

# Does nothing else matters?

Causes of programmatic-, organizational – and personnel reforms in  
Belgian mainstream parties

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## Introduction

West-European party systems have been described as disintegrating since the late 1970s. Mainstream parties in particular were diagnosed as being ‘in decline’ if not ‘dead’ as they saw their popularity, vote share and membership gradually declining in time (Wattenberg, 1984; Meguid, 2005; Dalton & Weldon, 2005; Dassonneville, 2018; Luybaert, 2019). Some thirty years later, mainstream parties are still kicking and alive and continue to be considered as central actors in modern representative politics (Pierce, 1999). Clearly, they have adapted to their changing environment to survive the new challenges they have faced (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016; de Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Gauja, 2017). Scholars are no longer discussing ‘decline’ but ‘adaptation’ and ‘resilience’ despite the fact that political parties are unanimously recognised as being eminently conservative organisations (Panebianco, 1988; Eldersveld, 1998; Harmel, 2002). The remedies used by the parties to counteract the decline they were experiencing are multiple. Scholars have already investigated a great variety of party reforms used by parties as responses to internal or external shocks such as electoral defeats (e.g. de Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Janda, 1990; Paczesniak et al., 2020), membership decline (e.g. Young & Cross, 2002; Kölln, 2014) or change of party leadership (e.g. Panebianco, 1988; Somer-Topcu, 2009). Among those, we can for example find valuable studies about programmatic reforms (e.g. Abou-Chadi, 2016; Hobolt & Tilley, 2016; Joon Han, 2017), leadership turnover (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2021; Garzia, 2012; H. H. Pedersen & Schumacher, 2015) or democratic organisational reforms (Barnea & Rahat, 2007; Cross & Katz, 2013; Ignazi, 2020; Sandri & Amjahad, 2015). Yet, two gaps remain in the literature on the causes of these party reforms. First, scholars often consider them as being explainable by a particular shock on its own, while party reforms can be explained by multiple causes. Second, no distinction is made between the conditions that lead political parties to implement reforms of different nature. Thereby literature has mostly concentrated on the causes leading towards (democratic) organizational reforms, while studies investigating multiple causes leading to personnel – and/or programmatic reforms are much scarcer. We argue, however, that these three party reforms should be investigated in a comparative manner as they form reforms on the three components of the political product (i.e. programmatic stances, organizational – and personnel image). Hence, we argue that an integrated approach, both in their causes as in their different types, of party reforms are needed to fully understand their mechanisms.

The goal pursued by this paper is two-fold. On the one hand, we seek to demonstrate the multi-causal character of party reforms, which we believe can only be the result of complex combinations of different causal conditions. On the other hand, we want to emphasise the importance of considering the plurality of party reforms that can be implemented by parties and - *de facto* - the plural nature of the causes that generate them. This paper aims to identify the causal pathway(s) that account for (different) party reforms by developing an innovative approach that integrates the key causal conditions already identified in the literature but which, until now, have always been considered individually from each other. We conduct Qualitative Comparative Analyses for three party reforms under study, implemented by six Belgian mainstream parties between 1987-2003. The QCA is used precisely because it allows the identification of such causal pathways to a particular outcome while providing room to display a great amount of information about the cases under study (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009; Beyens et al., 2016).

The paper proceeds in four sections. First, we review the existing literature about party reforms and their causes. Second, we detail the method used. Third, we report and discuss the analysis and the main results. The final section provides a general conclusion and highlights the main findings learned from the analyses.

## Theoretical framework

### Conceptualization of party reform(s)

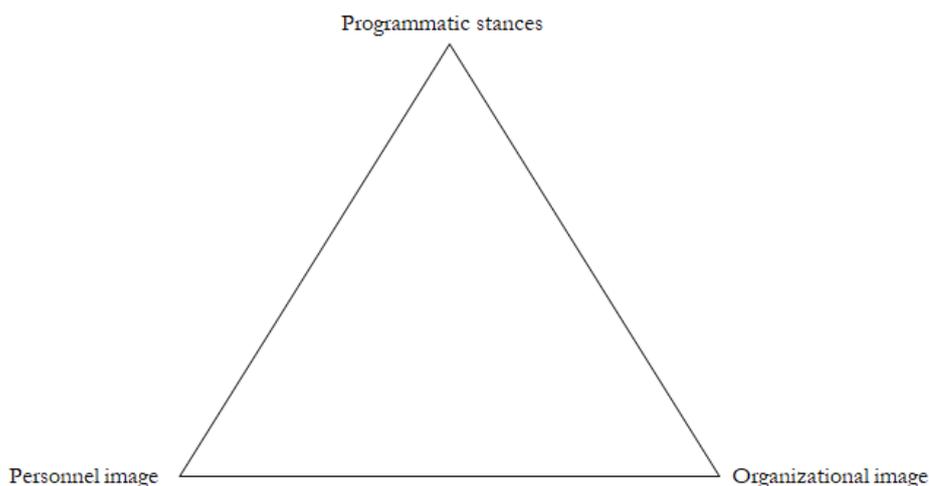
Party reforms can be considered as a subset of party change (Gauja, 2017). They require a balance of power favorable to their implementation because they ‘do not just happen’ and target those elements that are in direct control of the party (Panebianco, 1988; Harmel & Janda, 1994; Rihoux, 1999; Wauters, 2014). Thereby, party reforms are implemented more abruptly and consist of more intensive processes than party changes. They can target all aspects of the party organization, such as policies, tactics, structure and party rules (Gauja, 2017).

In her seminal work, Gauja (2017) suggested a narrow definition of party reforms she consider as: *“intentional and publicized changes that are made to a party’s structures and practices in order to improve them”* (p. 19). Yet, we argue that the *degree of intentionality* of this type of change can be discussed. Even though they require a favorable balance of power to be implemented, some party reforms are the result of such fundamental changes in the parties' environment that they have no choice but to adapt accordingly, leaving the question of intentionality open. A striking example of this ambivalence can be found in the case of the implementation of gender quota. As Meier (2004) explains, a distinction is often made between quota adopted by parties and those imposed by the state. In both cases, however, the implementation of new quota is always an opportunity for parties to openly publicize the ‘progressivism’ they are demonstrating in reforming their organization. Building on Gauja's (2017) definition, we accordingly propose a broader definition of party reforms that focuses not on the intentionality of their implementation but rather on the intentionality of their publicization. **We consider party reforms as intentionally publicized changes that are made to a party’s structures and practices in order to improve them.**

Based on this definition of party reforms, multiple happenings can be classified into the concept. For instance, there are studies on programmatic reforms (e.g. Abou-Chadi, 2016; Hobolt & Tilley, 2016; Joon Han, 2017), organizational reforms (e.g Barnea & Rahat, 2007; Cross & Katz, 2013; Ignazi, 2020; Sandri & Amjahad, 2015) and personnel reforms (e.g Ferreira da Silva et al., 2021; Garzia, 2012; Pedersen & Schumacher, 2015). From these studies, we know that political parties are prepared to reform (simultaneously) multiple aspects of the party when rebranding the party. This aligns with the notion of the multi-componential *political product* where political parties compete with one another. The most visible component of the political product are the policies offered by the parties (Spoon & Klüver, 2019; Worcester & Mortimore, 2005). However, voter perceptions of party policies can be blurred, and they are in any case supplemented with other cognitive shortcuts and contextual factors (Dahlberg, 2013; Lock & Harris, 1996). Several authors have proposed a three-component concept with different labels. Farrell and Wortmann (1987) refer to party image, leader image and manifesto. Worcester and Mortimore (2005) talk about issues, party

image and leader image, while other scholars report on ideology, person and the party (Butler & Collins, 1994; Speed, Butler, & Collins, 2015). While party (image) and leader/person (image) include an element of competence (Worcester & Mortimore, 2005), De Vries and Hobolt (2020) replaces these two factors by the broad one of party competence and personnel to implement policies once in office. Their notion of the political product thus consists of the promised policies and the competence to implement these policies. However, as Worcester and Mortimore (2005) indicate, the image of the party and party leader consists of more items than only their allocated competences such as representation, charismatic characteristics or democratic values. Therefore, party and personnel image are still included as separate components in our notion of the political product as they provide valuable informational shortcuts for voters (Coan, Merolla, Stephenson, & Zechmeister, 2008; Cutler, 2002). Thereby, the political product consists of a « triangle » based on **proposed programmatic stances, party organizational image and personnel image (Figure 1)**. An important implication is that *the different dimensions cannot be offered separately* (Speed et al., p132), but instead the interplay between the three components of the political product forms the voters' – and members'- knowledge of a political brand.

