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## **Parties under pressure : explaining choices made by parties in the wake of heavy electoral defeat**

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### **Citation**

Nijnanten, M. T. van. (2019, September 12). *Parties under pressure : explaining choices made by parties in the wake of heavy electoral defeat*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/77745>

Version: Publisher's Version

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



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**Issue Date:** 2019-09-12

# 1 Parties under pressure: introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

That parties are under pressure is not a new theme in political science. Since the 1980s, there has been a lively debate over whether or not political parties as a form of political organisation are in crisis.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the challenges faced by political parties are increasing: electoral volatility has risen, membership numbers have declined and they are challenged by the rise of competitors who claim to stand in opposition to “old” party politics. These central institutions of many democracies find themselves put under increasing stress. Though the electoral challenges parties are faced with are not new, they are increasing in number. At almost every election, one or more parties will find themselves with severe losses of votes, seats or both.

And yet, parties have persisted. Their capacity to do so is related in the literature to their capacity for *change*, allowing them to adapt to the circumstances.<sup>2</sup> It is this way of reacting to a changing political reality that is the subject of this dissertation. The central question it aims to answer is as follows: *how do political parties respond to an external shock in the form of heavy electoral defeat, and why do different parties respond in different ways?* In seeking to answer this question, this dissertation can be placed in a broader literature on party change which sees party change as the result of external shocks: dramatic events resulting from a change in the external environment, forcing the party to change.<sup>3</sup> The theories in this broader literature on party change following external shock, however, do not provide the conceptual and theoretical tools needed to analyse parties put under pressure by heavy electoral defeat and distinguish between various ways in which parties change as a result. This thesis takes a new institutionalist approach in which internal characteristics such as a party’s relationship to its electoral base and its ideological commitments as well as external factors such as the impact of electoral systems play important roles. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the literature by starting to construct the required framework, and in doing so further political science’s understanding of the antecedents of party change in general.

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1. E.g. K. Lawson and P. H. Merkl, eds., *When Parties Fail: Emerging Alternative Organisations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); H. Daalder, “A Crisis of Party?,” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 15, no. 4 (1992): 269–288; P. Mair, *Party System Change: Approaches and Interpretations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

2. E.g. Mair, *Party System Change*, 89.

3. E.g. A. Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organization and Power*, trans. from the Italian by M. Silver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 [1982]); R. Harmel and K. Janda, “An Integrated Theory of Party Goals and Party Change,” *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 6, no. 3 (1994): 259–287.

This introductory chapter introduces the research puzzle in more detail. Section 1.2 outlines the research puzzle and presents an argument for its theoretical relevance, arguing that the current literature pays insufficient systematic attention to this phenomenon. It also looks ahead to a more detailed discussion of the literature later in this dissertation in briefly considering why this might be the case. The main focus of section 1.3 shall be to discuss the rise in electoral volatility that has occurred in Western democracies. In particular, it will be argued that heavy electoral defeat is becoming a routine feature of parliamentary elections, presenting the study's societal relevance. Finally, section 1.4 presents an overview of the contents of this dissertation.

## 1.2 The puzzle: the black box of party change

The study of party change is a subset of a larger field of theoretical development in the social sciences, focusing on organisational and institutional change. A central characteristic that the social sciences accord to institutions and organisations is a certain permanence: they become imbued with value that extends beyond their original instrumental purpose and makes their survival a goal onto itself. This was also one of the early insights in the literature on political parties. Michels, in his classic study on political parties, notes the way in which political organisations displace their earlier idealistic goals with simple endeavour for the survival of the organisation itself.<sup>4</sup>

Looking at parties this way, it is easy to see how change itself becomes a target for explanation. If political parties are institutions and their chief aim is survival, then how is it that their programme, ideology, organisation and strategy changes over time? The literature has taken two different approaches to explain this. The first, most numerous category of studies views change as the result of gradual changes in the external environment, progressing more or less through a succession of party types.<sup>5</sup> The second school is concerned with sharp, marked external shocks which cause parties to change.<sup>6</sup>

Both bodies of literature suffer from a similar problem: the same process of party change takes different forms in different circumstances. In other words: the process between the changes in the environment that cause party change and the ultimate party change involves many intervening steps, which can explain why most parties change due to these factors, but not all of them to the same extent and in the same way. In a manner of speaking often employed in situations with a similar problem: there is a black box over the intervening causal process between the causes and the outcome of the process, which

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4. R. Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. from the German by E. Paul and C. Paul (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978 [1915]), 373.

