2 Party behavior

There are many ways to measure party behavior and its three relevant sub-components of salience, positioning, and blurring. Party manifestos are by far the most commonly used data source (Lehmann *et al.* 2025). For my purposes, manifestos are not an appropriate option for several reasons. The first problem is that research indicates that voters do not perceive or react to position changes as captured by party manifestos (Adams *et al.* 2011, 2014). This makes manifestos a poor data source for assessing the relationship between party position change and voting behavior.

The second major problem is best illustrated by the example of European integration—an issue which prominently features in three of the papers. My claim is that manifestos perform poorly in capturing party behavior on the issue. The manifestos are coded based on salience theory, which means that quasi-sentences are assigned to pre-selected categories. For the EU, two opposing categories exist—EU negative and EU positive. This already fails to consider the severity of a negative statement. A party that opposes the EU accession of Turkey would be scored the same as a party that wants to abolish the EU altogether, given that each devotes one sentence to the matter. Another issue is that quasi-sentences can only be coded into a single category. This is particularly problematic for the EU issue, as it relates to so many other issues (Marks *et al.* 2007). To illustrate, a party that advocates for redistributive policies on the EU level may be either coded as pro-EU due to its preference for additional integration or pro-redistribution.

The final issue with the manifesto-based measure is the low salience of European integration in mainstream party manifestos. Due to intra-party

divisions and lack of other political incentives, mainstream parties have tried their best to avoid the politicization of the EU (De Vries 2007; Green-Pedersen 2012) and, generally, devoted little attention to the issue in their manifestos. Concurrently, these parties have been the engine behind European integration. Low issue salience poses a problem to manifesto position measures, as their reliability increases with the number of included statements. Take again the example of a mainstream party that only includes a single sentence on European integration, in which it opposes Turkey's accession to the EU. One can hardly argue that this represents a particularly Eurosceptic position, as many Europhile parties take this stance. Yet, the manifesto scores would characterize this party as very Eurosceptic. There are some statistical techniques to alleviate this problem (Lowe *et al.* 2011), but in the presented example, misclassification would still be unavoidable.

Because of these problems, I rely on the second standard way to measure party behavior and draw on expert surveys. To illustrate, for the European integration position scores, experts are asked to place parties on a scale from 1 (party leadership is strongly opposed to European integration) to 7 (party leadership is strongly in favor of European integration). For the salience measure, experts evaluate the relative salience of European integration in the party's public stance on a scale from 0 (European integration is of no importance) to 10 (European integration is the most important issue). The mean evaluation of all experts for one party then forms its position/salience score. Following Rovny (2012, 2013), my primary measure of position blurring is the standard deviation of expert assessments of a party's position.

Some research has used this blurring measure to approximate divisions. I disagree with this on conceptual grounds. As a consequence of divisions, parties may send conflicting signals about their preferred policy position. These may then be picked up by voters and experts, who, in turn, are uncertain about the party's "true" position and perceive it to be blurred. If this were the only

reason why positions can be blurred, then blurring could reasonably approximate divisions.

Yet, as prominently argued by Rovny (2012, 2013), party leaders may also deliberately shroud the party's position in ambiguity to retain a heterogeneous coalition of voters. In addition, blurring can also be the intended outcome or by-product of vague or inconsistent messaging, flip-flopping, and issue avoidance (Lefevere 2024; Nasr 2023). Both the strategic adoption of these behaviors and their unintended use can have a multitude of motivations and causes beyond intra-party divisions. Nevertheless, as a robustness check, I use a more direct expert-based measure of blurring based on an item that asks experts to evaluate the blurriness of a party's issue position on a scale from 0 (not at all blurred) to 10 (extremely blurred).

The position and salience measures have been validated by several studies (Hooghe *et al.* 2010; Marks *et al.* 2007; Netjes and Binnema 2007; Steenbergen and Marks 2007). These validation efforts consistently show that expert assessments of party positioning and salience outperform manifesto-derived position scores and usually perform, at least, on par with elite and voter surveys (Hooghe *et al.* 2010; Marks *et al.* 2007; Netjes and Binnema 2007; Steenbergen and Marks 2007). Importantly, the validation studies also demonstrate that experts do not appear to struggle with placing divided parties (Marks *et al.* 2007). In addition, Rovny and Polk (2020: 252) have validated the expert uncertainty-based blurring measure against the more direct expert assessment of positional clarity and find that it offers a "reasonable proxy for capturing party position blurring."