**Figure 1 Theoretical parties' political product**



Yet, little is known about the different causes of reforms on these three components of the political product. More specific, the literature on the causes of party reforms currently suffers from two pitfalls. First, it focuses mainly on explaining (democratic) organisational reforms undertaken by parties, while there is little attention given on multiple causes leading to reforms related to other dimensions of the political product (i.e. programmatic and personnel reforms). Indeed, there are studies on the causes of a reform on programmatic- and personnel reforms, but to less overarching theorized extent compared to the organizational component. Second, there is no comparative study yet on the causal pathways of these three types of party reforms. For example, it remains unclear to this day if organizational reforms are the result of the same causal pathways than programmatic- or personnel reforms. It also appears that the relationship between the causes and consequences of reforms remains complex to break down. For example, a change of leader can be seen as a cause that increases the likelihood of reform at the party level. But it can also be seen as a reform in its own right with the aim of renewing the face of the party. The purpose of this paper is therefore to disentangle these causal pathways from one another for reforms on each component of the political

product<sup>1</sup>. In what follows we will outline first the causes of party reforms in general, followed by an overview of the causes for the separate type of party reforms.

### **Which causes of different types of party reforms**

The underlying assumption of this study is that the introduction of party reforms consists of an energy-intensive and lengthy process which may ultimately lead to the adaptation of the political product. Reforms are always the result of an *alignment of (causal) planets, by which we mean* that reforms are the result of a more or less complex combination of either internal or external *shocks* in parties' environment that force them to adapt. By conceptualizing party reforms that way, we fully engage with a research agenda that was inaugurated by a series of theoretical works in the 1980s and 1990s (Wilson, 1973; Harmel & Janda, 1982; Panebianco, 1988; Appleton & Ward, 1993, 1995, 1997) and perfectly illustrated by Panebianco (1988): *'organisational [party] change is, in most case, the effect of an external stimulus (environmental and/or technological) which joins forces with internal factors'*<sup>2</sup>.

So far, the *Integrated Theory of Party Goals and Party Change* developed by Harmel and Janda (1994) remains arguably the most elaborated explanatory theory of party change. The authors borrow three central assumptions from Panebianco (1988) in developing their theory. First, the authors stress the need to take into account both internal and external stimuli in explaining changes. Second, the level of institutionalisation will define the level of resistance of the organisation to change: the more institutionalised a party is, the more resistant it will be to change. Third, political parties are conservative organisations that will only change if they are stimulated by a shock. They consider that any party change is the result of a rational choice on the part of the dominant coalition, but qualify this by stressing that this choice must be put into context. For Harmel and Janda (1994), party changes are always imposed by the dominant coalition which suffers from pressure from other actors in the party or take advantage of a favourable context to consolidate their position. To put the role of the party leadership into context they postulate a basic statement: every party is characterised by the pursuit of a 'primary goal', whose failure to achieve it will affect its willingness to strategically renew itself. Parties can be vote maximizers, office maximizers, policy advocates or intraparty democracy maximizers. If they state that party changes can be the consequences of internal stimuli only, the broadest changes will take place for them when an external shock intimately linked to the parties' primary objective occurs. An electoral defeat will for example constitute a major external shock for a vote maximizer party while being dismissed in opposition will greatly impact office maximizer parties.

Although this approach is still one of the most ambitious attempts to develop an integrative approach to party change, some limitations can nevertheless be identified in the authors' arguments which need to be tackled. First, Harmel & Janda's approach assumes a high degree of rationality on the part of party elites by relying on the notion of perception borrowed from Deschouwer (1992). Party elites must namely both be aware of the occurrence of an important event (p. 276) and interpret it as an external shock worth reforming the organisation. We consider that the degree

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Anika Gauja for her comments regarding this matter on an earlier presented paper in the panel "New parties – New Members" in the ECPR joint sessions May 2021. Her insights inspired us to write this paper on the multiple causal pathways of party reforms on the three components of the political product.

<sup>2</sup> Although Panebianco (1988) mainly focused his research on organisational party changes, we consider that the implications of his reflections can be extended to the concept of party reforms as defined in this research.

of intentionality of party reforms can be questioned. Therefore, we focus in our definition of party reforms on “intentionally publicized changes” instead of “intentional changes” (see also above). Second, Harmel and Janda (1994) do not define their dependent variable sufficiently in the sense that they do not differentiate the very nature of reforms that parties can implement. They define party changes as “any variation, alternation or modification in how parties are organized, what human and material resources they can draw upon, **what they stand for** and **what they do**” (1994, pp.275) and emphasise the fact that they focus only on those changes that are within parties’ direct control. Thereby they remain vague in the different possibilities in types of party reforms. We supplemented their theory by arguing that parties can implement party reforms on the three components of the political product in the scope of rebranding the party. By identifying programmatic-, party organizational- and personnel reforms we can differentiate more fine-grained explanations for these different realities. Finally, the principle of “primary goals” remains very difficult to empirically operationalize. If we follow their theory strictly, an electoral defeat accompanied by a change in the dominant coalition would be enough to explain both an ideological repositioning and the democratisation of the structures of two parties if they are defined beforehand as vote maximizers. Moreover, winning votes is central to the pursuit of the vote maximization goal but is also a key instrument for achieving the two other primary goals, namely office and policy maximization (Strom, 1990; De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). The latter especially concerns mainstream parties which have evolved towards the ideal-types of cartel and professional-electoral parties over time (Panebianco, 1988, p. 264; Katz & Mair, 1995). We adapt their theory by stating that these four primary goals should be interpreted as key causal conditions for different types party reforms. We argue that it is the interplay of these conditions that causes the implementation of party reforms rather than a shock on one primary goal of the party. This aligns with the – more recent – findings that party reforms can also be explained by other conditions than only these primary goals.

Overall, four main factors can be identified as being considered key causal conditions in Harmel and Janda's explanation of party change: electoral performances, governmental participation and membership rate and a change in leadership

Three conditions are seen by the Harmel & Janda (1994) as internal pressures closely linked to the goals of the parties. First, **electoral performances** are scrutinized. As Gauja (2017) emphasises, electoral competition is generally seen as one of the two key conditions that can push parties to renew themselves alongside with a change of leader. The significant pressure that an electoral defeat can put on a party is such that it even has been named “mother of party changes” although this claim is now being debated (Janda, 1990; Paczesniak et al., 2020). Even if a party tend to be more office- or policy seeking, the maximization of votes will be crucial as a mean to achieve these other two goals (Strom, 1990; De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). Political parties compete for their political products in exchange for votes from the electorate. When an electoral defeat indicates that their goal might not be reached, political parties are likely to adapt by implementing reforms on the multiple components of the political product (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). This claim is supported for all three components of the political product under study. Past election results do indeed influence party policies as parties electoral support is based on these programmatic stances (Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2006; Spoon, 2009). When parties face electoral defeat they will be more inclined to adapt their party positions (Adams, Ezrow, & Somer-Topcu, 2011; Somer-Topcu, 2009). As stated above, the party leader is often seen as the personification of the party. Thereby an electoral defeat can be interpreted as a negative evaluation of the party leader and consequently cause a change of party leader (Andrews & Jackman, 2008; Ennsner-Jedenastik & Schumacher, 2015;

Rahat & Kenig, 2018). Moreover, an electoral defeat can expose the dominant coalition to criticism and elections are often an opportunity for activists to gain weight within the organisation by putting forward new democratic demands, making it a difficult momentum for party elites (Cross & Pilet, 2015).

