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Is disloyalty rewarded? The electoral consequences of bloc changes of Scandinavian Centre Parties 1977–2019

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Abstract

Centre Parties (Agrarians, Christian Democrats and Liberals) used to be an established part of the Scandinavian party systems and have often been pivotal for government formation. With ongoing individualisation, secularisation, decline of traditional cleavages, and the rise of new ones such as immigration, as well as polarisation, these parties face the challenge of losing representation in parliament as already happened to the Danish Centre Democrats and Christian Democrats. To shift a party's bloc affiliation and coalition preferences is a feature of centre parties, and it may itself be a strategic decision to mobilise new voters in a changed political environment to survive. Yet, it may alienate voters. While the strategic decision to change bloc is common among Scandinavian centre parties and theoretically relevant, empirical investigations of the electoral effects of bloc changes have been dim. We provide a systematic analysis of the electoral effects of bloc changes in Scandinavia in the last four decades. We collected data on bloc changes of Scandinavian centre parties and found 24 between 1977 and 2021. Our panel regressions reveal that bloc changes are indeed electorally costly as centre parties on average lose around 2% after a bloc change. Frequent bloc changes in the past do also reduce a party's average electoral performance. The electoral punishment of a bloc change, however, is cushioned by a large membership base as centre parties evade significant losses if they have a strong anchor in the electorate.

INTRODUCTION

Centre parties of different party families (Agrarian, Christian and Liberal parties) used to be a defining feature of Scandinavian party systems (Arter, 1999; Aylott, 2011; Berglund & Lindström, 1978). Especially in Denmark and Norway, they were often crucial for government formation. It took until 2001 in

Denmark that the first non-social democratic government could form without any support from a centre party. Since then, we could observe notable differences between their electoral support and political importance. Some parties have been marginalised or even disappeared such as the Danish Centre Democrats, some are currently struggling for surpassing the electoral thresholds and their survival (as the Norwegian Christian People's Party and Swedish Liberals), and some experienced remarkable comebacks such as Norway's Centre Party in 2017 and 2021.

One distinctive feature of Scandinavian centre parties is their frequent pivotal position for government formation (Arter, 2016; Strøm, 1990). To strengthen their bargaining position, and for political, tactical, or long-term strategic reasons, centre parties do sometimes shift their bloc affiliation during an election term or a campaign. One recent example is the decision of the Swedish Centre Party (*Centerpartiet*) and the Liberals (*Liberalerna*) in late 2018 to support a social democratic government against their election pledges to form a centre-right government. This led to the ultimate breakdown of the Alliance for Sweden, a centre-right four-party cooperation, and a red-green cabinet took office even though there was no left-of-centre majority in the 2018–2022 Riksdag.

The capability to change blocs is a feature of a centre party but it may also send mixed signals to the voters, particularly if these care about which bloc should win an election. Arter (2016) hypothesised that bloc changes or changes from a bloc affiliation to a hinge party strategy are electorally costly for centre parties. Empirically, we do however know little about the electoral effects of such bloc changes for Scandinavian centre parties. Our study fills this gap and helps us to understand why some Scandinavian centre parties have remained competitive whereas others have disappeared. We found 24 instances of bloc changes between the late 1970s and 2019 in our data collection.

We argue that bloc changes are punished as centre parties lose voters with distinct coalition or government preferences and alienate potential tactical voters from supporters of larger parties from the bloc the centre party was affiliated with. Similarly, we expect that a sequence of bloc changes reduces the support level for a centre party over time. We also posit a conditional hypothesis that the punishment from a bloc change is moderated by the membership base since parties with a strong membership can evade the losses from a bloc change.

Our results from panel regression models confirm these expectations since centre parties lose around two percentage points at the election following a bloc change and receive weaker average support if they have a history of bloc changes before an election. Yet, parties with a sufficiently strong membership base are not significantly punished for a bloc change. We conclude and discuss the implications of our findings.

Centre Parties in parliamentary democracies

In the classic literature, Downs (1957) established that the pivotal vote in parliament, and thus the centre, was attractive to control in two-party systems. Keman (1994) noted how pivotal centre parties can dominate government formation and legislation in multi-party systems. Yet, Sartori (1976) noted how strong centre parties would lead to double-sided attacks and polarisation. Hazan (1997) largely confirmed this view empirically.

Daalder (1984) set out to identify the existence and types of 'centres' within in the party systems. He found that in some countries, like Britain, France or Austria, the concept had little meaning, while in others, like Italy, Netherlands, and Germany, it was of high importance. The centre parties of Scandinavia, he placed as dependent on the size of the major parties. In a similar vein, Green-Pedersen, 2004 points out how the dynamics of party systems depend systematically on the size of the centrist parties. Large pivotal centrist parties, such as the Christian Democrats (CDA) in the Netherlands until the 1990s, did not need to commit to electoral alliances or blocs before an election. They utilised this freedom in coalition bargains to take the position of Prime Minister for themselves while deciding between left and right coalition partners. Accordingly, the non-commitment to any bloc and the shifts between coalition partners maximised their influence. The Centre Party in Finland took a somewhat similar role that has been labelled as a 'hinge party' that deliberately places itself between the leftist and rightist camp to maximise its 'availability' in the coalition building process. (Arter, 1979, 2016). Thus, a hinge party strategy may be more attainable for major and pivotal centrist parties.

In a Scandinavian context, the centrist parties have been much smaller. In contrast to Continental European countries, such as the Netherlands or Austria and Germany with their frequent grand coalitions, party competition had been characterised by a bloc structure focusing on socio-economic issues (left vs. right). Green-Pedersen and Thomsen (2005) argued that bloc politics is the precondition for parliamentarism in Scandinavia and cross-party cooperation. On that score, the small centrist parties often appealed for cross-bloc cooperation. While this may sometimes be successful when it comes to negotiations over public policy, the challenge for centre parties in Scandinavia is that at elections voters expect centre parties to commit themselves to a bloc, and to a Prime Minister candidate representing the bloc (Green-Pedersen, 2004). This implies that voters want to know which bloc they vote for when they support a centre party. Centrist parties such as the Danish Social Liberals (*Radikale Venstre*) thus often need to choose a bloc to remain credible to its members and voters, and thereby lose out on its pivotal position and the ability to play the hinge party strategy (Green-Pedersen, 2003; see also Dahl, 2015).

Yet, the smaller centrist parties of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark may still utilise the advantage of holding a pivotal position within the party system. This

presupposes a capacity to shift side, or bloc, from left to right or vice versa, to maximise policy influence (Arter, 2016; see Rémy 1975; or Bolleyer, 2007; for bargaining power of pivotal parties and bloc changes). This motivation was given by the Social Liberal Party in Denmark when it shifted from the left to the right in 1982 and back to the left in 1993. Yet, bloc changes may also happen to prevent other parties—particularly parties considered extreme by the centre parties—from gaining influence. This was the reason for the Centre Democrats to shift to the left bloc in 1993, because thereby the party sought to reduce the influence of the Socialist People's Party on the government (Bille, 1998, p. 150; Mortensen, 2014, p. 287ff). The Swedish Centre Party and the Liberals also justified their recent bloc changes as attempt to prevent the right-wing Sweden Democrats from influence. With the rise of new cleavages, like other traditional 'people's parties', centrist parties also need to find a position (Smith, 1989).