5. E.g. M. Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State*, trans. from the French by B. North and R. North (London: Methuen, 1954 [1951]), 63; O. Kirchheimer, "The Transformation of Western European Party Systems," in *Political Parties and Political Development*, ed. J. LaPalombara and M. Weiner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 185; R. S. Katz and P. Mair, "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: the Emergence of the Cartel Party," *Party Politics* 1, no. 1 (1995): 8; A. Krouwel, "Otto Kirchheimer and the Catch-All Party," *West European Politics* 26, no. 2 (2003): 23–40; A. Krouwel, *Party Transformations in European Democracies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 5.

6. E.g. Panebianco, *Political Parties*, 242; Harmel and Janda, "An Integrated Theory of Party Goals and Party Change," 265.

is hard for researchers to look in on.<sup>7</sup>

And yet, without opening the black box, the party change literature will keep struggling with the problem of expressing such a complex causal relationship too simply. In the literature on the evolution of party types, the tendency to overgeneralise and declare one party type dominant without regard to diversity across parties and party system has often been diagnosed.<sup>8</sup> Expectations of dominant party types have more often than not failed to materialise. The ‘external shocks literature’ suffers from a related issue: here, theory gets stuck at the stage of demonstrating a link between an external shock and change,<sup>9</sup> but often fails to take account of the various different forms that belong to this same category of change. In both cases, it is the same problem underlying these issues: the black box of party change, obscuring the complex causal interplay that links its antecedents to its outcome.

The case study, with its qualitative focus and ability to look in detail at causal processes, is the method *par excellence* to deal with the black box. And it has, in the literature on external shocks in particular, spawned a rich tradition of single-case studies employing the same model.<sup>10</sup> Yet in all these case studies, it is rarely acknowledged that the party change explained in the one is of a different kind than the party change discussed in the other. Without acknowledging this diversity of outcomes within the overall category of party change, the black box cannot be fully opened to understand why party change occurs in different forms in different circumstances. In other words: in one set of circumstances, some changes can be present and some absent, and in others this may be exactly the other way round. A framework needs to be developed to understand the different varieties of party change and why one occurs in one party and another in another.

This is the main research puzzle this dissertation is intended to address. It is situated within the literature on external shocks because the sharp environmental changes producing party change offer the greatest potential to observe the workings of party change up close, but there is nothing to suggest that a similar reasoning, once refined, cannot also be applied to the more ‘gradualist’ literature. Within the broader literature on party change, this dissertation focuses on electoral shocks for various reasons. First, there seems to be general agreement that electoral defeat is a form of external shock.<sup>11</sup> Second, unlike other forms of shock, it is easily observed, since the results of elections are public.

In this way, this chapter arrives at a two-part research question, both parts of which can ultimately be traced back to solving the research puzzle of the black box. The first

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7. W. C. Müller, “Inside the Black Box: A Confrontation of Party Executive Behaviour and Theories of Party Organizational Change,” *Party Politics* 3, no. 3 (1997): 295.

8. R. A. Koole, “Cadre, Catch-All or Cartel? A Comment on the Notion of the Cartel Party,” *Party Politics* 2, no. 4 (1996): 508; R. A. Koole, *De Opkomst van de Moderne Kaderpartij: Veranderende Partijorganisatie in Nederland 1960-1990* (Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 1992), 406-407; A. Krouwel, “The Catch-All Party in Western Europe, 1945-1990: A Study in Arrested Development” (PhD diss., Free University of Amsterdam, 1999), 204.

9. R. Harmel et al., “Performance, Leadership, Factions and Party Change: An Empirical Analysis,” *West European Politics* 18, no. 1 (1995): 1-33.

10. E.g. Müller, “Inside the Black Box”; F. Duncan, “‘Lately, Things Just Don’t Seem the Same’: External Shocks, Party Change and the Adaptation of the Dutch Christian Democrats During ‘Purple Hague’, 1994-8,” *Party Politics* 13, no. 1 (2007): 69-87.

11. Panebianco, *Political Parties*, 243; Harmel and Janda, “An Integrated Theory of Party Goals and Party Change,” 281.

part concerns the need to acknowledge and map out in a structured way the diversity of outcomes within the category of party change: *how do political parties respond to an external shock in the form of heavy electoral defeat?* This is a prerequisite of furthering the research agenda on party change. So far, case studies have each taken a different view of party change, allowing them to explain the outcome in one case but not necessarily to extrapolate them to others. To do so, a comparative small-N study with a single conceptual and heuristic toolbox is needed. The second part of the research question, and the most important one, deals directly with the complex causal process linking an electoral defeat and party change: *why do different political parties respond in different ways?* Having observed that certain parties respond to these sharp changes in the environment in different ways, the question is why.