Second, the issue of **governmental participation** can be seen as a key factor for political parties. As emphasised by Harmel and Janda (1994), the (un)willingness of other parties to join a party as a coalition partner will play a great role in the definition of this party as an acceptable partner, which may eventually lead the latter to reconsider its strategies in order to acknowledge its differences with the competitors or to get closer to them again (e.g. programmatic repositioning or personnel change). More specifically, a change in the governmental status may constitute an important shock – or a symbolic defeat – for parties accustomed to power (Katz & Mair, 1995). Facing a decline of the size of the organisation (i.e. political staff, financial and material resources, etc. provided through public means), parties in opposition will be likely to implement what Knight (1967) called *distress innovations* in order to hinder the effects of the external shock they suffered from. But when it may result in a substantial decrease in the public resources the party relies on, it can also free up additional human or financial capital for the implementation of sometimes costly reforms. Previous studies have for example already shown that political parties are more likely to implement leadership selection reforms when in opposition (Cross & Blais, 2012). Being in opposition is synonymous with a rebalancing in the weight of each face of the organisation. Cross and Blais (2012) underline that, in the Westminster countries, the parliamentary party lose relevance when in opposition and subsequently loses weight in the decision-making. Panebianco also noted (1988) the relevance of the governmental status in explaining party reforms. Regarding to programmatic reforms, opposition parties tend to be more flexible in adjusting their ideology and are less risk-averse compared to government parties (Van Spanje, 2011; Walgrave & Nuytemans, 2009). This is because governmental parties are constrained by the expectation of delivering the policy promises quickly while opposition parties are more innovative in updating their policy stances (Meyer & Wagner, 2013). The connection between going into opposition as mainstream party and party leadership change is less outspoken compared to the other party reforms. Research from Bille (1997) on leadership changes in the Danish Social Democratic Party finds that leadership change can be best understood in the light of going into office. It is often the combination between going into opposition and electoral defeat that causes a leadership change, while an electoral defeat accompanied with governmental participation does not necessary cause a turnover of party leader. This shows, once again, that party reforms are for more often the result of an interplay of causal conditions than one cause alone.

Third, variations in the **size of the membership** of political parties is also an important causal condition that can lead to strategic renewal. Party members are primary resources providing the party organisation with sometimes a substantial source of income, legitimacy, new ideas, voter loyalty and free labour during electoral episodes (Scarrow, 1994, 2000; Fisher et al., 2006; Kosiara-Pedersen et al., 2017; van Haute et al., 2018; Legein et al., 2020). Depending on the importance given to them by their party, they may even become a fully-fledged face of the party organisation (i.e. *party on the ground*; Katz & Mair, 1993) participating fully in decision-making. Following Harmel and Janda (1994), an unintentional decrease of such a resource could also destabilise parties that have made representing the wishes of their members a central concern. A substantial decline would push the party to rethink the way it aggregate and articulate members' interest since other scholars "have [already] noted the (negative) relationship of membership size to the homogeneity and

involvement of members within the party” (Harmel & Janda, 1994, p. 271). In arguing that, they are directly in line with Deschouwer's (1992) argument that electoral defeat is thought to be the mother of party change only if one accepts that electoral competition is the primary motivator of party behavior. For him however, parties may also be motivated by the desire to give citizens a means to organise and represent their interests through the building of a structure that promotes participation and deliberation (i.e. intra-party democracy). One of the main reasons for a citizen to join the party is the support for the party's ideology, values and programmatic stances (Bale, Webb, & Poletti, 2019). Hence, party elites can perceive a substantive and rapid decline of party membership rates as disapproval of party activists of the parties' policies. A broad membership base serves moreover as a strategic tool for legitimacy of the party, its leader and its actions (Gauja, 2015). The legitimacy of the party and thus ultimately its leader is undermined when a large substantive proportion of the members decides to leave the party, which might eventually lead to the resignation of the party leader.

Finally, Harmel & Janda highlight the impact that a **change in leadership** can have on the party and relate more to power-motivated reforms. To do so, they borrow from Panebianco (1988) the concepts of *conformation* and *composition* of the dominant coalition<sup>3</sup>. For the latter, the dominant coalition [often personalized by the party leader] is composed by organisational actors that control “the most vital zones of uncertainty [of the organisation]”. The conformation of the dominant coalition (i.e. composition and stability, p. 243) will dictate the timing of the reform. More broadly than the short argument offered by Harmel and Janda (1994) in this regard, we can add that the issue of leadership change is important in view of the increasing role that party leaders play within their party (Cross & Pilet, 2015). They are explicitly those in charge of the survival of the organisation and to respond to external stimuli it may experience. They oversee driving the party's policy, making the organisation achieve its goals and hold the most powerful levers to implement such reforms (Cross & Pilet, 2015; Gauja, 2017). As Harmel and Janda (1994) point out, the dominant coalition may implement party changes in order to reinforce their power, but the arrival of a new party leader may also push the newly formed coalition to reform one or several aspects of the political product. The party leader is also seen in this era as one of the most influential actors in current politics (Poguntke & Webb, 2005). A change of party leader gives opportunities to change the party's policy position in a credible manner, whereby party leaders will utilize the advantages of a new face leading the party and intentionally advertise programmatic reforms in their campaigns (Sommer-Topcu, 2017).

Finally, a complementary **contextual** condition will also be included in our analyses. This condition is related to what Harmel and Janda (1984) called an *event* (or environmental shock) which they defined as being ‘*a specific happening that occurs at a particular time and that is publicly recorded*’ (p. 276). In that, it differs from external shocks which are intimately linked to parties' primary goal. This condition is included because the issue of trust in political institutions is central in the understanding their evolution over time. As Pennings and Hazan (2001, p. 268) explain, with the linear increase in electoral volatility and the prolonged decline in party affiliations, party elites are increasingly vulnerable because their position is more exposed to factors beyond their control such

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<sup>3</sup> For Panebianco (1988), the *conformation* of the dominant coalition refers to the way power is distributed between the (groups of) actors that compose it. This distribution will therefore differentiate between weak coalitions (i.e. power is dispersed) and strong coalitions (i.e. power is concentrated). The *composition* directly concerns the (middle-level and/or factional) leaders who take part in it.

as bad opinion polls, positive or negative media coverage, political scandals or *badbuz* on social networks. Such negative events have electoral costs and have become an important component of current political life (Scarrow, 2006; Pollack et al., 2018). Political parties are expected to continually look for ways to sell a 'new' positive image and to find new ways of attracting more voters and party members when their public image is impacted. Communicating positively is a matter of compensating for the loss of symbolic capital that they are likely to lose under these conditions. Pennings and Hazan (2001) point out for example that the democratisation of candidate selection is part of the toolbox that some parties can, and do, use in order to put themselves in the spotlight and to restore a 'sense of commitment' to their affiliates alongside renewing their campaigning techniques. Besides, when voters outcast a vote, they will consider a factor of competence of the party and its leader (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). Previous research confirmed that voters evaluate leaders based on these performance criteria such as competence, integrity and trustworthiness (Bean, 1993). Hence, when a party or a party leader is involved in a scandal, the party will face (potential) negative electoral consequences (Scarrow, 2006; Pollack et al., 2018). In the hope to put an end towards this electoral decline, party leaders are willing – or in some cases may be forced – to resign (Pattie & Johnston, 2012).

