

# Electoral infidelity: Why party members cast defecting votes<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Party politics and electoral research generally assume that party members are loyal voters. This article first assesses the empirical basis for this assumption before providing individual-level explanations for defection. We combine prominent theories from party politics and electoral behavior research and argue that internal disagreement and external pressure can each bring about disloyal voting. We motivate our hypotheses with multi-country European survey data and test them on two sets of party-level national surveys. The results show, first, that on average 8 percent of European party members cast a defecting vote in the last election and, second, that dissatisfaction with the leadership is the strongest predictor of defection. Additionally, internal ideological disagreement is associated with higher probabilities of defection, whereas the effects of pull factors in the form of contentious policies are rather limited. These findings emphasize the importance of testing scientific assumptions and the potential significance of party leadership contests.

Keywords: Party members, electoral behavior, Europe

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<sup>1</sup> The order of author names reflects the principle of rotation. Both authors have contributed equally to all work. Earlier versions of this article were presented throughout 2016 in research seminars at KU Leuven, Linnaeus University Växjö, University of Gothenburg, the Politicologenetmaal in Brussels, IPSA in Poznan, and at Ox-Po workshops in Oxford and Paris. We thank all participants and discussants for their suggestions and comments. We would also like to thank Tim Bale, Paul Webb, Monica Poletti, Jane Green, Rob Johns, Erik Vestin and EJPR's reviewers for their valuable comments and advice. We acknowledge research funding from The Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet), grant number 421-2012-1188 and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, grant number P13-1090:1.

In light of the documented widespread decline of party members, one of the most-often cited benefits of members to parties is that they are the most loyal voters (e.g. Scarrow 1994, 2015). However, we do not yet know the limits of this affinity. Party membership is among the strongest outlets for political participation and so party scholars and electoral researchers alike assume that once citizens have opted to enroll in a party, they will also cast a vote for that party. But do members always vote loyally? And what might deter them from doing so?

The run-up to the British Labour Party's leadership contest in 2016 suggests that defection amongst party members may not be unthinkable. If several British Labour MPs publicly declared that they were not supporting or endorsing the current leader, Jeremy Corbyn, it is possible that some other less high-profile members could think similarly and cast a defecting vote even on Election Day. Admittedly, this was an extreme case with a divisive leadership figure but it might also stand for a larger phenomenon. It could be that what party politics and electoral researchers usually assume – loyally voting party members – may not be entirely true.

Knowledge about the extent to which members do, indeed, defect and for what reasons is not only important for party strategists but also for the literatures on voter volatility and party and issue competition (see Adams & Somer-Topcu 2009; Pardos-Prado 2015; Schumacher et al. 2013; van de Wardt et al. 2014). If members are in fact the least likely to defect in elections, establishing a deeper understanding of their reasons for disloyal behavior could shed additional light on this decision for less committed but more sizable groups, such as party sympathizers or party voters. This is especially important considering increasing levels of dealignment and voter volatility in Europe (see Dalton et al. 2011).

This article takes stock of the empirical basis for the assumption of loyal members by analyzing a range of different, comparable surveys from the European context. It finds that around 8 percent of European party members cast a disloyal vote in the last election. In multi-party systems with small electoral margins, even smaller numbers of votes can have important consequences for party competition. But defection on this scale might also make a difference in swing constituencies of two-party systems. By drawing on a combination of party politics and electoral behavior literature, we explain patterns of vote defection among party members. Leaning on Hirschman (1970), we argue that intra-party disagreement with the party's program and its leader is a push factor for defection, as it is symptomatic of a looser bond between a member and her party. Additionally, cross-party pressures through specific and contentious issues are pull factors that can create additional opportunity structures for a disloyal vote. Push and pull factors could each bring about defection.

Since general surveys lack sufficient sample size to perform all necessary analyses with members as units of observation, we support our argument with empirical results based on high-quality surveys that either contain only party members or include a disproportionately large amount of them. The data originate from two very different electoral and party systems – Sweden and Britain – and thus incorporate different incentive structures for citizens' vote choice. With this comparative European design, the article offers theory-driven insights into what brings about this surprising and potentially detrimental vote defection within parties.