Last, I want to note that the manifesto-based salience indicator also struggles with the coding-related issue, but is not as affected by the other criticisms. As I do not consider the salience measure to be completely unsuitable, I use it to validate the findings concerning how divisions affect party salience strategies. The next section summarizes the four dissertation papers, providing

additional details on how the different measures of divisions and party behavior were utilized. For a quick overview, consult Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the dissertation papers

#	RQ	Cases	Design	Findings
I	How do intra-party divisions affect party behavior?	260 parties in 28 European countries. 1999–2024.	Observational. Candidate and expert division measure. Fixed-effects OLS regressions.	On divisive issues, parties 1) lower their issue emphasis, 2) change positions, and 3) blur their positions.
II	How do intra-party divisions condition the effect of niche party pressure on mainstream party spatial and salience strategies?	78 mainstream parties in 14 Western European countries. 1999–2019.	Observational. Expert division measure. Fixed-effects OLS panel regressions.	Intra-party divisions condition mainstream party responses to external pressures exerted by the electoral success and issue entrepreneurship of niche parties. Divided mainstream parties tend to shift Eurosceptic and increase their EU emphasis in response to Eurosceptic party pressure, whereas united parties do not.
III	How do intra-party divisions condition the electoral success of mainstream party strategies on niche issues?	14 Western European countries. 1988–2025. 136 national election outcomes and vote switching in 70 national elections.	Observational. Expert division measure. Fixed-effects OLS panel and multilevel regressions.	Intra-party divisions condition the electoral effects of mainstream accommodation. Voters punish divided parties for accommodating, but, if anything, reward united parties for the same strategy. Divided parties mostly suffer net vote losses to non-niche rivals.
IV	How do intra-party divisions shape the electoral success of policy shifts?	Germany in December 2025–January 2026, 2,400 respondents.	Experimental. Manipulation of perceptions of divisions and dissenting intra-party actors. OLS regressions.	Voters reward responsive shifts less when they are openly contested by key intra-party actors. The division punishment is the same regardless of whether the shift is contested by party elites or the base.

6

Paper summaries

6.1 Paper I – Keeping the team together: How intra-party divisions shape party behavior across issues

Paper I asks how intra-party divisions affect party behavior (Lehmann 2025a). I develop a theoretical framework that integrates salience, spatial, and blurring approaches to party behavior with my understanding of parties as complex actors with often conflicting preferences on key issues. I theorize that parties 1) avoid divisive issues, 2) change their positions on divisive issues, and 3) blur their positions on divisive issues. The empirical part investigates the relationship between divisions and party behavior across six key issues (European integration, immigration, the environment, law and order, redistribution, and social lifestyle).

The paper utilizes both a candidate- and an expert-based division measure. Respectively, they capture a more latent dimension of preference heterogeneity and a more public dimension of perceivable disagreement. I expect the measures to display the same directional relationship with the indicators of party behavior, albeit with different strengths. I use both to increase the reliability of the results. The paper covers an inclusive sample of parties and countries, examining over 260 parties in all 28 current or former EU member states between 1999 and 2024. This makes it one of the first studies to examine the effects of divisions in both WE and CEE countries. I analyze the observational material in three analytic steps, moving from bivariate correlations to

multivariate regressions on the issue level to pooled fixed-effect regression analysis.

Across the two division measures, I find highly consistent support that parties avoid divisive issues. Preference heterogeneity provides sufficient incentives for issue avoidance but is only weakly associated with position change and blurring, with heterogeneity across issues. In contrast, public disagreements, as captured by the expert-based measure, are consistently associated with position change and blurring. The results broadly support the idea that preference heterogeneity and public disagreements similarly shape party behavior, with the latter prompting stronger behavioral responses. Issue avoidance appears to be the default strategy for divided parties. This finding is robustly supported across issues, countries, and party types (i.e., mainstream and niche parties).

6.2 Paper II – Why accommodate? How niche pressure and intra-party divisions shape mainstream party strategies

Paper II examines how the interplay of intra-party divisions and external pressures shapes party behavior (Lehmann 2025b). The paper utilizes the non-unitary framework to resolve a puzzle in the literature on mainstream accommodation of niche parties. The literature suggests that mainstream parties rarely benefit from accommodating niche challengers, yet there is an abundance of evidence that the strategy constitutes a common response to niche party emergence. I argue that the electoral success and issue entrepreneurship of niche parties exert external pressure on mainstream parties. For divided parties, these pressures can strengthen party factions that favor a position more closely aligned with that of the niche party. This can ultimately result in mainstream parties accommodating the niche party's issues and positions. Conversely,

internal unity provides an effective shield against niche pressures and anchors parties in their *status quo* strategies.