Formulating an answer to the first part of the research question requires the development of a new conceptual vocabulary and a heuristic model that can function as a starting point for theory-building. Since the existing models in the literature on shocks and change are only intended to explain the occurrence and extent of change, a new model is needed to get at the factors causing the several varieties of change. The focus on electoral shocks helps formulate this model in terms of the goal of the process: electoral recovery. Necessarily of course, this new model should then be tested on multiple cases in a qualitative way, so as to examine whether it can actually help to explain the presence or absence of certain types of changes in various cases.

In this way, the discussion naturally arrives at the second part of the research question. Previous case studies have, as noted above, often suffered from the problem of focusing too much on the idiosyncrasies of each case rather than on a general understanding and explanation of the phenomenon of party change itself. The best way to try to remedy this is a comparative small-N research design. By combining the detailed focused comparison of the case study method with a comparative design intended to account for the various differences across cases, the model can be put to a first test and further refined into a full theoretical model.

Addressing this problem can contribute knowledge to broader fields of the literature than just the focus on party change following electoral shocks. The literature on the evolution of party types suffers from a similar problem of presuming too easily (and too often wrongly) that certain developments observed will eventually lead to a new dominant party type emerging across different environments.<sup>12</sup> The difference between the two fields of study is not that large, since the same type of causes occur in both, being changes in the external environment in which parties operate. Once a framework has been developed to explain different outcomes after external shocks, some of the factors that are part of it can potentially also be applied to more gradual environmental changes. By starting with the marked changes produced by external shocks, it might be possible to explain the variation in more subtle and gradual changes as well.

The potential theoretical contribution can be broadened even further. It has been noted briefly in section 1.1 above that political parties have had a number of obituaries in the literature, each of which was subsequently proven wrong by their surprising resilience.

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12. Koole, "Cadre, Catch-All or Cartel?," 508; Koole, *De Opkomst van de Moderne Kaderpartij*, 406-407; Krouwel, "The Catch-All Party in Western Europe, 1945-1990," 204.

A useful idea about this resilience is that this is the result of the capacity of political parties to adapt to changing circumstances.<sup>13</sup> By looking at what happens when parties are put under pressure, we can also learn something about the way this capacity to adapt exists on the individual party level. In doing so, a deeper understanding of party change in parties under pressure also contributes to a deeper understanding of political parties themselves and the way in which they adapt to various changes in the social environment.

### 1.3 Increasing volatility, increasing pressure

The relevance of the research puzzle is not just a matter of furthering the research agenda on party change – it might also be an issue of societal importance. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, parties nowadays appear to face increasing challenges, mainly as a result of electoral volatility. These pressures result from the oft-observed process of partisan de-alignment in many Western democracies: party identification, which has for long been a defining influence on electoral behaviour, is declining among the electorate. Parties are faced not only with decreasing memberships<sup>14</sup> and the entry of new competitors<sup>15</sup>, but above all by an increasing instability in their shares of the vote, born from a decline in the number of voters who would more or less automatically vote for them.

The consequence of this is that heavy electoral defeat is more common today than it has been in the past. This can, first and foremost, be seen in the levels of electoral volatility in Western Europe. Although Bartolini and Mair found that on average, volatility was still lower than in the ‘freezing’ inter-war period,<sup>16</sup> Mair also noted in 1992 that several European democracies were experiencing increased volatility.<sup>17</sup> Emmanuele and Chiamonte found two decades later that ‘unstable’ elections have occurred disproportionately in recent years, increasing from one third pre-1991 to half of the cases after that year.<sup>18</sup> In addition, they note that strings of these elections have occurred in eleven different Western European democracies, most of them in this period.<sup>19</sup>

To further illustrate this, figure 1.1 displays the number of electoral defeats that can be qualified as heavy defeats in European countries.<sup>20</sup> As a rule of thumb, a loss of at least one third of a party’s previous votes and/or seats was considered a heavy electoral defeat. This same rule of thumb will be employed later on in this dissertation to delineate the universe of cases of heavy electoral defeat, and will be justified in chapter four. For

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13. See Mair, *Party System Change*, 89.

14. P. Mair and I. van Biezen, “Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980-2000,” *Party Politics* 7, no. 1 (2001): 5–21.

15. R. Harmel and J. D. Robertson, “Formation and Success of New Parties: A Cross-National Analysis,” *International Political Science Review* 6, no. 4 (1985): 501–523; B. Meguid, *Party Competition Between Unequals: Strategies and Electoral Fortunes in Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

16. S. Bartolini and P. Mair, *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability* (1990), 120.

17. Mair, *Party System Change*, 81.

18. V. Emmanuele and A. Chiamonte, “Party system volatility, regeneration and de-institutionalization in Western Europe (1945-2015),” *Party Politics* 23, no. 4 (2017): 382.