The results show that above all dissatisfaction with the party leader is associated with a higher probability to vote for another party, which highlights the importance of maintaining intra-party agreement since party members are not only voters but can also be a 'multiplier of votes' (Scarrow 1994: 47) through their communication. The

significance of satisfaction with leadership for predicting member defection is particularly important to highlight given the prominence of leadership-dominated organizational structures in many contemporary political parties. However, we also find that ideological incongruence on the general left-right scale contributes to breaking the bond between members and their parties. The results provide only limited support for the idea of pull factors such as controversial political issues; in general, they point towards the importance of push factors for disloyal voting amongst members and in particular dissatisfaction with the party leader.

## PARTY MEMBERS AS VOTERS

Amidst a general decline of party membership across Europe, scholars of political parties and party membership in particular regularly discuss the advantages and disadvantages of party members for parties (e.g. Scarrow 1994, 2015; see also Tavits 2012) as well as demand- or supply-side explanations for membership decline (e.g. Scarrow 2015). According to those descriptions, one party-benefit of membership usually requires little explanation or elaboration: ‘Members are loyal voters.’ (Scarrow 1994: 47) It seems straightforward that card-carrying party members who pay their fees would also vote for their ‘own team’ on election day.

Members are likely to cast a loyal vote because of their ideological conviction. While there may be different reasons for people to initially join a party (see, e.g. Bruter and Harrison 2009), members of the same party are usually united by the ideological profile. Other things equal, members – similar to identifiers – are more committed to and persuaded by a specific party and what it stands for than non-members; otherwise they would not have enrolled in the party. Members have deeper identification with

the party and a higher tolerance or threshold for disagreement due to their positive inclination (Tavits 2012). Therefore, it only seems natural that members would also cast a vote for their own party.

The assumption of party members as loyal voters is further empirically corroborated in the literature on vote choice models, albeit in an indirect way. Vote choice models usually include party identification as a predictor of vote choice in the US and in Europe (e.g. Miller 1991; Bartle and Bellucci 2014), yet the more formal party membership is to our knowledge not used as a predictor of vote choice. With this, the party politics and electoral choice literature seem to agree on the assumption that ‘members are loyal voters’ (Scarrow 1994: 47) and that members provide ‘a relatively safe reservoir of votes’ (Hooghe and Dassonneville 2014: 369) for their party. Modeling the effects of individual-level party membership on vote choice then seems redundant.

However, a first evaluation of this assumption suggests that it needs to be qualified. The European Social Survey (ESS) included a question on party-specific membership in its first five survey rounds, i.e. 2002-2010, that has been validated against officially reported membership figures (van Biezen et al. 2012). The ESS also includes re-call questions on past national election voting behavior.<sup>2</sup> Using these measures, we calculated defection rates among voting members per country averaged across all five waves. Averages control for election-specific events that might increase defection

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<sup>2</sup> While self-reported membership or voting may be subject to false reporting, we have no reason to believe that non-members would falsely claim membership. If anything, members are more likely to falsely claim non-membership or a loyal vote. This means that an inspection of defection rates in the ESS presents a very conservative picture biased in favour of the null hypothesis of no defection.

levels. They also provide a more reliable estimate given the generally small number of sampled members per party.<sup>3</sup>

According to the results, disloyal members are not rare. Figure 1 illustrates that while country-level variation exists (between 0 percent in Finland and Slovenia and 18 percent in Slovakia), most countries in which individual membership could be unequivocally matched with parties standing for elections show some level of membership defection at the ballot booth. This means that the assumption of loyal votes from party members is true for most European members, yet not for a non-trivial share. On average, across the 28 countries and five rounds of data collection, around 8 percent of party members said they cast a defecting vote.<sup>4</sup> This figure may seem small at first given an average membership rate of around 4.7 percent in a country (van Biezen et al. 2012). However, in multi-party systems with small electoral margins a few more votes can be crucial. For instance, in the 2013 German federal election, the liberal FDP was only 0.2 percentage points, or around 90,000 votes, short of crossing the parliamentary threshold (Bundeswahlleiter 2013). Next to swinging potentially marginal electoral outcomes, knowledge about the proportion of defecting members is also important for parties because these votes are most likely easier to regain compared to votes from non-members or non-identifiers. At