The empirical part is narrower than in Paper I, examining party strategies on European integration in 14 Western European countries between 1999 and 2019. The paper utilizes the expert-based division measure, as the proposed mechanism requires that the divisions are not solely latent preference heterogeneities but that internal dissenters can feasibly pressure the party leadership and air their grievances publicly. I analyze the observational material through fixed-effects OLS panel regression analysis.

The findings support the idea that divided parties tend to increase their emphasis on the EU issue and shift towards more Eurosceptic positions when facing electorally successful and issue entrepreneurial Eurosceptic parties. United parties are not affected by niche pressures. The findings highlight an interesting dynamic. As shown in Paper I, parties generally try to avoid divisive issues. However, external pressures, like those exerted by niche challengers, can lead them to deviate from their default strategy of issue avoidance and steer them towards engagement, despite the potential negative electoral consequences.

6.3 Paper III – When does accommodation fail? The electoral consequences of intra-party divisions and mainstream party strategies

Paper III shifts the perspective to the voter level to examine the electoral consequences of intra-party divisions (Lehmann 2026a). The paper addresses another puzzle in the literature on mainstream accommodation of niche parties. While dominant spatial theoretical models suggest that accommodation should electorally benefit mainstream parties, most empirical research finds that this is not the case. I propose intra-party divisions as one solution to this puzzle.

I argue that voters punish divided parties for shifting towards more Eurosceptic and anti-immigration positions. As the example in the introduction illustrates, when parties are divided on key policy issues, their internal disagreements can spill over into the public eye. I assert that accommodation attempts like those of Friedrich Merz, pushing the CDU towards more restrictive immigration positions, are unlikely to be electorally successful when they are openly contradicted from within the party. Citizens who favor accommodation may question the credibility of these shifts as well as the competency of the party to effectively implement them. Concurrently, voters who are not in favor of accommodative shifts are unlikely to be persuaded otherwise by divided parties that send mixed signals about their preferences.

Empirically, I examine election outcomes and dyadic vote switching in the same 14 Western European countries as in Paper II. I draw on the same expert-based division measure to ensure that divisions can feasibly be perceived by voters. On the election level, I analyze mainstream party vote shares in 136 national elections between 1988 and 2025 via panel regression analysis. The results suggest that divided parties electorally suffer from Eurosceptic shifts, whereas united parties do not.

I find similar dynamics on the party-dyad level. I utilize multilevel regression models to analyze dyadic vote switching in 70 national elections between 1994 and 2025. The results indicate that voters reward completely united parties for accommodation but punish divided parties for the same strategy. I further disentangle voter flows between mainstream and a) Eurosceptic, b) other non-Eurosceptic parties. The results suggest that united accommodators mainly record net gains from non-Eurosceptic rivals, whereas divided accommodators suffer net losses from these rivals. Voter flows between mainstream and Eurosceptic parties are comparatively minor and not strongly moderated by division levels. The results broadly align with a valence logic of mainstream-niche competition, where accommodative shifts by divided parties are

unpopular and especially punished by mainstream voters. I find similar dynamics on the issue of immigration.

Jointly, Papers II and III uncover evidence for a curious mismatch between party strategies and election outcomes, driven by intra-party dynamics. Whereas Paper II shows that divided parties are more likely to accommodate niche rivals, Paper III demonstrates that they are the least successful in this endeavor. The paper further contributes to the spatial literature by highlighting the conditions under which standard spatial frameworks fail to provide useful theoretical insights into electoral competition.

6.4 Paper IV – Intra-party divisions and the electoral success of party policy shifts

Paper IV develops a broader theory of how intra-party divisions affect the electoral success of party policy shifts. I theorize four complementary factors that shape the success of responsive party policy shifts and argue that divisions negatively affect all four. As in Paper III, I theorize that, when shifts are publicly contested by key intra-party actors, voters doubt their credibility and the ability of the party to competently follow through on its newfound policy preferences. In addition, I argue that voters view internally contested shifts as short-lived and are also more likely to misperceive the party's new position. In turn, voters reward parties less for aligning with their personal policy preferences. Regarding the role of actor type, I hypothesize that intra-party contestation by party elites is more harmful than contestation by the party base.