However, it would be incautious to expect that the reforms on the different components of the political product is caused – at least in the same extent – by the same conditions. When investigating the nature of the different types of party reforms, we can detect causal conditions beyond those presented by Harmel & Janda (1994) and the level of trust. Several studies indicate for example that parties act like open units who are responsive towards the shifts in programmatic preferences of citizens and party voters (e.g Fagerholm, 2016; Adams et al., 2006)<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the type of party organization and the level of institutionalization predicts the ability of parties to cope with environmental shocks. Thereby, mass parties who benefits from a large share of public subsidies and have hierarchical decision-making processes are more able to change their policies compared to small membership parties (Meyer & Wagner, 2013). The importance of changes in the legal structure of the institutional systems in which parties operate must also be taken into account. Although, one can doubt if those kinds of changes can be regarded as a strategic party reform - as they were not directly decided upon in the party but by the state and they were not part of a long-debated process in the party - they can directly lead towards a positive outcome on party organizational reforms (Meier, 2012; Scarrow, 2006; Scarrow et al., 2017). In contrast, a change of party leader might also not always be caused by an environmental shock but can also follow the death or the voluntarily resignation of the incumbent. Finally, the literature about party organization has already underline the existence of internal or external spillover effects of party systems (Kitschelt, 1988; Meier, 2004). The potential effect of this particular environmental factor will be monitored when interpreting the results but will not be included in the QCA models themselves. In order to still compare the causal pathways leading to the three different types of party reforms, we try to control as much as possible for these additional conditions (see. data and methods).

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<sup>4</sup> A review of Eurobarometer data during the period under study, however, showed no such significant programmatic preferences shift of the citizens surveyed (see Appendix).

One implication resulting from this overview is that party reforms on the different components of the political product can be caused by conditions that are not relevant at all in the other components. For instance, a short-term shift of citizens is considered as one of the causes of programmatic reforms, while this is not the case for organizational- and personnel reforms. Thereby we expand this line of thinking towards the multiple causes of party reforms. **We expect that party reforms on the different dimensions of the political product (i.e. programmatic stances, personnel – and organizational image) will be caused by different pathways.** We expect this because (1) we know that there are individual conditions at play for some type of reforms who are not relevant for other type of reforms and (2) because a reform on one dimension of the political product is a more suitable response on particular environmental shocks than others. For example, we can expect that the resignation of the party leader will be a more convincing measure than a programmatic change in order to restore the trustworthiness of the party when a party leader is involved in a political scandal.

## Data and methods

In order to investigate the causes that explain reforms of the three different components of the political product we will focus on the six Belgian mainstream parties (i.e. PS, Vooruit, MR, OpenVLD, cdH and CD&V; see. Table 1). Like in many West European countries, these parties face strong criticism and questioning of their internal functioning. They are criticized for their elitism and their monopoly over the organization of the state, so that one can speak of *particracy* (van Haute & Pilet, 2007). Their strong links with the state and their central role in the political system as a whole make them particularly vulnerable to the electoral and membership decline that has characterized the Belgian and West European party systems since the 1980s (Luypaert, 2019). Given the challenges they face, we can reasonably assume that these parties will be all the more likely to implement new reforms to address them. These [old mainstream] parties have all reached their phase of maturity in the sense of Panebianco (1988) and have managed to rapidly acquire, and maintain, a *relevant* status in the Belgian political landscape since their creation (Pedersen, 1981). We thereby control for the level of party institutionalization as a cause of party reforms (see above). Overall, these century-old parties have participated in a high number of successive national (and regional) governments. Despite that their political culture is different - three party families are represented (i.e. Social democrats, Liberals and Christian democrats) - we can still conclude that these parties are quite homogeneous in terms of the goals they pursue. Although we have already underlined some limitations to Harmel and Janda (1994) *party goals* theory, each of the six selected parties can be easily classified as being primarily vote and office maximizers. Avoiding too much variation on elements exogenous to the causal conditions that will be used in the QCA (see. below) is crucial for the interpretation of the results. This relative homogeneity of the parties selected on the criteria mentioned here is moreover complemented by our detailed knowledge of these organisations, another essential element in conducting a comprehensive QCA (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012).

These six Belgian mainstream parties are observed at the federal legislatures for over the period 1987-2003. Observing the parties by legislature makes it possible to compare them during electoral cycles that are relatively identical from the point of view of the day-to-day management of political

affairs, without obscuring the occurrence of the shocks that interest us here. Moreover, this period allows for sufficient variation in the presence or absence of the different causal conditions selected while keeping a reasonable balance between observations for which the outcome is positive (1; implementation of a party reform) and negative (0; absence of party reform). These criteria are indispensable prerequisites for the use of the QCA (see Table 4). This timespan also allows us to control for shifts in voters' left-right preferences as, based on Eurobarometer data, there were no substantial change found in this time-period (see Figure 2 Appendix). Table 2 in Appendix presents the type of reforms of the political product's component for the cases we included in the analyses.

**Table 1 Belgian mainstream parties**

<b>Abrievation</b>	<b>Party name</b>	<b>Founding year</b>	<b>Party family</b>
<b>PS</b>	Parti socialiste	1885	Social democrats
<b>Vooruit</b>	Vooruit	1885	Social democrats
<b>MR</b>	Mouvement réformateur	1846	Liberals
<b>OpenVLD</b>	Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten	1846	Liberals
<b>cdH</b>	Centre démocrate humaniste	1884	Christian Democrats
<b>CD&amp;V</b>	Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams	1884	Christian Democrats

### **Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)**

Since we consider that the causal pathways leading to party reforms are characterized by equifinality (i.e. different solutions can lead to the same outcome) and can only be explained by the convergence of multiple contextual catalysts, we used a method which allows us to uncover these causal pathways, namely a fuzzy-set QCA (fs/QCA). QCA presupposes that the phenomenon being studied is more than likely explained by a conjunctural causation (i.e. the causal condition is only explanatory in combination with others) and can give rise to causal asymmetry (i.e. if the presence of the outcome is explained by the presence of one causal condition, the absence of the latter does not automatically explain the absence of the outcome) (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012; Beyens et al., 2016, p. 264). As already mentioned, QCA is particularly well fitted for case-oriented comparative studies. The set-theoretic logic of that method fully applies to our approach given the mutually exclusive nature of our outcome: the presence (1) or absence (0) of the implementation of party reform in each legislature. Moreover, the use of a fuzzy-set analysis allows us to avoid dichotomizing causal conditions of a more complex nature. It provides a finer approach to the variations to which they may give rise (Pennings, 2009; Schneider & Wagemann, 2010). Rather than defining cases as members or non-members of a well-defined set along each condition, this approach allows cases to have a degree of (partial) membership in each set – having by definition blurred boundaries – situated between 0 (full non-membership) and 1 (full membership). This conception of social reality is in direct line with our object of study. It would indeed be complicated to assume that two parties that have respectively lost 9% and 27% of their total member over the last 5 years belong the same way to the same set, which is itself considered to be increasing the likelihood of implementing reforms. On the other hand, it is possible to consider that any party

that has lost more than 5% of its members over the same period belongs to a certain degree to this set. The degree of membership will be determined by the % of lost members. Nevertheless, the corollary to this approach is that a considerable responsibility rests on the shoulders of the researcher, who must decide for himself on the *calibration* of the conditions. This presupposes a constant dialogue between theoretical considerations and detailed knowledge of the cases involved. As our main expertise lies within the actions of Belgian parties, we opted to only include Belgian cases into the QCA.

### **The operationalization and calibration of conditions and outcomes**

Two other databases provided extensive data on party leadership (COSPAL) and membership (MAPP). For the rest of the missing data, large part of the information was found through institutional sources or in the extensive literature about parties and the Belgian political system (among others Wauters, 2009; Delwit et al., 2011; Put, 2015) or the morphologies of Belgian political parties published in *Res Publica* between the 1980 and 2005. In addition, data derived from the Manifesto project dataset (MARPOR) were also used to define Belgian parties' policy positions in the first QCA<sup>5</sup>.