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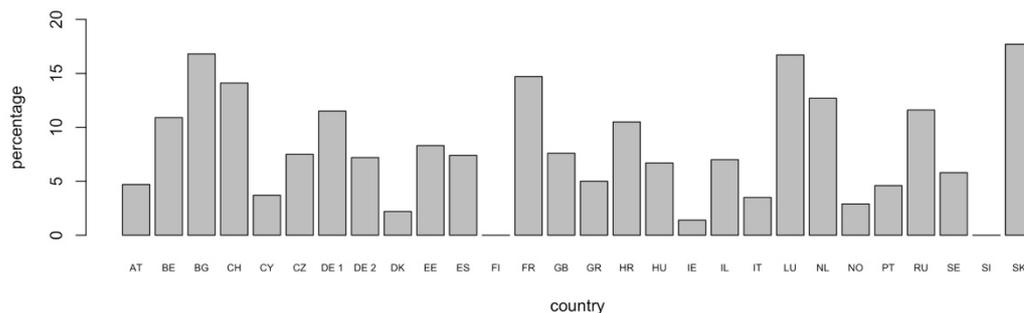
<sup>3</sup> For example, although Austria has the highest membership ratio in Europe (van Biezen et al. 2012), the Austrian ESS rounds 1-3 only include between 127 and 243 (voting) party members across five to seven parties.

<sup>4</sup> As party membership numbers have declined, researchers increasingly examine if party supporters – a group with looser but still durable connections to the party – are able to provide benefits to the party similar to those once brought by members (Fisher et al. 2013; Gauja and Jackson 2016; Webb et al. 2017). Although a full analysis of party supporters is beyond the scope of this article, we also calculated the percentage of defecting “party identifiers” as a proxy for party supporters. As expected, defection amongst party identifiers is higher with an average of above 12 percent. However, substantial country-level variation exists, as documented in Figure A1 in the appendix.

minimum, these proportions of defecting members in Europe cast some doubt on party members' alleged benefit to parties as safe voters.

Figure 1. Percentage of disloyal members per country, averaged across five rounds of ESS data (weighted data).

Note: Germany appears twice in the figure due to their two-votes electoral system.



## BREAKING THE BOND: WHEN AND WHY PARTY MEMBERS DEFECT

Despite members' inbuilt inclination to vote for their own party, there may be good reasons for members to not always vote loyally. For one, there may be strategic reasons to vote for another party, especially in multi-party systems that are defined by predictable coalitions. Under such circumstances strategic voting decisions are often based on preferences for or against a specific coalition (Kedar 2005). Since party members are typically more politically interested and informed than average citizens, strategic concerns could play a particularly prominent role for members. Such concerns are driven by system dynamics surrounding the electoral and party system but in this article, we are predominantly interested in party-level factors or 'the accumulation of disagreeable developments' that can make a member more likely to abandon his/her party (Tavits, 2012: 85). Specifically, we posit that vote defection by

party members is the result of two kinds of party-level factors: Intra-party disagreements present push factors whereas cross-party policy pressures are potential pull factors.<sup>5</sup>

Parties may be (or may strive to present themselves as) unitary actors to the electorate, yet the internal discourse over the party's plan of action is an important constitutive element (see, e.g. Katz 2002). For example, according to analyses of the ideological profile of party members and their perception of their parties in Belgium and Canada, only between 24 and 52 percent of members report identical positions for themselves and their party on the left-right scale (van Haute and Carty 2012). Similarly, in Sweden about two-thirds of party members report being at least somewhat ideologically different from their party (Kölln and Polk 2017). The results of these studies indicate that some degree of internal party disagreement is normal rather than an exception.