19. *Ibid.*, 384.

20. Only parties which had been present in the previous legislature were considered. This is a necessary restriction to make, since the disadvantage of having to meet an electoral threshold that has not been met before makes the vote of non-represented parties subject to more fluctuations of its own.

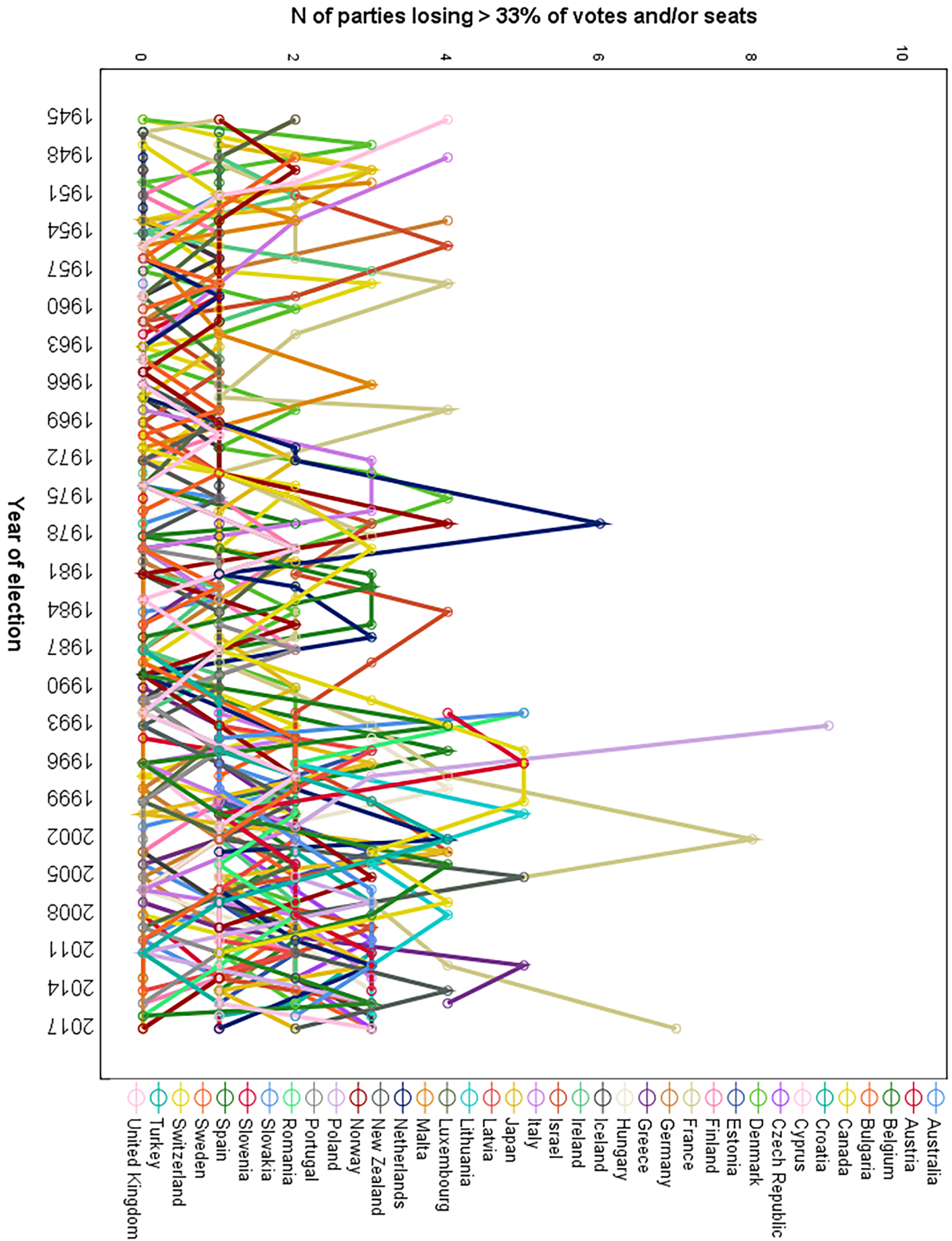


Figure 1.1: Number of parties losing more than 33% of their votes or seats, 1945-2017



now, it suffices to say that it is a significant enough loss to seriously damage a party's future electoral potential should the party not take serious action to address the crisis. In Britain and the Netherlands, the two countries under study in this dissertation, not an election has been held since the 1990s without a party losing heavily in this way. Indeed, this is the case for much if not all of Europe. Even where there is no party at all that suffers a loss of this magnitude at an election, this is more often the exception rather than the rule. Interestingly, the graph suggests that in most post-communist countries, this kind of instability of party vote and seat shares appears to be structural.