Table 3 displays the causal conditions included in the analysis following the fuzzy-set guidelines. The conditions of electoral defeat (DEFEAT), change of leader (LEADER) and change of governmental status (OPP) were dichotomized. Observations took the value 1 if the party has suffered an electoral defeat at federal and/or regional level during the legislature and if the party have seen its party leader change or serve his first term during the legislature as well. Value 1 is also given when they were sitting in opposition at the end of the legislature. By electoral defeat, we mean the loss of one or more positions in the ranking of parties that ran in the same electoral college during the elections. Operationalising this condition in this way better captures the shock that a failed election can be for these parties, which have generally suffered a linear decline in their vote share since the 1980s (Luypaert, 2019). The three remaining conditions were for their part calibrated on based on theoretical background and empirical observations. Concerning the decline of party membership (MEMBERS), we calibrated the condition based on the percentage of members lost by the party over the 5 last years at the end of the legislature or the year of implementation of the reform if applicable. In Belgium, parties experience a natural non-renewal rate of 5% of their total membership each year. A drop of 5% reported in the data therefore actually expresses a drop of 10% in total, which can be considered a worrying trend by officials over a 5-year period<sup>6</sup>. It is unlikely that a party would start a reform process after a sudden 10% loss of membership in 2002, when it has experienced a steady increase in membership over the last three years. Consequently, all parties that have registered more members, have kept stable rates or have lost less than 5% (i.e. maximum ambiguity point) of their members over the last 5 years are considered as non-members

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<sup>5</sup>William Cross, Jean-Benoit Pilet and Scott Pruyers (2019) Dataset Comparative Study of Party Leaders V.2 (COSPAL). Ottawa/Brussels.; van Haute, E. et al. (2016) MAPP Dataset, Zenodo. doi:10.5281/zenodo.61234. MARPOR, Versions 2020-1 until most recent version: Burst, Tobias / Krause, Werner / Lehmann, Pola / Lewandowski, Jirka / Matthieß, Theres / Merz, Nicolas / Regel, Sven / Zehnter, Lisa (2021): Manifesto Corpus. Version: 2020-1. Berlin: WZB Berlin Social Science Center

<sup>6</sup> This ratio was determined by Emilie van Haute (Université libre de Bruxelles) on the basis of informal discussions with executives of several of the parties studied in 2016. Empirically, this logic is also reflected in the distribution of the data.

or partially non-members of the set of parties having suffered from a substantial membership decline. All parties having lost 6% or more of their members over this period will be considered as partially in. And all parties having lost 20% or more of their members will be considered as fully in the set. Finally, parties that have been linked to a major political crisis (CTX) in the Belgian political system will be considered as partial members of this set, while parties that have been directly involved in a particular political scandal will be considered as full members. It should also be noted that a new causal condition has been specifically added in the QCA concerning personal reforms (TERMEND). Indeed, while each of the previously defined conditions is expected to play a role in explaining these reforms, a change of leader may simply be the result of practical factors related to party statutes (e.g. statutory end of the mandate) or circumstances unrelated to political life (e.g. illness, personal reasons, death). Table 2 in Appendix gives these calibrated conditions for our cases under study.

Our analyses consist in three QCA. Each of them focuses on one type of party reform (i.e. the outcome) themselves related to one dimension of the political product. The value 1 is given to the outcome if (1) a substantial shift in the socio-economic positioning of the party is observed (i.e. presence of a programmatic reform), (2) a democratic organizational reform has been implemented (i.e. presence of an organizational reform) and (3) a party leader has changed and/or served his or her first mandate during the legislature under study (i.e. presence of a personal reform). Value 0 defines the absence of any reform falling into these categories (see Table 4).

**Programmatic reforms** are operationalized as shifts in the socio-economic positioning since it is one of the two main programmatic responses parties can give to changes in electoral markets together with a change in issue saliency (Meguid, 2005). Data provided by the Manifesto project consist of ideological scores ranging from -1 (left-wing positioning) to +1 (right-wing positioning) on numerous ideological categories based on the coding of quasi-sentences (e.g. economic, cultural, social or ecological positioning of the party based on its program). Following Adams *et al.* (2006) example, we used this standardized indicator because it allows to make them correspond with many other measures of party positioning commonly used in the literature (e.g. expert placements, parliamentary voting analyses, party placements by voters, party self-placement; Adams *et al.*, 2006, p. 516). The standardization of the data provided by the Manifesto Project Database on a -1 to +1 scale also allows us to match these data with the public opinion data on the same item taken from the Eurobarometers, which is a control variable we use in our model (see Figure 2 in appendix). As we are only interested in substantial change in the parties' socio-economic positions, we calibrated this condition as a four-value set: 1 when the change is [ $\geq 1.4$ ], 0.9 when the change is [ $\geq 1$ ,  $< 1.4$ ], 0.8 if the change is [ $\geq 0.4$  and  $< 1$ ] and 0 when the change is smaller than [0.4]. The threshold 0.4 was chosen as this means that from this amount of change, the party moved towards another category on the socio-economic cleavage (i.e. extreme-left, center-left, center, center-right, extreme right). Please note that we do not take the direction into account (i.e. if parties have moved to the left or the right) but only the absolute amount of change as we predict change in itself.

Regarding the organizational image component, we have decided to focus only on **democratic organizational reforms** since those are certainly one of the most powerful tools for parties when they must renew their organisation in a negative context. This type of organisational adaptations is probably the most scrutinized in the literature even though their democratic nature is not crystal clear (Scarrow, 1999; Pennings & Hazan, 2001; van Haute & Pilet, 2007; Kenig, 2008;

Hazan & Rahat, 2010). Basically, we understand democratic reforms as being “any organisational change that (a) modifies specific rules or practices (b) that shape the relationship between at least two faces of the party, (c) strengthening in priority the *party-on-the-ground* and (d) whose starting and ending points over time are clearly identifiable”. We focus more specifically on two key types of democratic reforms implemented by the Belgian mainstream parties during the last decades: the leadership- and candidate selection processes. In overall, 17 reforms implemented by 6 parties were selected. As explained by Legein (2021), these two types of reforms are worth to be scrutinized because they are at the heart of intra-party dynamics but can also deeply impact the political system.

Finally, a **personnel reform** will be coded 1 if the party leader changed during the legislature.

**Table 3 Definition and coding of the causal conditions**

Condition	Label	Details*	Coding	Calibration
Electoral defeat	DEFEAT	Did the party suffer an electoral defeat during the last federal and/or regional elections? Defeat is assessed based on the party's ranking in terms of the number of seats obtained in the federal and regional parliaments. A defeat is coded if the party lost 1 or more rank during the elections	0 = No 1 = Yes	Dummy
Change of leader	LEADER	Has the party leader changed during the legislature or is the current leader serving his or her first term?	0 = No 1 = Yes	Dummy
Governmental status	OPP	Was the party in opposition at the federal level at the end of the legislature?	0 = No 1 = In opposition	Dummy
Membership decline	MEMBERS	What percentage of members has the party lost over the last 5 years?	[Percentage]	Calibration (0.20;0.05;0)**
Political context	CTXT	Has a major political crisis occurred during the legislature? Has the party been explicitly linked to a political scandal during the legislature?	0 = No 1 = A major political crisis has occurred 2 = The party has been directly linked to a political scandal	Calibration (2;0.1;0)

\* Note that when a party has implemented a party reform during the legislature, conditions are coded according to the situation at the time of the reform.