To test this, I conduct a survey experiment on a representative sample of the German population ($N = 2,400$). In the experiment, respondents are randomly assigned to one of four conditions. In all four conditions, respondents read a mock newspaper article about a hypothetical party, which, at the last election, held an issue position incongruent with their own preferences. In the control condition, the party confirms this incongruent position. In the three

treatment conditions, the party shifts to perfectly align its policy position with the respondent's preference. I then vary whether the shift is internally supported or opposed and which key intra-party actor opposes the shift (party elites or the base).

I use OLS regression to analyze the experimental data. I find evidence of a substantial reward for aligning with voter preferences under party unity. However, voters punish intra-party contestation, reducing the responsiveness reward by around 34%. Dissent by intra-party elites is punished the same as dissent from the base. I find tentative evidence for the credibility, competence, and misperception mechanisms.

The paper provides clear causal evidence that intra-party divisions can negatively affect the electoral success of party policy shifts. It is also one of the first to shed light on the mechanisms that connect divisions to voting behavior. By doing so, the paper addresses a puzzle in the party responsiveness literature. While spatial theories predict that voters should reward parties for responsive policy shifts, observational studies find little evidence for this. I show how intra-party divisions help explain this disconnect, severing the electoral connection between party positions and voter preferences.

7

Conclusion

The dominant spatial and salience theoretical approaches to the study of party competition, by and large, assume that parties are unitary actors. Throughout the four dissertation papers, I show how breaking with the unitary actor assumption can markedly improve our understanding of contemporary political phenomena and further help us make sense of why parties and voters frequently behave in ways that defy the dominant theories. In contrast to most extant research rejecting the unitary actor assumption, I focus on the underexplored consequences of ideological divisions on key political issues. The dissertation answers the guiding research question of how intra-party divisions affect party and voting behavior in two parts.

In part one, I theorize how intra-party divisions affect different facets of party behavior. Paper I integrates spatial, salience, and blurring theoretical frameworks to show that divided parties generally engage in issue avoidance, position change, and blurring. Paper II demonstrates how external pressures, exerted by the emergence of niche parties, can crucially alter these dynamics. Whereas united parties can resist niche pressures, intra-party divisions steer parties towards engagement and accommodation. Paper II thus addresses the puzzle of why mainstream parties accommodate the issue and positions of niche parties, despite evidence suggesting that the strategy tends to backfire electorally.

In part two, I turn my attention toward the consequences of intra-party divisions for voting behavior. Theoretically, I posit that divisions condition the

electoral success of party policy shifts. Paper III uses the intra-party lens to offer an explanation for the puzzle of why mainstream accommodation fails in the first place. I show that voters punish divided mainstream parties for accommodation, while united parties tend to suffer no electoral penalty. Building on this, Paper IV situates its contribution in the party responsiveness literature, addressing the puzzle of why voters do not reward parties for promising them the policies that they demand. I demonstrate that intra-party divisions substantially reduce the electoral reward parties can receive for aligning their policies with voter preferences.

The dissertation not only sheds light on important political phenomena but also has broader implications for our understanding of party competition, voting behavior, and democratic representation. My findings point to a core tension within political parties. Most parties seek to maximize their vote share. Under a pure Downsian framework, this pushes parties to align with voter preferences and thus sustains substantive representation. As I show, the existence of ideological intra-party divisions complicates things. Papers III and IV support a dual logic of voting behavior structured by spatial and valence considerations. Voters want substantive representation and reward parties for providing it, but they also want parties to represent them credibly and competently. To do so, parties need to display a united front. They thus need to strike a balance between attracting/representing voters and seeking unity. Papers I and II indicate that the primary way in which parties try to resolve this tension is not via positional adjustments but rather through their salience strategies. Issue avoidance stands out as the initial tool of addressing division, while issue engagement becomes more common as external pressures mount. The uncovered patterns lend further credence to the idea that European party competition is increasingly structured by competition over the issue agenda rather than diverging policy offers (Green-Pedersen 2007).

The findings can also add one small piece to our understanding of big events, such as the Brexit referendum. Paper II offers a theoretical account of

why the referendum was called in the first place. The factions of the Conservative Party that favored the UK's exit from the EU were internally strengthened by the pressures exerted by the relentless issue entrepreneurship of UKIP. David Cameron then gave in to these internal pressures and engaged with the EU issue, calling for a nationwide referendum to settle an internal dispute (Bale 2018). However, both the Conservatives and Labour were highly divided in their support for remaining in the EU and failed to convince voters. Ultimately, the UK not only exited the EU, but the Conservative Party fully committed to hard Euroscepticism, going as far as leaving the European Economic Area and customs union.