The societal relevance of this study now becomes clear: political parties, a vital part of many democratic systems, are under increasing electoral pressure. Past studies have provided ample evidence for the popular wisdom that parties are forced to change by electoral defeat of a certain magnitude. Yet to understand the ways in which parties will develop in the future under these challenging circumstances, a more detailed consideration of party change following heavy electoral defeat is needed. It is not enough to know that parties change as a result of a heavy electoral defeat, though it is certainly comforting to know that the popular wisdom in this case is correct. In order to say anything meaningful about the impact this increasing pressure will have on political parties, the debate needs to go further than that, considering the different ways in which parties can develop.

Opening up the black box is therefore not just a matter of theoretical importance; it contributes to a vital and ongoing debate about the continuing relevance and changing practices of political parties. By informing thinking about the way in which parties act and change themselves when put under pressure, the future of these important actors in our democratic systems may be put in sharper focus. By relating important developments such as the differentiation of party membership<sup>21</sup>, the extension of the franchise in leadership elections to registered supporters and the downplaying of ideology<sup>22</sup> to the environmental challenges faced by each party, the future of these important actors in our democratic systems may be put in sharper focus.

## 1.4 Contents of this dissertation

This chapter has set out the research puzzle to be addressed in this dissertation. In the following chapters of this dissertation, the approach broadly outlined above will be expanded upon. Chapter two contains a review of the literature on political parties in general and party change in particular. In particular, it further explores the problem of the black box in the 'party shocks literature' and goes into more detail, arguing the need for a new theoretical model of party shocks and party change. Developing a new model alongside heuristic tools and the conceptual vocabulary required is the focus of the third chapter of this dissertation. Two strategies are derived from the ultimate need to compensate for the loss of electoral potential after an electoral shock: the reinforcement strategy, bringing the party closer to its roots in order to reach out to those supporters

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21. E.g. S. E. Scarrow, *Multi-Speed Membership Parties: Evidence and Implications*, 2014, Paper prepared for "Contemporary Meanings of Party Membership", ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Salamanca, Spain, April 10-15, 2014.

22. Kirchheimer, "The Transformation of Western European Party Systems," 190.

that deserted it and those like them; and the extension strategy, broadening the party's base with measures that often move away from its roots. The argument that will be presented in this chapter with regard to the two strategies is that internal institutional characteristics of each party, particularly their attachment to their electoral base and their ideology, and external factors such as the electoral system, combine to influence the choice of strategy and the ultimate form of party change. It concludes by presenting a number of testable propositions. Having formulated these, this dissertation continues in chapter four by operationalising the major variables and outlining a comparative research design consisting of four parties which have suffered a crisis in the past to test these propositions.

The main body of this dissertation consists of five empirical chapters. Using evidence from the archival records of each party, chapters five through eight present an in-depth account of the response of each of the four parties up to two electoral cycles following a heavy electoral defeat, structured along the lines of the model. After discussing the Dutch Christian Democratic Appeal's response to its 1994 defeat in chapter five and the British Labour Party's transformation between 1983 and 1992 in chapter six, the analysis will turn towards the Netherlands' Democrats 66 between 1982 and 1989. Finally, the British Liberal Party's recovery process between 1970 and 1974 will be discussed. Each of these chapters attempt to explain the course each of these parties have taken in crisis. The evidence from these cases is then combined and synthesised in chapter nine. Through this comparative analysis, each of the propositions formulated in chapter three will then be put to the test, allowing judgment of the performance of the model. In chapter ten, finally, the overall conclusions of this dissertation will be formulated and suggestions made for future research.

The common thread that may be found running through all the chapters of this dissertation, binding them together, is how indebted political parties are to their history. Where previous entries into the 'shocks literature' cast the process of change as a power struggle, the image that emerges from this study is that it is more than that: it is also a continuous conversation with the party's own past. Through a process of path-dependency, the way in which the party's social base and its ideology have been viewed in the past very much affects the party at the new critical juncture that is initiated by the electoral crisis. In practice, veering away from this past is difficult even in such a challenging situation. This is the major argument of this dissertation: a party under pressure is forced to show its true colours. It has to (re)consider the basic essentials of its existence: what is the party and who is it for? As it will be shown, it is these questions that structure the debate on the path to electoral recovery, rather than more rational and functionalist considerations, such as the identity of the defectors.