\*\*Anchor points are presented in the brackets. They are used to attribute to assign a value between 0 and 1 to observations based on the percentage of members lost over the last 5 years. All parties that registered more members, kept their membership stable or lost less than 5% (0.05) of members over the 5 years are considered not to be part of the set of parties that lost members (value 0). All parties that lost 6% or more of their members are considered to be more or less strongly part of this set (0.5<value<1). Finally, all parties that lost more than 20% of their membership (0.20) are considered to be fully part of this set (value 1). The same logic applies to GOVOPP and CTXT.

**Table 4 Definition and coding of the outcome**

<b>Component of the political product</b>	<b>Reform as outcome</b>	<b>Details*</b>	<b>Coding</b>	<b>Calibration</b>
Programmatic stances	Substantive change on socio-economic position	Has the party changed its socio-economic position substantively compared to the previous national elections? Substantive change is assessed as a change of at least [0,4] in party's position based on MARPOR-data. This means that if a party changed at least [0,4], they moved towards another category of the socio-economic cleavage (i.e. extreme-left, center-left, center, center-right, extreme right).	[position change]	Calibration(0, 0.8, 0.9, 1)
Personnel image	Change of leader	Has the party leader changed during the legislature?	0 = No 1 = Yes	Dummy
Organizational image	Democratic reforms	Has the party implemented leadership- and/or candidate selection democratization processes?	0 = No 1 = Yes	Dummy

## Results and discussion

### Causal pathways leading to programmatic reforms

Four different causal pathways were uncovered by the first QCA about programmatic reforms (see Table 5). These first results confirm our expectation that party reform is far more often explained by the combinations of conditions instead of one and can give rise to causal asymmetry (see. above). One of the strongest insights from the results is that neither leadership changes nor electoral defeats, nor sitting in opposition can explain programmatic reforms by themselves, although these three conditions constitute strong environmental shocks for parties as discussed in the literature so far. Remarkably, the presence of one of them is even mutually exclusive with the absence of the other two in the solutions. The arguments found in the literature must therefore be qualified within the framework of this type of reform. In the Belgian case, the condition of electoral defeat was only decisive when the party was managed by an incumbent leader at the time. Accordingly, Vooruit changed its programmatic position during the 1999-2003 legislature after an electoral defeat at both the federal and regional levels, under the leadership of Patrick Janssens – in office since the end of 1998 and re-elected in 2001. As Moens and Bouteca (2021) pointed out, Janssens was the main architect of the programmatic renewal of Vooruit at the end of a decade marked by the political affairs that shook the Belgian political world and the party itself. The international context also saw the emergence shortly before of the Third Way under the impetus of Tony Blair, which inspired, among others, several Belgian parties in the renewal of their programmatic positioning (Delwit, 2021; Moens & Bouteca, 2021; Pilet & Rangoni, 2021). The role of party leaders driving new ideological projects for their party is also illustrated by the reforms undertaken by the two Belgian liberal parties: MR and OpenVLD both revised their programmatic position under the impetus of incumbent leaders just after being rejected in opposition due to political alliances. MR was then led since 1981 by Louis Michel, who was known to have favoured social inflections in the ideological line of the party in contrast with the neo-liberal turns of Thatcherian inspiration led by his predecessor during the 1970s and early 1980s and his successors in the 1990s. For its part, OpenVLD was led by Guy Verhofstadt - also known as the “baby Thatcher” in Belgium - since 1989 at the time of the shift of the Flemish liberal programme.

The role given by the literature to the governmental status of mainstream parties in the explanation of the implementation of programmatic reforms is also partially confirmed in the Belgian case. Both liberal parties have indeed revised their programmatic stance once when they were in opposition and led by an incumbent leader, and again when they spent a second consecutive legislature in opposition, in a negative political context due to the outbreak of a major political affair<sup>7</sup>, yet without having experienced an electoral defeat. However, two emblematic cases of profound ideological reforms implemented during an opposition cure are not covered by the proposed solutions (i.e. CDH and CD&V). The two Christian Democratic parties have indeed

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<sup>7</sup> In 1996, Marc Dutroux is arrested in the ‘Dutroux Case’ for a series of sexual crimes against minors. This case - with international resounding - will shed light on the malfunctioning of the Belgian justice system and police force, as illustrated by the suspect’s escape in 1998. This will lead to the resignation of two ministers and to a profound reform of the justice system. Political parties in government at the time of the crisis were specifically targeted by criticism during this crisis.

experienced a sudden return to opposition after 58 consecutive years in the Belgian federal government at the beginning of the 00s. This episode away from governmental affairs was an opportunity for the French-speaking Christian Democratic Party to make important changes in their positioning by moving away (Pilet & Rangoni, 2021; van Haute, 2021). This *non-result* either demonstrates the limitation of using QCA in an analysis like the one we propose here, or indicates a deeper and more complex nature of the causes that led these two parties to make these changes at this point in time. The last hypothesis, supported by Legein (2021), nuances de facto the individual influence of the governmental status in the implementation of such wide-ranging reforms which must be put, in this very specific case, in broader political context particularly difficult for them. Unlike the French-speaking Christian-Democrats, the Dutch-speaking Christian democratic party did not respond towards electoral decline and a return to opposition with a change in socio-economic position. However, they did target the other two components of the political product.

Finally, the two conditions of change of leader and decline of membership appear only in a complementary way in the results and only in combination with stable electoral performances and the occupation of ministerial positions. This solution, for its part, goes in the direction of what is argued in the literature. On the one hand, a change of leader is seen as an opportunity to sell a (new) political project to the public through the renewal of the person who embodies the party's image. On the other hand, a significant decline in membership can be seen by parties as a sign of disengagement due to the inadequacy of the ideological incentives provided by the party to its members, thus encouraging it to renew its offer. Such changes in the environment of CDH led the party to implement programmatic reforms during the 1995-1999 legislature, although it suffered neither an electoral defeat nor a dismissal in opposition. It therefore underlines the destabilising shock of the combination of the other two conditions.

**Table 5 Causal pathways to programmatic reforms (parsimonious solution)**

	<b>~LEADER* DEFEAT</b>	<b>~LEADER* OPPOSITION</b>	<b>LEADER* ~DEFEAT* ~OPPOSITION* MEMBER</b>	<b>~DEFEAT *OPPOSITION *TRUST</b>
<b>Raw coverage</b>	0.06	0.12	0.29	0.13
<b>Unique Coverage</b>	0.06	0.12	0.29	0.13
<b>Consistency</b>	0.8	0.8	0.9	0.69
<b>Covered cases</b>	Vooruit_1999-2003	MR_1987-1991 OPENVLD_1991-1995	CDH_1995-1999	MR_1995-1999 OPENVLD_1995-1999
<b>Solution consistency</b>	0.90			
<b>Solution coverage</b>	0.60			
<b>Uncovered cases</b>	Vooruit1987-1991 CD&V1987-1991 CD&V 1995-1999 OPENVLD1987-1991 PS1987-1991 PS1991-1995 PS1995-1999 CDH1987-1991 CDH1999-2003 MR1999-2003			

### **Causal pathways leading to personnel reforms**

Three causal pathways allow to explain personnel reforms implemented by the Belgian mainstream parties between 1987 and 2003 (see. Table 6). In that regard, it is safe to say that the first pathway is logical and was highly expected. When the incumbent party leader resigns for a “non-strategic” reason, it ultimately leads to leadership change. Whether it is the end of a mandate dictated by the party's statutory rules or personal reasons unrelated to political life (e.g. illness, death, etc.) a change of leader remains a normal and inevitable event in political parties. According to some definitions, these organisations can even be defined as political parties only if they are able to outlive the elites that govern them (LaPalombara & Weiner, 1966).