Holding a centrist position in a bloc system may be electorally costly since the voters want to know which bloc they vote for. Indeed, another classic, Duverger (1964, p. 215) dismissed the existence of any 'centrist tendency' in party systems; there were only artificial groupings of the right wing of the Left or the left wing of the Right, and he stated that 'The fate of the Center is to be torn asunder, buffeted and annihilated: torn asunder when one of its halves votes Right and the other Left, buffeted when it votes as a group first Right then Left, annihilated when it abstains from voting.'

Likewise, by shifting bloc, centre parties risk becoming undermined as suggested by the literature, particularly when a decline of traditional cleavages based on class, sets in Franklin et al. (1992), Kriesi (1998) and Knutsen (2018). If they take part in government, as smaller, and hence typically junior coalition partners, they will have to pay 'the cost of ruling', although mitigated some by their position in the centre (Hjermitslev, 2020).

Electoral costs of bloc shifts

One distinct way of changing a party's positioning is changing one's allies and coalition partners. As mentioned above, this is of relevance for Scandinavian party systems given the presence of various centre parties. For these parties, government participation or toleration was often a strategic decision that allowed them to secure policy gains and selected benefits for their core constituencies (Dahl, 2015). One special case occurs when a party breaks up with its traditional allies and either shifts bloc and coalition partners or becomes unaffiliated (i.e. pursues a 'hinge party' strategy). Such bloc shifts can be an attempt to attract new voter groups or secure policy gains, but also blur the party's profile and make voters cynical (cf. Arter, 2016; Duverger, 1964).

However, bloc shifts may become riskier in a changed environment with less loyal voters, fewer partisans, and a crumbling membership base, where voters do no longer follow their party leadership's strategic decisions in return for

defined policy gains or benefits (e.g., agricultural subsidies). Particularly, a smaller membership base and few resources reduce a party's ability to communicate the bloc change to the electorate and its own voters. Moreover, a bloc shift means that tactical voters from previously allied parties face insecurity as to whether they get the desired government constellation if the bloc shift is announced prior to the election, respectively they feel cheated if a bloc shift has been pursued against the centre party's election pledge and will no longer support the party in future elections.

Fredén (2014) has in this regard theorised and demonstrated the existence of 'threshold insurance voting'. This means that tactical voters, who originally favour a larger party from their preferred bloc or pre-electoral coalition, vote for a smaller party from the same bloc to secure that the small party surpasses the threshold. Her main example were the Swedish Christian Democrats who are often supported by the partisans of the Conservatives to realise a centre-right majority. Outside Scandinavia, the German concept of 'loaned vote' (*Leihstimme*) is similar as the centrist FDP often relied on tactical voters from the CDU or SPD as long as the German party system was a three-party system and the FDP remained the small but pivotal party (see Roberts, 1988).

Hence, we argue that threshold insurance voting will only benefit centre parties who remain loyal to their bloc or pre-electoral coalition as supporters or partisans of larger parties will not vote for smaller centrist parties if they have left the bloc before or even have a track record of disloyalty due to frequent bloc changes in the past. This means that the likelihood of benefiting from 'threshold insurance voting' (Fréden, 2014) or 'loaned votes' will decrease, and future electoral support is jeopardised.

Harmel and Janda (1994) expect strong party organisations—with high membership and high levels of internal party democracy—to reduce the likelihood for party change, in particular ideological party change. This is because party organisations are committed to the party ideology and thus 'conservative' whereas party leadership may find it attractive to shift positions for more tactical reasons. This would lead to an expectation that parties with a strong party organisation is less likely to make a bloc shift. Yet, empirically, we can observe centre parties both with and without strong party organisations shifting side. Hence, we put our question differently: how does a strong party organisation impact on electoral support if a party shifts bloc? In this connection, Christiansen (2020), studying the Liberal Party of Denmark (*Venstre*)—not a centrist party by itself—noted that its relative strong party organisation had 'shielded' the party leadership through transformation and party change even when it took some years for this process to show electoral gains. Anghel and Thürk (2021) find that 'ethno-regional' parties (such as the Swedish People's Party in Finland) are more likely to serve as formal support parties for a minority government, allowing for a log-roll strategy with specific payoffs to a distinct electoral group. Likewise, centrist parties may hold an

advantage if they are able to uphold support in a distinct group of voters originating from historical cleavages—like farmers for the Centre Parties in Norway and Sweden—regardless of shift in bloc. In contrast, parties with weaker organisations demand more immediate results.

It follows that parties with a strong party organisation may have a stronger core support if or when they shift bloc. Thus, large memberships and resources may mitigate or reduce the electoral losses of bloc shifts and are better able to resist times of electoral decline. We argue that these parties will be in a stronger position to 'test' a new position without being annihilated in the short run. Adaption to new environments is more successful if a party is institutionalised and has stronger resources (i.e., finances/members) (Harmel & Janda, 1994; Panebianco, 1988). Hence, as long as a centrist party holds firm support from cleavage-based voter groups, this position may even be upheld in the electorate.

Based on our discussion of the expected effects of bloc changes, we therefore expect:

Hypothesis 1. *A bloc shift reduces electoral support at the next election.*

Hypothesis 2. *Parties with a strong membership base lose fewer voters as consequence of a bloc shift.*

Hypothesis 3. *The average electoral support for a centre party declines with every bloc shift.*

Research strategy and data

To gather data on bloc changes of Scandinavian centre parties, we created a data matrix (year by party) and coded the party's current bloc affiliation based on original party documents, historical sources, existing secondary literature on the individual parties, and an own inspection of each party's history since the late 1970s (the data matrix, a detailed overview of the sources and coding procedures appears in the Supporting Information: Online Appendix). We select this period because we expect the problems with decline in traditional cleavage-based to set in from the 1970s while at the same time, decades of dominance by the social democratic parties, particularly in Sweden and Norway, got reduced with more dynamic possibilities for government formations.

We begin with the Storting Elections 1977 for Norway, the Folketing Elections 1979 for Denmark, and the Riksdag Elections 1979 for Sweden. Since then, the party systems in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden have had a left-wing (red) bloc consisting of social democrats, greens, post-communist, and other leftist parties and a right-wing (blue) bloc consisting of conservatives, right-wing liberals, and far right parties. Centre parties thus cooperated with either of the

blocs although most centre parties were historically affiliated with the right bloc. We coded a bloc change as 1 if a party had left the bloc, it was originally affiliated with during the preceding electoral term. This includes situations where a party did leave the bloc that it was supposed to support or form a government with directly after the election. This can be the case by supporting another government alternative than promised, making confidence-and-supply agreements with parties from other blocs; or directly forming a government with a party from the other camp against the original promise, pre-electoral coalition agreements or coalitions pledges in the manifesto. We also coded leaving a coalition from the same bloc and joining a coalition from a rival bloc within the same term as bloc change. The same goes for shifting the bloc or Prime Minister preference during an election campaign after having been affiliated with or tolerated another bloc.