Several studies of electoral politics support Hirschman's well-known thesis (1970) that disagreement within an organization can lead to exit or voice behavior (see, e.g., Weber 2011; Karreth et al. 2013; Bakker et al. 2015). But we agree with van Haute (2015) that there has been surprisingly little consideration of party members from this perspective. In this framework, electoral defection is, at minimum, a form of disloyal behavior but one that also potentially combines exit and voice. Although a member that votes for a different party than the one to which she belongs is in a way departing from the party for that electoral cycle, this "short-term exit" need not be entirely thought of as exit because members who vote for another party are not necessarily

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<sup>5</sup> Strategic considerations induced by a country's electoral and party systems arguably also belong to the group of pull factors.

leaving the party for good.<sup>6</sup> A member that votes for another party may also be attempting to express “voice” in the form of a tactical vote. We know from research on European Parliament voting, for example, that citizens sometimes select parties in second-order elections to send a message to their preferred national parties (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Yet, the hidden character of casting a disloyal vote complicates it as a tool for expressing the voice of members within the party organization. A defecting vote from a party member therefore resides at an intersection of Hirschman’s exit, voice, and loyalty response options, clearly straining the bonds of loyalty but blending elements of voice and exit.

We maintain that ideological disagreement is a symptom for a looser tie to the party and presents a potential push factor. Working from a proximity-based understanding of spatial voting (Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinnich 1984), we expect that members who are more in disagreement with the party’s ideological profile will have a weaker bond to the party’s platform and its aims. These members might thus be more likely to let other factors such as strategic voting trump their initial inclination to vote loyally. For example, Wagner (2017) reports in his study on current and former party members in Austria that former members showed a larger ideological distance from their former party than current members from their party. Although casting a defecting vote is not the same as ‘exiting’ altogether, it can potentially be a first step towards leaving while already producing powerful and unforeseen negative consequences for the party. We expect that members’ intra-party disagreement based on the ideological left-right dimension will be connected to casting a defecting vote.

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<sup>6</sup> We currently lack the data necessary to systematically follow defecting party members in subsequent electoral cycles, but future research should prioritize understanding when a defecting member returns to the party in the next election (as a form of realignment) and when defection is a step on a path to more permanent exit (as a form of dealignment).

*H1 Party members with a higher level of left-right incongruence to their party are more likely to defect.*

Disagreement with one's own party, however, is not necessarily restricted to the left-right dimension, but could have many different sources. It can also occur on the personnel level when members disagree with the party leader or his/her policies.

Examples of such intra-party controversies about personnel can be easily found. Party congress elections for party leaders and their results provide numeric evidence of disagreement over a specific person. For instance, the former party leader of the German Social Democratic Party (2009-2017), Sigmar Gabriel, only received 74.3 percent of the vote, marking the second worst result of a social democratic party leader since 1945.<sup>7</sup> More generally, longitudinal data on leadership elections in many British parties shows that members regularly exhibit substantial disapproval with the (prospective) leadership (Quinn 2012). This shows that intra-party disagreement with the party leader can be expressed through an internal vote choice. Yet, it also opens up the possibility that members could be even stronger in their reaction to their party leader and cast a defecting vote.

This possibility is corroborated by studies in European electoral behavior that argue for the effects of leadership evaluations on citizens' vote choice (see, e.g. Aarts et al. 2011; Lobo and Curtice 2015). This work argues for the presidentialization hypothesis in which citizens' views of political leaders have independent effects on people's decision to vote for a party in presidential and parliamentary elections. Empirical evidence from several parliamentary democracies corroborates the hypothesis (see, e.g. Karvonen 2010; Garzia 2012; Bittner 2011). For example, Lobo and Curtice (2015: 247) conclude that there is 'very strong support for the importance of

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/spd-parteitag-121.html> (accessed 14/12/2015).

leadership evaluations in the vote choice of electorates today'. It means a party's leader can be a major driver of citizens' vote choice.