What is interesting to observe is the individual implication of the CTXT condition in explaining personnel reforms. As underlined by the likes of De Vries and Hobolt (2020) or Pattie and Johnston (2012), political affairs are strong enough shocks for the parties to lead to changes in leadership in order to renew the party's image and compensate for the negative media attention around the personalities involved in the scandals. 10 out of the 14 reforms covered by this condition were undertaken between 1995 and 2003. This period was marked by two major political

crises at the level of the party system, namely the Dutroux case and the so-called ‘Dioxyne crisis’<sup>8</sup>. Both socialist parties were also directly linked to other affairs during the 1991-1995 legislature. Vooruit was publicly connected to the ‘Agusta’ affair in 1993 alongside PS, while the latter also had to face criticism following the ‘IOS’ (inter-communal socialist works) affair in 1994 and ‘UNIOP-INUSOP’ affair in 1996<sup>9</sup>. Finally, CD&V was directly involved in two similar cases in 1992 and 2001.

The third causal pathway emphasises the importance of parties’ governmental status when no substantial membership decline is registered in explaining personnel reforms. The case of MR is illustrative of an organisational specificity that runs through this party since the 1980s<sup>10</sup> when the party was firmly held by its tutelary figure Jean Gol. When the party is in government, the real decision-making centre of gravity is at the level of the federal government, where its strongman is usually located. When the party is in opposition, the party president acts as the main leader. Given this specificity, it is not surprising that the two covered personnel reforms undertaken by MR coincide with the return of Jean Gol to internal affairs after being dismissed from his position of Deputy Prime Minister due to the party’s change of status. This period intensified internal tensions and inaugurated a clan war dividing the dominant faction until 2019. The case of OpenVLD is different. The change of the party’s governmental status was the occasion for Guy Verhofstadt – the newly elected party leader - to implement a profound and multidimensional party reform in the early 1990s. These changes helped to boost the electoral prospects of the party, which returned to power in a spectacular way in 1999. His failure to bring the OpenVLD back into government sooner, however, exposed him to great internal pressure and forced to drop out of the race for re-election in 1995.

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<sup>8</sup> This is a food crisis with strong political implications. Shortly after the affair broke out, the Minister of Public Health (Marcel Colla, Vooruit) and Minister of Agriculture (Karel Pinxten, CD&V) had to resign. It broke out a few weeks before the 1999 legislative elections and damaged the record of the parties then in office. It allowed the ecologists (and to a lesser extent the Vlaams Belang) to gain important electoral scores in the following elections.

<sup>9</sup> The ‘Agusta’ scandal is the name given to a judicial case of financial malpractice directly involving several ministers and key individuals from both Belgian socialist parties. The IOS affair is a case of financial malpractice for clientelistic purposes which led to the arrest of Richard Carlier, one of the key figures of the PS middle-level elites. The UNIOP-INUSOP case led to the arrest of the Socialist Minister Guy Coëme for forgery, fraud, abuse of trust and corruption in the context of the financing of the party.

<sup>10</sup> This distribution of the decisional power was initially unofficial but was made official by the reform of the party statutes in 2002.

**Table 6 Causal pathways to personnel reforms (parsimonious solution)**

	<b>TERMEND</b>	<b>TRUST</b>	<b>OPPOSITION *~MEMBER</b>
<b>Raw coverage</b>	0.42	0.64	0.21
<b>Unique Coverage</b>	0.12	0.40	0.03
<b>Consistency</b>	1	0.91	0.95
<b>Covered cases</b>	CD&V_1991-1995 MR_1987-1991 MR_1995-1999 OPENVLD_1987-1991 OPENVLD_1995-1999 CDH_1995-1999 Vooruit_1987-1991 Vooruit_1995-1999	CD&V_1999-2003 CD&V_1991-1995 PS_1991-1995 PS_1995-1999 Vooruit_1991-1995 CD&V_1995-1999 MR_1995-1999 MR_1999-2003 PS_1999-2003 CDH_1995-1999 CDH_1999-2003 Vooruit_1999-2003 Vooruit_1995-1999 OPENVLD_1995-1999 OPENVLD_1999-2003	MR_1987-1991 MR_1995-1999 <sup>11</sup> OPENVLD_1995-1999 MR_1991-1995
<b>Solution consistency</b>	0.93		
<b>Solution coverage</b>	0.87		
<b>Uncovered cases</b>	Vooruit 1999-2003 CD&V1987-1991		

### **Causal pathways leading to organizational reforms**

The third QCA provides three explanatory pathways for the democratic organisational reforms implemented by Belgian mainstream parties over the period under study (Table 7). These combinations show once again that changes in party leadership may not be individually as significant as has been argued in the literature. Results even illustrate the opposite in the Belgian case (see Table 8). Both liberal parties and CD&V have changed the way they elected their party leader (and some of the rules governing their mandate) under the supervision of an incumbent president while sitting in opposition after three consecutive governmental participations. Results also highlight the importance of electoral defeats and changes in government status in the explanation of these reforms. The shock an electoral defeat can constitute for parties appears to be amplified when combined with a substantial decline in membership, as it is specifically the case for the historically 'mass' Belgian parties. 11 out of 17 democratic reforms followed causal pathways containing one of these two conditions. Finally, the contextual condition is also present in the explanation of the implementation of the one member one vote system (OMOV) in the election of the Flemish Christian Democrat leader in 1993. Although the youth section of the party was

<sup>11</sup> This is an odd result given that the same observation is covered by the first causal path. In fact, the party leader changed following the death of the incumbent leader.

already urging the former party leader to democratise the party, it was the combined effect of the dramatic rise of the far right in the previous federal elections and the outbreak of the ‘Delcroix affair’ that pushed the party establishment to propose this innovation under the leadership of the newly promoted president ad interim. Yet the party did not suffer from substantial membership decline at the time. As Wauters (2014) explains, it was rather seen as a way to rebrand the party's image while mobilising even more strongly the already affiliated members to compensate for the recent loss of popularity linked these two negative contextual events.

**Table 7 Causal pathways to organizational reforms (parsimonious solutions)**

	~LEADER *OPPOSITION	DEFEAT *MEMBERS	~LEADER *~MEMBERS *TRUST
<b>Raw coverage</b>	0.183	0.477	0.141
<b>Unique coverage</b>	0.154	0.431	0.08
<b>Consistency</b>	0.930	0.987	0.871
<b>Covered cases</b>	MR_1987-1991 OPENVLD_1991-1995	PS_1995-1999 PS_1999-2003 Vooruit_1995-1999 Vooruit_1999-2003 cdH_1999-2003 CD&V_1999-2003	CD&V_1991-1995
<b>Solution consistency</b>	0.96		
<b>Solution coverage</b>	0.72		
<b>Uncovered cases</b>	cdH_1987-1991 CD&V_1995-1999		

In total, 9 different causal combinations can explain reforms carried out by the Belgian mainstream parties on the 3 different components of the political product (i.e. programmatic stance, personnel and organisation) between 1987 and 2003. Our approach has consisted in breaking down the political product parties compete for in order to examine its components separately. The common consideration of the three QCAs we ran suggest four main findings confirming our central hypothesis. **Indeed, we expected that party reforms on the different dimensions of the political product would be caused by different causal pathways.**

First, results show that 7 out of the 9 causal pathways identified through the analyses consists of conjunctural causations. It therefore confirms the underlying assumptions on which our hypothesis was built: party reforms are more than likely the result of the convergence of multiple causal conditions which only acquire explanatory power in combination with others. It also confirms that party reforms are characterized by equifinality since each type of reform are explained by three to four different solutions.

Second, it appears that only one of all causal combinations we uncovered can explain more than one types of party reform. The combination of a change of governmental status (i.e. being

rejected into opposition) during the mandate of a party leader already in office at the time of the shock explains both programmatic and organizational reforms implemented by MR and OpenVLD between 1987 and 1995. The fact that the same parties implemented both types of reforms simultaneously while facing similar environmental changes is interesting at two levels. On the one hand, it indicates a large-scale reform of these two parties led by well-established leaders but facing a challenge to their status as privileged coalition partners (Harmel & Janda, 1994). On the other hand, the fact that this solution does not cover any reforms implemented by other party families strengthens our hypothesis because it further underlines the diversity of causes that can lead to reforms of one or more dimensions of the political product.