The bloc change variable thus captures whether a party had changed its bloc affiliation before an election irrespective of whether this happened directly after the last election or later during the term. In line with Arter (2016), we therefore capture changes between a bloc affiliation, hinge party, and bloc realignment strategy during a term. We did not code temporary budget coalitions as bloc change per se as almost all governments during the period under review have been minority governments and centre parties often voted for a government's budget in return for concessions (see Christiansen, 2011). If no bloc change occurred, we assigned the value 0 for our main independent variable. We therefore apply a dummy specification for bloc changes and do not apply an ordinal scale that would account for more than one bloc change during a term.[1] This happened in two cases (Swedish Centre Party in 1994–1998 term and Liberals in 2018–2022) but does not provide us with enough statistical power to conduct any meaningful analysis.[2] We provide three examples for bloc changes and our rationale for coding them.

A first example of bloc changes is the Norwegian Centre Party (*Senterpartiet*). The party had historically only supported or joined centre-right governments (or non-socialist in Norwegian terminus) but decided to end the cooperation with the other non-socialist parties in 1990 as consequence of the breakdown of Syse's (*Høyre*) centre-right government (Madsen, 2001, p. 183ff). It then declared itself as unaffiliated party which no longer would govern together with the conservative Høyre. This was coded as first bloc change. The party maintained this strategy until 2005, when it announced that it will cooperate with the Labour Party (*Arbeiderpartiet*) and thus joined the red bloc and a left-wing cabinet the same year, which we coded as second bloc change.

A second example illustrating a bloc change during an election term are the Danish Centre Democrats (CD), the Christian People's Party (KRF) and Social Liberals (RV) who had been part of the centre-right bloc since 1982 and formed government coalitions with the Conservatives and Liberals (CD and KRF

1982–1988 and RV 1988–1990). In 1993, all three parties joined a new centre-left government following the Tamil scandal and Poul Schlüter's resignation as Prime Minister even though they had supported Schlüter in the 1990 election. CD and KRF even pointed at Henning Dyremose (Conservative) as potential new Prime Minister but shifted bloc after Nyrup Rasmussen (Social Democrats) became negotiation leader. We coded this as bloc change for all three parties (CD, KRF and RV) in the term 1990–1994.

A third more recent examples are the Swedish Centre Party (C) and the Liberals (L) who both campaigned for a centre-right Alliance government during the election campaign for the 2018 Riksdag Election and promised not to support a social democratic government led by Stefan Löfven. After failed negotiations among the centre-right parties in late 2018 as to whether an Alliance government should be tolerated by the right-wing Sweden Democrats, C and L decided to support a red-green minority government led by Stefan Löfven and published an agreement with those two parties against their election pledge. We coded this a bloc change for the term 2018–2022.

In sum, we coded 24 bloc shifts of the nine centre parties studied since 1977 when including the cases of the Centre Party and Liberals in the term 2018–2022. This is illustrated in Table 1.

Thirteen of the 24 cases are from Denmark, where particularly the Christian People's Party (later Christian Democrats) have shifted many times (six cases). There are eight Norwegian, and three Swedish cases. Only the Swedish Christian Democrats did never shift side but have remained within the right bloc.

We further calculated the number of cumulative bloc changes before a given election to inspect whether frequent bloc changes are associated with significantly lower electoral support as voters punish parties for not delivering on their promises frequently and for unpredictable alliance-building. This was done by using the 'sum()' function in STATA for creating new variables with cumulated values for each party in our time-series separately.

To inspect whether bloc changes affect the electoral support of centre parties, we first ran a t-test of means for the vote shares for the parties that changed bloc during the electoral term respectively directly before a given election and those who did not. Since the groups differ substantially in their sample sizes and their standard errors of means, we used Welch's t-test (Welch, 1947) to account for this. We further present descriptive statistics of the cumulative effects of bloc changes to illustrate that the average support for a centre party declines with every bloc change.

We then use time-series regressions to model the effects of re-positioning and bloc change on vote share at national elections. Given the relatively low number of observations (nine parties with 107 election results in total, and 97 observations when using a lagged variable to account for autocorrelation of election results), our endeavour with the panel regressions was not to engage in

TABLE 1 Bloc changes of Centre Parties in Scandinavia, 1977–2021

Country	Party	Term and direction of bloc shift	Brief explanation
Denmark	Centrum-Demokraterne (CD)	1979–1981 **R = > L**	Party promised centre-right cooperation (MCVQ (A Four-Leaf Clover Brings Luck) in 1979 manifesto but supported Jørgensen IV/V (S) after election in 1979 (Centrum-Demokraterne, 1979)
Denmark	Centrum-Demokraterne	1981–1984 **L = > R**	Party was parliamentary base of Jørgensen IV/V (S) but brought Schlüter I (K, V, CD, and KRF) to power in 1982
Denmark	Centrum-Demokraterne	1990–1994 **R = > L**	Party previously supported Schlüter IV (K, V) but in 1993 joined Nyrup Rasmussen I (S, RV, CD, and KRF)
Denmark	Centrum-Demokraterne	1994–1998 **L = > R**	Party left Nyrup Rasmussen II (S, RV, and CD) in 1996 and promised to support centre-right Prime Minister candidate in 1998 campaign
Denmark	Centrum-Demokraterne	2001–2005 **R = > U**	Party ran without bloc affiliation in 2005 campaign after having supported a centre-right Prime Minister in 2001
Denmark	Kristeligt Folkeparti (KRF)	1979–1981 **R = > L**	Party favoured centre-right government, but delivered parliamentary support for Jørgensen IV/V after election in 1979
Denmark	Kristeligt Folkeparti	1981–1984 **L = > R**	Party was parliamentary base of Jørgensen IV/V (S) but brought Schlüter I (K, V, CD, and KRF) to power in 1982
Denmark	Kristeligt Folkeparti	1990–1994 **R = > L**	Party previously supported Schlüter IV (K, V) but in 1993 joined Nyrup Rasmussen I (S, RV, CD, and KRF)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Country	Party	Term and direction of bloc shift	Brief explanation
Denmark	Kristeligt Folkeparti	1994–1998 L = > R	Party supported VK-government during election campaign 1998 while being member of a Social Democratic government until 1994
Denmark	Kristendemokraterne (KD)	2005–2007 R = > L	Party supported Helle Thorning Schmidt (S) as Prime Minister candidate after having supported Liberal Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen (V) in 2001
Denmark	Kristendemokraterne	2007–2011 L = > R	Party supported Lars Løkke Rasmussen (V) as Prime Minister candidate in 2007 campaign after having supported Prime Minister Helle Thorning Schmidt (S) before
Denmark	Radikale Venstre (RV)	1981–1984 L = > R	Party was parliamentary base of Jørgensen IV/V (S) but brought Schlüter I (K, V, CD, and KRF) to power in 1982
Denmark	Radikale Venstre	1990–1994 R = > L	Party withdrew support for Schlüter IV (K, V) in 1993 and joined Nyrup Rasmussen I (S, RV, CD, and KRF)
Norway	Kristelig Folkeparti (KrF)	1989–1993 R = > U	Party had supported Labour government after breakdown of Syse I (H, SP, KrF) in 1990; party announced three bloc system in 1993 with independent centre bloc of KrF, V and SP
Norway	Kristelig Folkeparti	2001–2005 U = > R	Party formed centre-right government with H and V – (Bondevik II), and did not form the centre government that was announced in programme with KrF, SP and V before