While these studies are based on findings related to the general electorate, we argue that they should also apply to party members. Compared to the general electorate, party members are more strongly bonded with the party and leadership effects should thus be weaker among this group. Nonetheless, based on the above combination of evidence from party politics and electoral behavior research, we anticipate that negative leadership evaluations can be a determinant of defection for party members. Specifically, we maintain that in times of increasing personalization of party politics dissatisfaction with the party leader should be another push factor for members to cast a defecting vote.

*H2 Party members with a higher level of dissatisfaction with their party leader are more likely to cast a defecting vote.*

Beyond the party leadership, specific policy issues are also known to create intra-party tensions, especially whenever they are salient and incur cross-party disagreement. Across Europe, studies repeatedly show that the cultural dimension creates a number of tensions amongst and between political parties (see, e.g., Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2006). Despite the historical importance of left-right party competition based on the economic cleavage, changes in the party system dynamics of Europe suggest that the specific issues such as immigration or European integration (Hobolt and De Vries 2015; Pardos-Prado 2015) could explain the short-term exit behaviour of a defecting vote.

The issue ownership literature argues that political parties tend to emphasize issues on which they have a comparative advantage and that are salient for party supporters (see, e.g., Green-Pedersen 2007; Stubager and Slothus 2013). In Sweden, for example,

the anti-immigration stance of the Sweden Democrats distinguishes the party from the rest of the party system (Dahlström and Sundell 2012; Dahlström and Esaiasson 2013), which is consistent with radical right party strategies across Western Europe (see, e.g., Meguid 2005: 347-348).

If anti-immigration positions are ‘owned’ by the radical right, there are reasons to believe that this could cause problems for parties of the mainstream right (Bale 2008; de Lange 2012; Pardos-Prado 2015). For example, Conservative party members in Britain with culturally conservative attitudes on topics like immigration and the European Union expressed a willingness to consider voting for UKIP in future elections (Webb and Bale 2014). Right-wing parties are often already associated with the types of law and order policies and tough stances on immigration stressed by anti-immigrant parties (Bale 2008: 320), and Dahlström and Esaiasson (2013) provide evidence that right-leaning Swedish parties are more likely to pursue anti-immigrant policies than those on the left. Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup (2008: 626) argue that coalition dynamics constrain the ability of the Moderates – Sweden’s largest centre-right party – to move in the direction of the anti-immigrant party. Therefore, the potential absorption of the Sweden Democrats into the right-wing bloc – similar to what took place earlier in Denmark and Norway – is seen as less likely than the dismantling of the contemporary bloc structure to Swedish politics (Aylott and Bolin 2015: 738). Therefore, right-leaning party members could be tempted by this cross-cutting cleavage and we propose the following hypothesis on potential pull factors:

*H3 Party members with more intolerant migrant attitudes are more likely to cast a defecting vote, particularly if they are members of a party leaning toward the political right.*

Summarizing, intra-party disagreement on the general left-right dimension or with the party leader generates policy and personnel incentives for some members to cast a disloyal vote. Cross-party pressures on specific issues provide additional pull factors to cast a disloyal vote.

## DATA

Previous research on party members has been constrained by data availability because general surveys, such as the ESS, lack a sufficient amount of party members and fine-grained questions about party membership. For example, in the 2010 ESS round, only 106 respondents indicated being a member of any Swedish political party, although officially reported statistics indicate a membership size of almost 260,000 (Kölln 2016). This small sample size limits the scope of testable individual- or party-level hypotheses. Party membership surveys or surveys that contain a disproportionate number of members pose an alternative approach (see, e.g. van Haute and Gauja 2015).

In this article, we use both kinds of surveys. One is a cross-sectional survey and we acknowledge the constraints in using these types of data for causal inference (see Shadish et al. 2002; but also Wagner 2017). However, the other survey was administered to a panel of individuals who were followed across several waves. This allows us to use the presumed explanatory variables from an earlier time-point and we can thus considerably improve on causal inference.