When interpreting the findings, it is useful to reflect on the underlying understanding of intra-party divisions. Specifically, I followed a broad minimalist approach closely tied to the existence of preference heterogeneity within parties on important political issues. The definition covers variation in many different dimensions of the concept. Yet, it also excludes other potentially important types of intra-party divisions. Parties may, for example, disagree on organizational aspects (Bolleyer and Kölln 2025), independent of policy preferences. To gain an even more encompassing understanding of the consequences of intra-party divisions, future work should consider the effects of such disagreements and how they connect to internal struggles over policy.

Despite the useful insights that I hope this dissertation provides, I want to highlight some limitations that can inform future research. One of the main limitations is that I am unable to test the proposed mechanisms that lead divided parties to change their behavior. Relatedly, I can also only speculate whether changes in party positions, salience, and position blurring are strategic or an unanticipated consequence of divisions. The two are extremely difficult to disentangle empirically, as they are not mutually exclusive. Blurred positions may, for instance, be the combined outcome of strategic ambiguity and public infighting. Future research could address this shortcoming by using qualitative in-depth studies to illuminate how party leaders deal with divisions

in crucial cases or use process-tracing to specifically examine the mechanisms that link intra-party divisions and party behavior. There are already some good starting points in the literature (Aylott 2002; Orhan 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). On a more systematic level, a promising path forward would be to consider data on changes in party leadership and dominant party factions and to look more closely at whether and how party elites deviate from the party line.

While the papers cover a broad range of countries, the empirical focus always remains exclusively on EU member states. I encourage future empirical research to examine whether the findings travel to other contexts that meet the minimum scope conditions. Prime contenders are Western non-EU democracies, such as Switzerland or New Zealand, but South American democracies may also work.

Another avenue for future research would be to pay closer attention to how issue-level dynamics shape how parties deal with divisions. Recent work suggests that party strategies systematically differ depending on whether an issue is part of the primary or secondary dimension that the party competes on (Koedam 2022b). In addition, I have suggested that the public salience of issues is likely to play an important role in informing party leaders how urgently they need to address internal divisions. Another important issue-level factor may be issue ownership. Considering that the concept directly taps into the competence evaluations of parties, it seems likely that divided issue owners may be particularly sensitive to ownership attacks. An interesting question then arises concerning how issue owners strategize when, for one reason or another, they are plagued by divisions on the issue they would otherwise like to compete on. All of this is to say that much work needs to be done to fully understand the issue-level variation in how parties deal with divisions.

Finally, this dissertation has extensively discussed the consequences of intra-party divisions but paid no attention to their causes. One reason for this is that scholarly work on the causes is strongly underdeveloped (but see Greene and Haber 2016). A natural point of departure is the literature on issue

divisions within the electorate. A plausible assumption would be that parties consist of members who, much like voting blocs, sort themselves based on their political ideology. Some issues may then arise, such as European integration or immigration, that cut across these ideologies. However, this account is not completely satisfactory. If the salience of these issues endures, we would expect to see more frequent reshaping of the party systems than we do empirically, and divisions would be unlikely to exist in an equilibrium. We thus still lack a complete dynamic account of when divisions increase and decrease within political parties.

A related unanswered question is when intra-party preference heterogeneities lead to public disagreements. As Paper I shows, parties are divided on many issues, yet some seem more prone to result in public conflicts than others, with immigration as a prime example. One plausible explanation for this is the existence of far-right issue entrepreneurs, who try to push the issue to the forefront of party competition precisely because of its divisive nature (Hobolt and De Vries 2015, 2020). A complementary possibility is that value-laden socio-cultural issues, like immigration and European integration, have more conflict potential due to their moral underpinnings (see Tavits 2007). Future research on when intra-party preference heterogeneities translate into outright conflict could help shed further light on these plausible explanations.

To conclude, as I have extensively argued, ideological intra-party divisions play an important role in shaping party and voting behavior in contemporary European politics. Loosening the unitary actor assumption is thus not only reasonable but also offers useful theoretical insights that can provide a novel perspective on many ongoing societal and academic debates.

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Included papers

Paper I: Lehmann, F. (2025) Keeping the team together: how intra-party divisions shape party behavior across issues. *Journal of European Public Policy*: 1-29. E-pub ahead of print.

Paper II: Lehmann, F. (2025) Why accommodate? How niche pressure and intra-party divisions shape mainstream party strategies. *Journal of European Public Policy* 32(10): 2331-2356.

Paper III: Lehmann, F. (2026) When does accommodation fail? The electoral consequences of intra-party divisions and mainstream party strategies. *West European Politics*: 1-28. E-pub ahead of print.

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