(Continues)

TABLE 1   (Continued)

Country	Party	Term and direction of bloc shift	Brief explanation
Norway	Kristelig Folkeparti	2013–2017 **U = > R**	KrF did not want right-wing H + FRP government during term 2013–2017 but did support it against previous promises
Norway	Senterpartiet (SP)	1989–1993 **R = > U**	SP left coalition and cooperation with Høyre and KrF, and ran as unaffiliated party afterwards
Norway	Senterpartiet	2001–2005 **U = > L**	SP joined left bloc in run-up for 2005 election and supported coalition with Labour Party after having been unaffiliated since 1997
Norway	Venstre (V)	1973–1977 **R = > U**	V left the centre-right cooperation and remained outside both blocs in late 1970s until 1981
Norway	Venstre	1981–1985 **U = > L**	V opened for cooperation with Labour after having been unaffiliated party before
Norway	Venstre	1985–1989 **L = > R**	V supported 'borgerlig samlingsregering' with H, KrF and V after remerge with DLF
Sweden	Centerpartiet (C)	1994–1998 **R = > L, L = > R**	C supported Persson I (S) after 1994 and being member of centre-right government before (1991–1994) and then shifted back to centre-right bloc during 1998 election campaign
Sweden	Centerpartiet	2018–2022 **R = > L**	C supported Alliance government in campaign for 2018 but supported red-green minority cabinet after election 2018

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Country	Party	Term and direction of bloc shift	Brief explanation
Sweden	Liberalerna (Folkpartiet – Liberalerna, L)	2018–2022 **R = > L, L = > R**	L supported Alliance government in campaign but supported red-green minority cabinet after election 2018, shifted back to cooperation with centre-right in 2021

Source: Own compilation, see Supporting Information: Online Appendix for the literature and sources used to code bloc changes. Arrows indicate direction of bloc change with **L** = left bloc, **R** = right bloc and **U** = unaffiliated or unclear.

a variable race or to engage in a competition on which sophisticated model has the highest explanatory power. Rather, we seek to investigate whether our hypotheses can be confirmed by a quantitative analysis testing the predicted relationships over time. We therefore specified the models according to our predictions and included theoretically relevant variables and controls capturing the parties' strategic decisions. We use GLS random effects panel regressions (Wooldridge, 2010) for the nine parties under review as we are not interested in the effects of changes between political strategies within a given party, but the effects of between party variation regarding the strategic choice to shift bloc during an election term.[3] We ran all our models with fixed effects for election terms to account for unobserved heterogeneity between election terms.

We further used Jackknife standard errors (Efron & Stein, 1981) to inspect the robustness of our main findings in view of the small sample size of $N = 97$ and to inspect whether the results could have been affected by single coding decisions regarding the bloc changes (or non-changes) coded. We removed the Centre Democrats in one of the specifications as this party might be an influential case given its erratic strategy and the frequent bloc changes in its later years. These models appear besides the original specification to ease comparison and to demonstrate that the estimation method respectively the use of Jackknife estimates does not affect our conclusions. We ran similar models adding a dummy for the CD and models using OLS regression with robust standard errors respectively a Prais-Winsten specification to show that our results are not driven by the estimation method chosen and robust to different specifications of our panel regressions. These models appear in the Online Appendix, Tables A3–A4.

Our dependent variable is the vote share of each of the nine parties in the parliamentary elections since 1977 obtained from the national statistical agencies (see Supporting Information: Online Appendix). We run our main

models without the bloc changes of the Centre Party and the Liberals in Sweden during the term 2018–2022 as no regular election was held until data collection was finished. We present models and results that incorporate these two bloc changes with a hypothetical extra election in Spring 2021 after the vote of no confidence against then Prime Minister Löfven (S). These analyses yield substantially similar results and appear in the Online Appendix (Supporting Information: Tables A6–A8). Our main independent variables are the bloc change variables (bloc change during term and cumulated bloc changes) and the membership-based measured as party in the electorate (ratio members to total electorate, see Mair & Van Biezen, 2001).[4] Finally, we ran robustness tests with first- and second-difference specifications of the membership and vote share variables as additional regressors to inspect endogeneity as bloc changes might be the effect of declining membership and crumbling electoral support, that is, parties change bloc out of desperation. These models are reported in the Supporting Information: Online Appendix, Tables A9 and A10 and yielded similar conclusions which rule out that endogeneity has driven our main results.

Analysis: Electoral effects of bloc changes and membership base

Descriptive statistics

We begin our analysis with descriptive analyses of the relationship between bloc changes and average electoral support. Figure 1 presents the electoral performance of the nine centre parties under review. Overall, we can see parties that saw a steady decline (CD and the Danish and Norwegian Christian Democrats) also have a history of frequent bloc changes (dotted vertical lines). Other parties such as the Danish Radikale Venstre, the Swedish Liberals, and the Norwegian Venstre represent a trendless fluctuation of their results which is mildly related to their bloc changes—the Danish party seem to have gained a bit from their two bloc changes. In five out of the nine cases, the parties have a lower electoral support in the last election compared to the first election covered by our analyses which signals that centre parties are indeed in a crisis. To provide a first test of the effect of bloc changes on electoral support, Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for parties that changed bloc during a term compared to those who did not.

Table 2 shows that the average electoral support for centre parties who had changed bloc during the previous election term is lower at the following election compared to those who had not (4.5% vs. 6.5%). A *t*-test of means with Welch's approximation corroborated that the difference of means (2.026) is statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, with $p = 0.0099$. We arrive at a similar result when we remove the Centre Democrats from the *t*-test (diff = 2.101, $p = 0.022$).