The 2015 Swedish Party Membership Survey includes 10,392 responses from party members belonging to seven different parties obtained from a web-based survey that was distributed by Swedish parties via their emailing list (Kölln and Polk 2017). Since

the survey was distributed by the parties themselves, only individuals on the membership list were contacted. It means that the sampling frame only listed the target population (with some under-coverage due to missing email addresses). All parties represented in the *Riksdag* participated, except for the Centre Party and the Sweden Democrats. In addition, the Feminist Initiative took part in the survey as the only other Swedish party represented in the European Parliament. Realized response rates are expectedly low with between 9.52 and 17.59 percent. The more than 10,000 responses provide a large sample size spread across a relatively large and diverse set of smaller and larger parties that allows us to test our hypotheses.<sup>8</sup>

Just like in any survey, selection bias is also a concern in membership surveys as it could be that members systematically select themselves into the web-based survey. However, this does not seem to have taken place with the Swedish survey, or at least not more than with other surveys. Members who participated in the 2015 Swedish survey were, on average, in their 50s (mean year of birth = 1960; median = 1957) and joined their respective parties in the last 20 years (mean year of first membership = 1999; median = 2006). The majority of members are relatively little involved in party activities (mean = 6-10 hours per month; median = 1-5 hours per month) and around 25 percent of all surveyed members belong now or once did to the midlevel elite with a local or regional, paid or unpaid office. When asked to rank various reasons to initially join the party, most members' first choice were political/ideological reasons, followed by social reasons; only 14.3 percent of members said that political career benefits were (very) important considerations to join in the first place. This means that participants in this survey correspond quite well to what we know about party members and their characteristics generally (see Gauja and van Haute 2015) and we

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<sup>8</sup> There is no information on the extent of non-response bias and thus the results cannot easily be generalized to the wider population of party members.

thus have no reason to assume that only the most (dis)satisfied members participated in the survey.

Sweden is a multiparty system, where electoral bloc politics and coalition governments have been stable features of recent electoral cycles. Perhaps these or other unobserved aspects of the Swedish political system affect vote defection of its party members in a unique way. To examine the extent to which our findings are inadvertently driven by case selection, we test our hypotheses in a second context with a very different institutional environment, namely in Britain. While Sweden's electoral system is based on a mix of party-list proportional representation and adjustment seats, Britain has a first-past-the-post electoral system. Further, following the 2015 British general election, Britain's effective number of parties (according to seats) was 2.5, whereas the Swedish *Riksdag* has 5.0 since the 2014 general election (Döring and Manow 2015). Based on these institutional differences, vote choice in these countries takes place in very different environments, which could lead to different results when testing our hypotheses.

The sixth wave of the British Election Study, BES, Internet Panel (Fieldhouse et al. 2015), conducted in May of 2015, was the first post-election wave of its panel study data and includes questions on party membership and voting behavior. We use data from this wave for constructing our dependent variable and socio-demographic variables. Our main independent variables are taken from the fourth wave of the BES online panel in order to increase our confidence in the direction of causality. For, it could reasonably be argued that a defecting party member would internally justify this decision by concurrently reporting dissatisfaction with the leader or ideological disagreement. Wave 4 of the BES online panel was conducted between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of March, over a month before the post-election wave (Wave 6), making this scenario

less likely. 26,112 respondents completed waves 4, 5, and 6, leaving us with a substantial number of party members across waves 4 and 6. The panel data are weighted with the waves-specific weight (`wt_full_W4W6`) provided by the BES team. Of these respondents, around 10 percent (2,735) reported that they were members of a political party in Wave 6, compared to around 2 percent in the general electorate (see House of Commons Library 2016, p. 8), which means that the BES offers a substantial number of British party members and thus an alternative way of performing analyses on party members. Our sample includes members of the Labour Party, the Conservative Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, the Scottish National Party, UKIP, and Plaid Cymru. We did not include the very limited number of respondents that listed the British National Party ( $n = 9$ ) or “Other” ( $n = 85$ ), which, together with other missing data, decreased the number of reported party members to 2,638.