Third, our analyses show the specificities of party reforms on the personnel dimension of the political product. Two sufficient conditions alone explain a large majority of the cases observed while the other types reforms can only be explained by more than one combination. If the first sufficient condition was highly predictable (i.e. statutory end of mandate or end for personal reasons), the second illustrates the importance that political affairs and crises within the Belgian system have had in the evolution of the parties that compose it. It also underlines the personal dimension of this contextual condition, namely that “each scandal has its face”. However, this finding might be also due to the Belgian political system as *particracy*. Next to the general widespread trend of presidentialization processes in West-European parties, the Belgian political system is also characterized by extremely dominant leaders in the political decision making processes. Hence, when the party is involved in a scandal it would (probably more compared to other countries) primarily harm the political party leader as he/she forms the face of the party and its decisions.

Finally, another observation completes the lessons learnt so far on the basis of our working hypothesis. It seems that a “sister party effect”<sup>12</sup> can be identified in our results. Indeed, parties from a same political family tend to implement reforms of a same nature in a similar timing and when facing the same changes in their environment. This observation is particularly true concerning liberal parties in programmatic- and organizational reforms, while most visible for the other two party families in organizational reforms. However, this is only a supplementary observation that deserves further examination.

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<sup>12</sup>The Belgian party system has the particularity of being composed of two autonomous sub-systems. Before the federalisation of the country, only one mainstream party of each of the three political families studied here existed at the national level. However, these had to split into two parties, one French-speaking and one Dutch-speaking, during the process of federalisation of the country around 1970. The two parties resulting from the split of the former unitary party are therefore called sister parties.

## Conclusion

Over the last few decades, mainstream parties have faced a strong decline in both vote- and membership share. Despite these trends, mainstream parties remained vital actors who still compete to one another for office and votes. Apparently, these mainstream parties adapt to a changing environment. While previous studies mainly concentrated on the causes of reforms in the party organizational structure, this paper argued that parties will also implement reforms on programmatic stances and the personnel image of the party as these three components form the multi-componential political product. Furthermore, we argued that these three components reflect different realities of the party. Thereby a reform on one component will be the result of other causal pathways than reform on other components. While previous studies, such as Harmel & Janda, indicated a shock in parties' primary goals as the main driver of party reforms, we argued that separate party reforms are caused by different combination of causal conditions instead of one. These expectations were confirmed with our QCA on 6 Belgian mainstream parties for over a period of 15 years.

Our study finds that the three party reforms are all caused by different pathways. Out of the 9 discovered pathways, only one explained multiple reforms. The combination of a change of governmental status (i.e. being rejected into opposition) during the mandate of a party leader already in office at the time of the shock explains both programmatic and organizational reforms. Second, our results shows that 7 out of 9 causal pathways consisted of the combination of multiple causal conditions. These findings contribute to the existing literature on causes of party reforms by stating that party reforms are far more often (7 out of 9) the result of combination of causes instead of one. Moreover, by studying party reforms in an integrated manner we were able to disentangle different causes for separate types of party reforms. To our knowledge, this is the first integrated study concentrating on the multiple causes leading to programmatic-, organizational- and personnel reforms. Our findings clearly indicate the distinct realities that these components of the political product represent.

Further research can build on this integrated approach by including more cases. For instance, we found that political scandals were in itself influential enough to cause leader change. The case of Belgium as partocracy could here be the most-likely case. By testing these findings on other countries where party leaders play a less influential role, we would be able to fully tackle scandals as causal condition. Further research could also narrow down the analyses by concentrating on different causal pathways explaining party reforms in the same component of the political product. For example, it might be that a change of the socio-economic position (which is studied in this paper) has other causal pathways than a change on multicultural positions. Nevertheless, by conducting further research on this integrated approach we would be able to understand the behavior and responsiveness of parties to a larger extent.

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## Appendix

Figure 2. Eurobarometer data on citizens' socio-economic position change

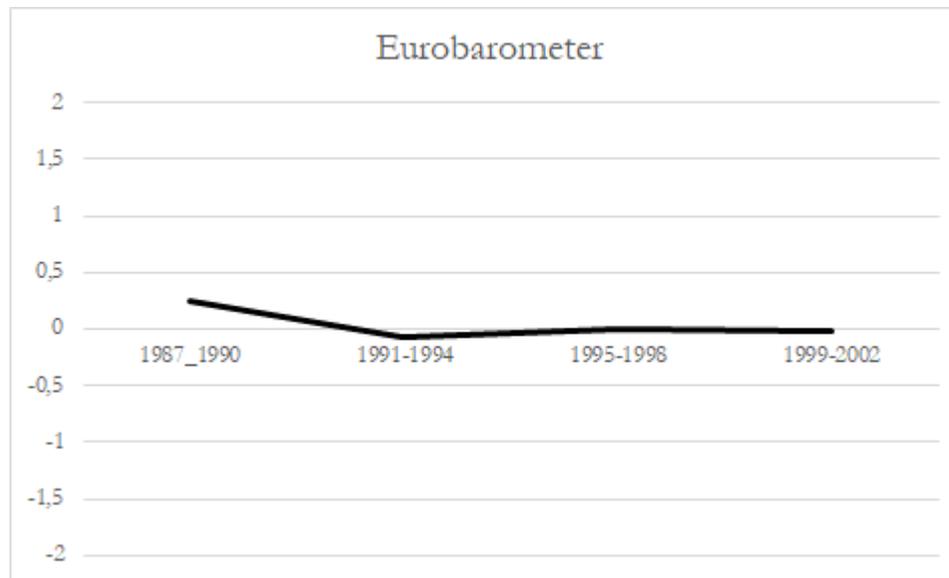


Table 2 Implemented reforms by Belgian mainstream parties, 1987-2003

Legislature	Party	Programmatic component: change in socio-economic position	Organizational component: democratic reform	Personnel component: change of party leader
<b>1987-1991</b>	PS	-0,51		No
	MR	-0,50	Leader selection through party primaries (OMOV-one member, one vote)  Bicephalous party leadership	Yes
	cdH	-0,78	Reintroduction of members polls for lists approval	No
	Vooruit	0,69		Yes
	CD&V	-0,75		Yes
	OpenVLD	-0,40		Yes
<b>1991-1995</b>	PS	0,43		
	MR			Yes
	Vooruit			Yes
	OpenVLD	-0,57	Limitation of the party leader term of office in time  Leader selection through party primaries (OMOV-one member, one vote)  Introduction of members polls opened to registered voters for lists approval	No

	CD&V		Leader selection through party primaries (OMOV-one member, one vote)	Yes
<b>1995-1999</b>	Vooruit		Leader selection through party primaries (OMOV-one member, one vote)	No
	PS	0,88	Leader selection through party primaries (OMOV-one member, one vote)  Limitation of the party leader term of office in time	No
	CDH	-0,51		Yes
	MR	-0,71		Yes
	CD&V	-1,05	Reintroduction of <i>members polls</i> for lists approval	Yes
	OpenVLD	-0,46		Yes
<b>1999-2003</b>	PS		Introduction of new rules increasing the number of stakeholders allowed to remove the party leader	Yes
	CD&V		Limitation of the party leader term of office in time More competencies are assigned to the district party (formal rules)	Yes
	Open VLD			Yes
	Vooruit	-0,65	Decentralisation of the power of initiative in the drafting of candidate lists and management of the whole process to the district party before final approval by the national party	Yes
	PS		Introduction of a mutual agreement mechanism between <i>fédérations</i> covering a same electoral district	No
	cdH	1,38	More competencies are assigned to the district party (unformal rules)	Yes
	MR	-0,61		Yes