This first test supports our Hypothesis 1 that centre parties lose electoral support as consequence of changing the bloc during an election term. On average,
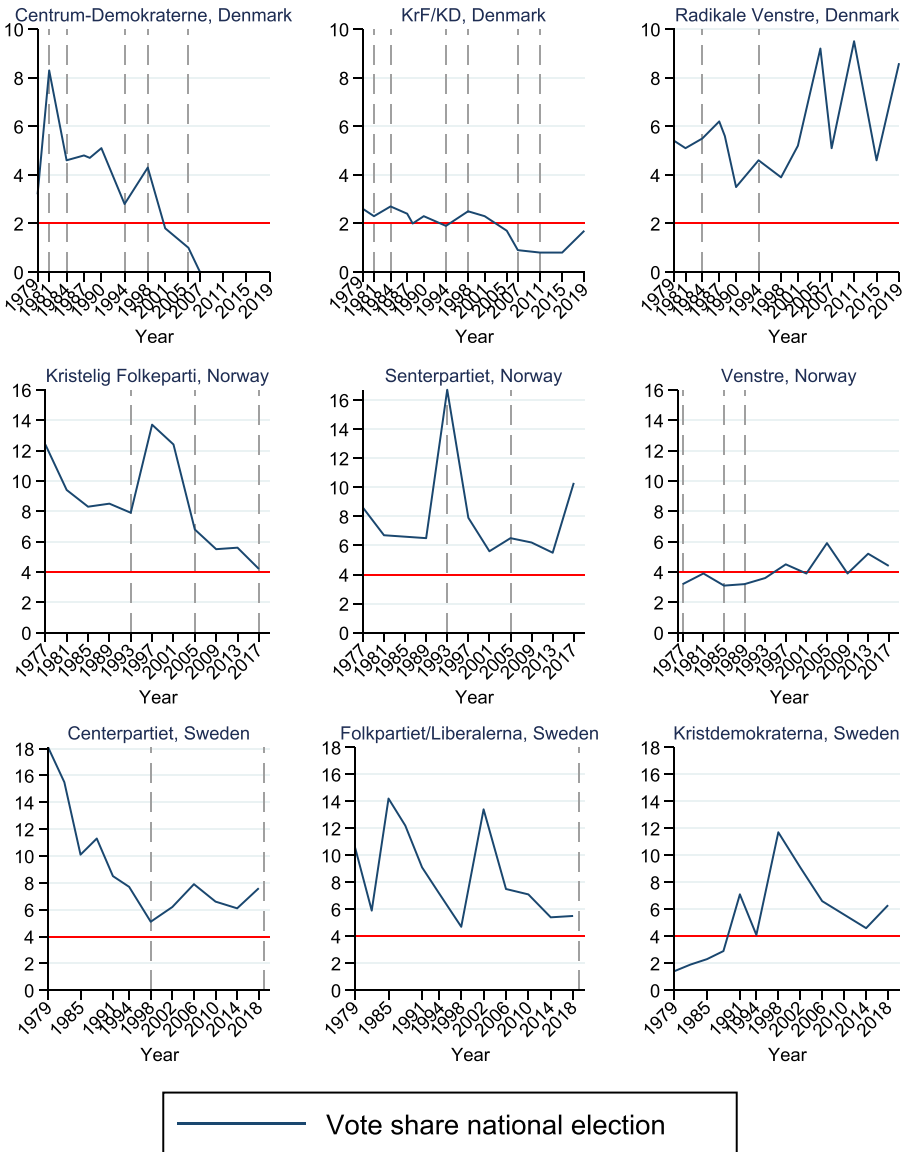
FIGURE 1 Electoral support for Scandinavian Centre Parties and bloc changes, 1977–2019. *Source*: Own data of centre parties vote shares and bloc changes, see Supporting Information: Online Appendix. The bloc changes of the Swedish Centre Party and Liberals in 2018 are excluded. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

TABLE 2   Mean electoral support by bloc changes

Bloc change	N	Mean electoral support (%)	Standard deviation	Standard error of mean
No	85	6.521	3.446	0.376
Yes	22	4.495	3.461	0.738
Total	107	6.105	3.545	0.343

Source: Own data of centre parties vote shares and bloc changes, see Supporting Information: Online Appendix. The bloc changes of the Swedish Centre Party and Liberals in 2018 are excluded as no election was held until data collection finished.
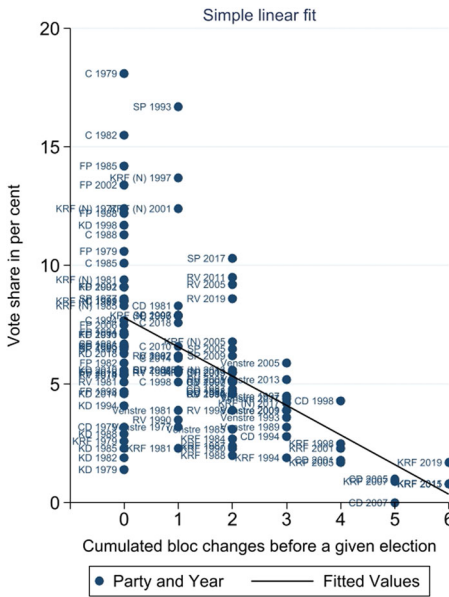

FIGURE 2   Cumulated bloc changes and electoral support for centre parties, 1977–2019. *Source:* Own data of centre parties vote shares and bloc changes, see Supporting Information: Online Appendix for raw data. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

a centre party loses around 2% for doing so. To further illustrate that bloc changes are costly and to provide first descriptive support for Hypothesis 3, we plot the cumulated number of bloc changes against the observed electoral support for the nine parties under review in Figure 2.

Figure 2 illustrates that the electoral support for centre parties declines with the number of bloc changes pursued in the past. None of the parties that pursued more than two bloc changes in their history before reached 5% of the vote at the following election. Moreover, those two parties with the most frequent bloc

changes—the Danish Centre Democrats and Christian Democrats—are also those who have lost their parliamentary representation by 2005. A simple linear fit supports the observation from the scatter plot as there is a clear negative association between the cumulated number of bloc changes and the average electoral performance of the centre parties under review ($\beta = -1.244$, $r^2 = 0.292$). Accordingly, there is strong descriptive support for Hypothesis 3.

The effects of bloc change on electoral support

Having presented descriptive statistics on bloc changes and electoral support of centre parties in Scandinavia, we now inspect whether we find statistically significant effects of bloc changes and other strategic choices and whether a strong membership base cushions the effect of a bloc change. We therefore specify a series of random-effects panel regressions with the centre parties' vote share at national elections as dependent variable. The independent variables are changing the bloc affiliation and other strategic choices that a party can make (being in government, joining a government, leaving a government, or being the Prime Minister party) (Hjermitslev, 2020), and the membership base measured as the ratio *number of members/total electorate* (Mair & Van Biezen, 2001). We also control for the parties' actual bloc affiliation at the election (left, right or unaffiliated), their age and the number of seats in the previous term to measure a party's previous size before a bloc change and to account for autocorrelation of past and future electoral performance. We use the lagged seat share to avoid too strong correlations between previous and actual vote share.