Party members in our BES sample are, on average, around 45 years old and thus somewhat younger than what we know about the general profile of European party members and somewhat more politically active. They perform on average 2.6 out of 4 forms of political actions. These characteristics are typical of survey respondents from general internet panels and generally allow testing our hypotheses. We note, however, that the results may not easily travel to the entire British membership base.

## MEASURES

In the Swedish survey, we measure defecting vote choice by asking respondents whether they voted in the last general election in September 2014. Individuals that chose the response option ‘Yes, and I voted for another party’ are coded as 1,

everyone else as 0. A total of 7.8 percent ( $n = 803$ ) of sampled party members reported having voted for another party than their own in the last general election.<sup>9</sup> This figure is marginally lower than the European average of almost 8 percent as found in the ESS.

We measure satisfaction with the party leader with a question that asked members to indicate their level of satisfaction ‘with the leadership’, which was measured on a five-point scale (1 = ‘not at all satisfied’ – 5 = ‘very satisfied’). For the purpose of this analysis we reversed the coding so that the variable now indicates degrees of dissatisfaction with the leadership.

General ideological incongruence is measured as the absolute distance between a party member’s self-placement on a 0-10 general left-right scale and that member’s placement of the party on the same 0-10 general left-right scale. Higher values mean that respondents place themselves further away from their party while lower numbers indicate that members see themselves as more towards their party. This measure, frequently used in congruence research (Powell 2009), captures the difference respondents see between their own ideological position and the party’s and therefore measures what makes individual members *believe* they are close or far from a party – and the consequences of this.

We interact this measure with a binary variable that indicates whether respondents placed themselves further to the right (= 1) of their party or not (= 0). We do this in an attempt to ascertain the specific cross-party pressure brought to bear on right-leaning party members by the rapidly growing, extreme right Sweden Democrats. The combination of these measures provides information on the strength and direction of ideological incongruence.

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<sup>9</sup> Abstaining from the election altogether does not seem to be a viable option. Only 25 individuals reported not having casted a vote.

Party members' attitudes towards immigrants are measured through responses to the statement "Immigrants should be required to adapt to the customs of Sweden". Responses range from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (5). This item emphasizes the cultural rather than the economic aspects of immigration. Because of the Swedish party system's legacy in terms of 'left' and 'right', the cultural aspects of immigration highlight the differences to established party positions. Additionally, it captures one of the most salient policy positions of the Sweden Democrats. We reversed the coding to generate a measure of stricter immigration attitudes. Table A1 in the Appendix summarizes all variables.

In the BES defection is also measured as a dichotomous variable. Survey respondents that reported themselves as currently the member of a political party but also reported voting for a different party than the one to which they belong are coded as 1. Reported party members that voted for the party to which they belong are coded as 0. A total of 290, roughly 10 percent, reported voting for a different party than their own in the 2015 general election.<sup>10</sup> The UK defection rate reported in the pooled ESS data is 2.4 percentage points lower than that of the BES. As mentioned earlier, general surveys like the ESS are designed to be representative of the population not party members, and members from smaller parties, in particular, are under-surveyed in these situations. This can produce discrepancies in reported defection rate when members of a small party report higher than average defections.

Absolute and directional incongruence are measured in the same way as above. For our leadership measure, BES respondents were asked to indicate how much they liked each party leader on a scale ranging from 0 (dislike) to 10 (like). We took these scores that party members assigned to their party leaders and reversed the scale to create our

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<sup>10</sup> Just 1.14 percent of party members reported abstaining.

measure of leadership dissatisfaction. Anti-immigration attitudes are measured by reversing the 5-point scale of a question that asks respondents if immigration levels should be decreased a lot (1) or increased a lot (5). The variables are summarized in Table A2 in the appendix.

Despite the considerable overlap in question wording between the Swedish and the British survey, important differences remain. Therefore, we do not pool the data and instead test the hypotheses on each dataset separately.