Table 3 presents the coefficients from the regression models of bloc change and electoral support from various specifications. Among all possible strategic choices, only being in office, leaving a government during the term, being affiliated with the right bloc, and shifting the bloc during the term reach significance at $p < 0.10$ at least in some specifications. Moreover, membership base and previous seat share increase a party's vote share significantly. Crucial for our arguments are the negative effects of changing the bloc and the positive effects of having many members. The baseline models (1–5) in the five left-hand columns of Table 3 show that a centre party loses more than two percentage points at an election as consequence of a bloc change before when we control for various other strategic choices such as being in office, joining or leaving a cabinet and being the Prime Minister party or the party's age. The loss of around two percentage points is significant at the conventional level across all different specifications of our baseline model.[5] The coefficient is also significant in the Jackknife specification (second model) indicating that the results are not driven by one specific year-party dyad or coding decision.[6] Increasing a party's members/electorate ratio by 1% increases its vote share by around 1.3% in the baseline model.

TABLE 3 Effect of bloc changes and membership base on electoral support of Centre Parties, 1977–2019

Specification	Baseline Time series (TS) (1)	Baseline TS with jack-knifed s.e. (2)	Baseline TS with prime minister effect (3)	Baseline TS with party age (4)	Baseline TS (5) excluding centre democrats	Interaction TS (6)	Interaction TS with jack-knifed s.e. (7)	Interaction TS with prime minister effect (8)	Interaction TS with party age (9)	Interaction TS (10) excluding centre democrats
In Government: yes	−0.933	−0.933	−1.219!	−0.860	−0.898	−0.956	−0.956	−1.186!	−0.897	−0.969
	(0.627)	(0.595)	(0.660)	(0.631)	(0.677)	(0.625)	(0.606)	(0.661)	(0.631)	(0.678)
Left gov't during term	2.638*	2.638	3.006*	2.589!	2.936!	2.625*	2.625	2.929*	2.588!	2.631!
	(1.328)	(2.873)	(1.350)	(1.328)	(1.541)	(1.323)	(2.827)	(1.353)	(1.327)	(1.559)
Joined gov't during term	−0.224	−0.224	−0.013	−0.280	−0.262	0.009	0.009	0.134	−0.065	−0.013
	(1.150)	(1.170)	(1.155)	(1.151)	(1.226)	(1.160)	(1.208)	(1.165)	(1.167)	(1.241)
Prime minister party: yes			2.870					2.354		
			(2.162)					(2.227)		
Party age				0.009					0.007	
				(0.009)					(0.009)	
Seats (lagged)	0.108***	0.108***	0.106***	0.108***	0.102***	0.109***	0.109***	0.107***	0.109***	0.102***
	(0.024)	(0.022)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.022)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)
Bloc affiliation: centre-right	−2.221**	−2.221*	−2.406**	−2.030**	−1.897*	−2.220**	−2.220*	−2.372**	−2.071**	−1.921*
	(0.751)	(0.897)	(0.760)	(0.774)	(0.781)	(0.748)	(0.914)	(0.761)	(0.774)	(0.779)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Specification	Baseline Time series (TS) (1)	Baseline TS with jack-knifed s.e. (2)	Baseline TS with prime minister effect (3)	Baseline TS with party age (4)	Baseline TS (5) excluding centre democrats	Interaction TS (6)	Interaction TS with jack-knifed s.e. (7)	Interaction TS with prime minister effect (8)	Interaction TS with party age (9)	Interaction TS (10) excluding centre democrats
Bloc affiliation: unaffiliated	0.327	0.327	0.363	0.398	0.982	0.040	0.040	0.128	0.133	0.550
	(1.090)	(1.487)	(1.085)	(1.092)	(1.177)	(1.109)	(1.526)	(1.112)	(1.119)	(1.231)
Own centre bloc										
Bloc change: yes	−2.107**	−2.107*	−2.428**	−1.864*	−2.223**	−2.902**	−2.902*	−3.001**	−2.608*	−3.276**
	(0.771)	(0.915)	(0.804)	(0.807)	(0.826)	(0.994)	(1.278)	(0.997)	(1.065)	(1.219)
Party in electorate	125.878*	125.878*	96.677!	114.652*	142.410*	105.712!	105.712	85.911	99.612!	128.817*
	(53.466)	(61.998)	(57.569)	(54.563)	(57.307)	(55.611)	(71.616)	(58.641)	(56.300)	(58.309)
Bloc change* Party in Electorate						171.930	171.930	136.596	149.342	190.121
						(136.390)	(241.039)	(140.325)	(139.770)	(162.058)
Constant	5.116***	5.116***	5.328***	4.600***	4.182***	5.454***	5.454***	5.558***	5.008***	4.491***
	(1.068)	(1.347)	(1.075)	(1.181)	(1.152)	(1.097)	(1.458)	(1.101)	(1.240)	(1.178)
N (party-election years)	97	97	97	97	88	97	97	97	97	88
FE for election terms	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Specification	Baseline Time series (TS) (1)	Baseline TS with jack-knifed s.e. (2)	Baseline TS with prime minister effect (3)	Baseline TS with party age (4)	Baseline TS (5) excluding centre democrats	Interaction TS (6)	Interaction TS with jack-knifed s.e. (7)	Interaction TS with prime minister effect (8)	Interaction TS with party age (9)	Interaction TS (10) excluding centre democrats
R-squared (overall)	0.594	0.594	0.603	0.600	0.601	0.602	0.602	0.608	0.606	0.618
R-squared (within)	0.341	0.341	0.355	0.342	0.373	0.342	0.342	0.354	0.343	0.369
R-squared (between)	0.911	0.911	0.920	0.908	0.904	0.921	0.921	0.926	0.918	0.925
DF	20	20	21	21	20	21	21	22	22	21

Note: Random effects panel regressions with 97 party*election dyads. Standard errors in parentheses. $^*p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$, $1p < 0.10$, fixed effects not shown.

Centre parties seem to lose further support when they are in government signalling a cost of ruling effect (Hjermitslev, 2020) but can compensate for this when they leave a government. The coefficients for these two choices are at borderline significance ($p < 0.10$) in some specifications run. Joining a government or being the Prime Minister Party (third model) is neither significantly rewarded nor punished. Age (fourth model) as alternative measure of party institutionalisation remains insignificant. Hence, Table 3 confirms our Hypothesis 1 as centre parties lose significant electoral support after a bloc change. We should also note that the explanatory power of the models is quite high as they explain 59%–65% of the overall variance and more than 90% of the between party variance.

When we interact bloc change and the membership base in models 6–10 in the five right-hand columns, we find support for Hypothesis 2 positing a conditional effect of membership. The punishment following a bloc shift is strong and significant for parties with few members as the constitutive term of around −2.9 for models 6–10 indicates. A high membership base measured as party in the electorate increases electoral support for centre parties. The interaction remains insignificant, but we know that the significance of an interaction term cannot necessarily be gauged from the coefficient alone (Berry et al., 2012; Brambor et al., 2006). To illustrate the conditional relationship further, we present the marginal effect of changing the bloc affiliation across the observed values for membership base (excluding the highest 5% membership shares to avoid conclusions based on extreme outliers). Figure 3 yields
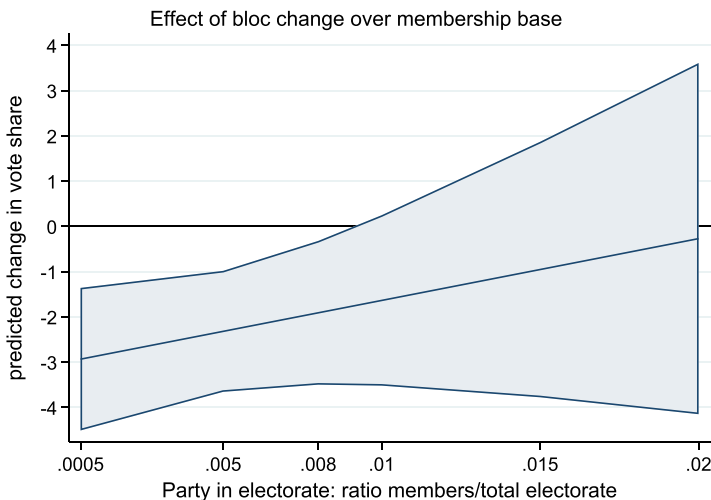
FIGURE 3 Marginal effect of bloc shift on change in vote share across membership base. *Source:* Marginal effect derived from panel regression containing interaction *bloc change*membership base* from Table 3, Model 8. The confidence interval is set at 0.90. $N = 97$. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

the respective marginal effect of bloc change across membership base from Model 8 in Table 3.

A value of 0.01 on the *x*-axis denotes that 1% of the electorate is member of a given party. For instance, a membership ratio of below 0.005 (or 0.5%) resembles the Danish Centre Democrats for most years, while a ratio of 0.02 (equal to 2%) resembles the Norwegian Centre Party around 1980. The effect of changing the bloc is significantly negative for parties that have few members (less than 1% of the electorate as members). Such a party would face an average loss of around 2% or more at an election. If the membership base exceeds 0.9% of the electorate, the effect of bloc change becomes insignificant, that is, there is no longer a significant punishment after a bloc change if a party has enough members. With an increasing party in the electorate ratio, the regression slope comes close to zero which signals that centre parties with a strong membership base can evade the punishment from bloc changes. This corroborates our Hypothesis 2 that bloc changes are costly, but that the effect is moderated by a sufficiently strong party organisation. This effect is robust to additional specifications with party age as additional mediator or moderator variable (see Supporting Information: Table A5, Online Appendix). These alternative specifications show that the explained variance does not increase when we add age as additional control compared to the original specifications (see the R-squared measures in Supporting Information: Table A5).

Cumulative effects

Next, we present our regression models for the cumulative effects of bloc changes. To reiterate, this specification of our main independent variable captures the absolute number of bloc changes that a party pursued before a given election in our data. Hence, we capture the history of bloc changes in the voters' mind. Table 4 presents the respective model specifications for the effects of cumulated bloc changes.

As almost all control variables yield similar conclusions as in Table 3 above or remain insignificant, we directly turn to the cumulative effects of bloc changes. The coefficients for cumulated bloc changes across all five specifications indicate that a centre party loses around 0.80 to 0.94 percentage points of electoral support with every past bloc change pursued. This effect is highly significant at $p < 0.01$ resp. $p < 0.001$ in our models and not driven by the Centre Democrats. Accordingly, a history of bloc changes reduces the electoral performance of centre parties significantly in line with Hypothesis 3. Again, the R-squared signals a strong explanatory power of our models.

To visualise the effect of cumulative bloc changes, Figure 4 presents the predicted electoral support from Model 3 in Table 4 over the number of bloc changes and compares this to our results from our scatterplot of cumulated bloc changes.

TABLE 4 Cumulated effect of bloc changes on electoral support of Centre Parties, 1977–2019

Specification	Time series specification (TS) (11)	TS with jack-knifed s.e. (12)	TS with prime minister effect (13)	TS with party age (14)	TS without centre democrats (15)
In government: yes	−1.071!	−1.071	−1.367*	−0.972	−1.155!
	(0.610)	(0.693)	(0.642)	(0.610)	(0.674)
Left gov't during term	1.835	1.835	2.085	1.885	1.865
	(1.263)	(2.691)	(1.268)	(1.255)	(1.518)
Joined gov't during term	−0.253	−0.253	−0.100	−0.263	−0.470
	(1.078)	(1.224)	(1.077)	(1.071)	(1.186)
Prime minister party: yes			2.914		
			(2.073)		
Party age				0.012	
				(0.008)	
Seats (lagged)	0.064*	0.064!	0.058*	0.067*	0.062*
	(0.027)	(0.034)	(0.027)	(0.026)	(0.028)
Bloc affiliation: centre-right	−1.627*	−1.627!	−1.723*	−1.457*	−1.398!
	(0.707)	(0.848)	(0.706)	(0.712)	(0.748)
Bloc affiliation: unaffiliated Own centre bloc	−0.100	−0.100	−0.096	0.074	0.593
	(1.021)	(1.323)	(1.015)	(1.021)	(1.158)
Cumulated bloc changes Before an election	−0.853***	−0.853**	−0.939***	−0.795***	−0.801**
	(0.225)	(0.289)	(0.232)	(0.227)	(0.256)
Party in Electorate	155.976**	155.976*	130.152*	137.105**	176.966**
	(51.291)	(64.252)	(54.180)	(52.592)	(56.909)
Constant	5.136***	5.136***	5.298***	4.548***	4.254***
	(1.010)	(1.230)	(1.010)	(1.083)	(1.129)
N	98	98	98	98	88
FE for election terms	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared (overall)	0.624	0.624	0.633	0.365	0.623

(Continues)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Specification	Time series specification (TS) (11)	TS with jack-knifed s.e. (12)	TS with prime minister effect (13)	TS with party age (14)	TS without centre democrats (15)
R-squared (within)	0.366	0.366	0.381	0.939	0.374
R-squared (between)	0.916	0.916	0.919	0.634	0.910
df	20	20	21	21	20

Note: Random effects panel regressions with 98 party*election dyads. Standard errors in parentheses. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$, !$p < 0.10$; fixed effects not shown.
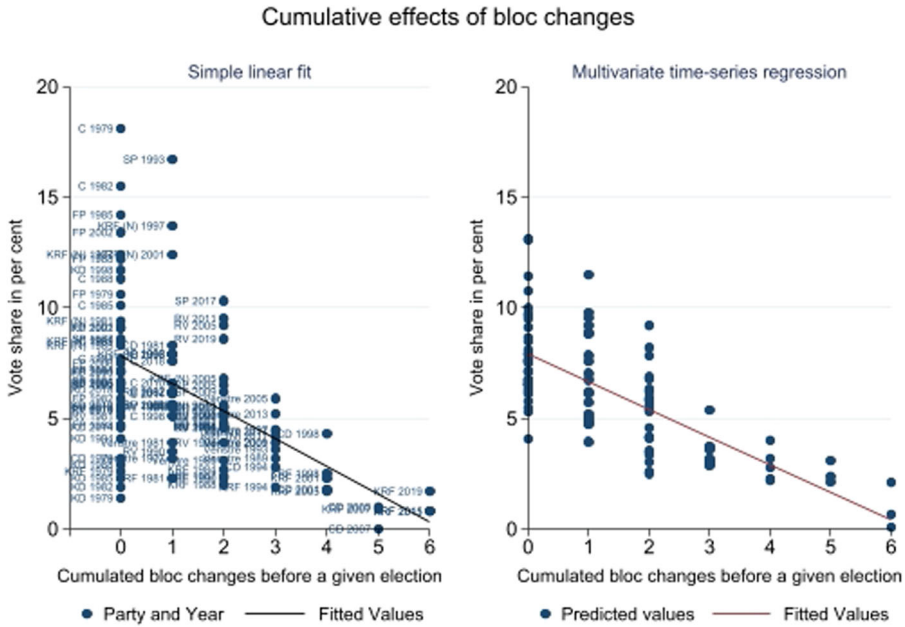
FIGURE 4 Effect of cumulative bloc changes on centre parties' electoral support. Sources: Left-hand panel: observed data of centre parties vote shares and bloc changes, see Supporting Information: Table A2 in the Appendix; right-hand panel: predicted values obtained from Model 3 in Table 4 based on this dataset. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

The panel on the right-hand side of Figure 4 demonstrates that constant bloc changes are indeed harmful for centre parties. The predicted electoral support declines with every change. Centre parties with frequent bloc changes in the past are also those who come close to the electoral thresholds of four

(Norway, Sweden) or 2% (Denmark) or end below the threshold. Accordingly, parties that change their bloc affiliation frequently risk their parliamentary existence. The comparison of the predicted support from our multivariate time-series regression in the right-hand panel with the observed data on the left-hand side further shows that our panel regression specification matches the observed election results across the cumulated bloc changes quite well. Consequently, Hypothesis 3 is confirmed as frequent bloc changes are a hazardous game for centre parties.

CONCLUSION

This paper analysed the electoral consequences of bloc changes by Scandinavian centre parties since 1977. Centre parties have been pivotal for government formation in Scandinavia for many years and have often tried to maximise their policy influence through bloc changes, to maintain distinctiveness, or changed the bloc for other reasons. So far, the literature has not provided any thorough analysis of the actual electoral effects of bloc changes for this party family.

We theorised that bloc changes are costly but can be cushioned by a strong party membership base. Our results demonstrated that centre parties lose around two percentage points after a bloc change during an election term and that a history of bloc changes reduces its natural support at the ballots in the long-term. The losses of a bloc change reduce and become insignificant for parties with a sufficiently strong membership base as our models containing the interaction 'bloc change x membership' have revealed.

Our results suggest that if parties consider a bloc change, they should do this from a position of organisational and electoral strength (cf. Christiansen, 2020). In contrast, if centre parties engage in bloc changes out of pure desperation, that is, when facing bad polls, as the now deceased Centre Democrats in Denmark in the 2000s or the Swedish Liberals in more recent years, they risk their long-term existence. Voters do not reward parties that have been disloyal to their original cooperation partners and remain unpredictable in their parliamentary alliance building due to frequent bloc changes. In this regard, our results contribute to understand why parties such as the Danish Centre Democrats have disappeared and why other parties such as Danish Christian Democrats or Swedish Liberals struggle to survive.

Future studies on this topic should use micro-level data from election studies to confirm the results from our macro-level regression approach. This would allow to identify more detailed causal mechanisms explaining why voters get alienated by bloc changes of smaller centre parties. One issue here is the weakening of threshold insurance voting for parties who have the changed bloc before (Fréden, 2014). Similarly, since not all bloc changes are punished as our results revealed, future research should also analyse successful bloc changes and the underlying reasons for them.

One obvious limitation of our paper is that we were unable to distinguish between political, tactical, and strategic reasons for bloc changes and their distinct electoral consequences in our macro-level regressions. Future work needs to distinguish those motivations conceptually and how they affect the electoral effects of bloc changes. Accordingly, one avenue for future research is to study those bloc changes that were an element of a long-term ideological realignment respectively strategic repositioning compared to those made due to short-term tactical considerations or even desperation.

Natural candidates for this research are the Norwegian and Swedish Centre Parties. Both changed bloc as part of a more long-term political realignment. The Norwegian Centre Party cut its ties to the other centre-right parties due to disagreements on EU membership in the 1990s and then joined the left bloc. It could so far maintain a stable voter base after having revitalised its agrarian and rural profile and by adopting some populist positions on cultural issues after 2014. The Swedish sister gradually cut its ties to the other centre-right parties due to disagreements on cooperation with the Sweden Democrats. The Swedish Centre had adopted a more libertarian profile under the leadership of Annie Lööf who opted for the cooperation with the social democratic minority governments of Stefan Löfven instead of remaining part of the centre-right Alliance. Both examples seem to reflect successful, strategically motivated bloc changes.

Hence, future research should tap into the processes underlying successful versus non-successful bloc changes and the underlying motivations. Here, case studies and mixed methods designs are the natural methodological tools to investigate why strategic leaderships enacted a bloc change and why voters did not punish the party for this respectively why the bloc change was successful in the long run.

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ENDNOTES

[1] We did not code considered or unfinished bloc changes if parties had strategic considerations about changing the bloc but did not do so in the end. Examples are the Swedish Liberals in 1994

who considered cooperation with the Social Democrats or the Danish Social Liberals (Radikale Venstre) who briefly considered to run as unaffiliated party in the 2005 campaign but then quickly renewed their affiliation with the red bloc.

[2] Adding a dummy for multiple bloc changes does not alter our conclusions (analyses available on request).

[3] In some cases, the strategy comes close to a constant as for instance the Swedish Christian Democrats never changed its bloc affiliation, and we would have a time-invariant constant for this party when applying party fixed effects. Theoretically, we are rather interested in the outcomes that occur between different parties with different strategic choices and therefore believe that applying random effects for parties is the natural choice for our research question.

[4] The variable goes from 0 to 1 with 0 denoting a situation with no members in the electorate and 1 denoting a hypothetical situation where all voters would be members of that party.

[5] We also run supplementary analyses where we accounted for the natural bloc of each party (e.g., historical affiliation with the centre-left or centre-right bloc). These yielded a slightly stronger punishment (0.3% extra loss) when parties leave their natural bloc (results available on request). Moreover, we ran models with another bloc change variable which accounts for the direction of the bloc change: (0) 'no defection', (1) 'from left bloc', (2) 'from right bloc', (3) 'from unaffiliated'. When we run the analysis with this alternative measure of bloc change, the results suggest that the costliest bloc change is defecting from the right bloc (minus 2.05%) followed by defection from the left bloc (minus 1.24%). Defection from unaffiliated is not costly (plus 0.33%). These results are also available on request.

[6] When we run the Jackknife specifications with parties as clusters, the significance level reduces to $p < 0.10$ as we lose up to 12 observations per replication.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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