## RESULTS

Figure 2 displays the percentage of defecting votes by party for both countries. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of party members cast loyal votes in the previous election, but a substantial number defected and there is considerable variation across parties.<sup>11</sup> In both countries, it is members of the Green Party that report the highest defection rates at almost 29 percent for the Green Party in the UK and at just over 10 percent for the Swedish Green Party. These numbers stand in stark contrast to the Scottish National Party or the Swedish Social Democrats, where only 1.3 and just over 4 percent of members voted for a different party in the last election, respectively. The defection rate among members of the Green Party in the UK is unusually high. Next to strategic voting, it likely has to do with the fact that the party only ran in 31 out of 59 Scottish constituencies. In the other constituencies, members of the Green

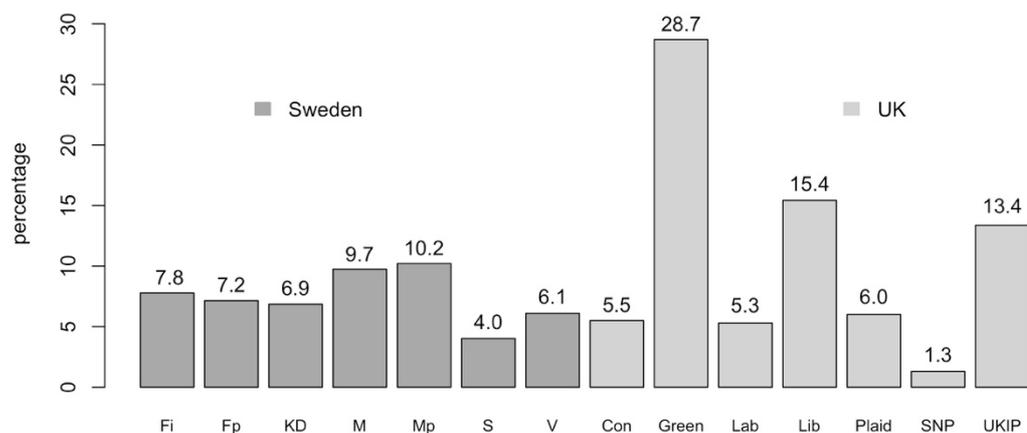
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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that Swedish local-election defection rates for the same day were considerably lower (Kölln and Polk 2017), which highlights the potential relevance of national factors, such as dissatisfaction with the national leader and cross-party policy pressures.

Party were forced to defect.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, analyses based on Green party members' vote recall shows that the largest group (12.3 per cent) defected to the SNP.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, UKIP did not run in all Scottish constituencies (House of Commons Library 2015). Further, the Scottish party system experienced considerable change between the UK general elections of 2010-2015, including the SNP's Scottish parliamentary majority in 2011, the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, and the influx of new members that joined SNP after the referendum. To account for these special circumstances in Scotland, we include a dummy for Scottish voters in our individual-level models.

Figure 2. Shares of reported defecting votes in the Sept. 2014 (SE) and May 2015 (UK) elections, by party.

Note: 'Fi' Feministiskt Initiativ (Feminist Initiative); 'Fp' Folkpartiet (Liberal Party); 'KD' Kristdemokraterna (Christian Democrats); 'M' Moderaterna (Moderate Party); 'Mp' Miljöpartiet (Green Party); 'S' Socialdemokraterna (Social Democrats); 'V' Vänsterpartiet (Left Party); 'Con' (Conservative Party); 'Green' (Green Party); 'Lab' (Labour Party); 'Lib' (Liberal Democrats); 'Plaid' (Plaid Cymru); 'SNP' (Scottish National Party); 'UKIP' (UK Independence Party).



<sup>12</sup> Scottish defectors are not overly represented in districts in which they were not given the chance to vote for their party. Around 41% of all Scottish defectors and 37% of Scottish Green defectors lived in districts without Greens running.

<sup>13</sup> Figure A2 in the appendix shows for which parties defecting party members (on the left) said they casted their votes (on the right).

To test our individual-level expectations we estimate several random intercept logit models with party as the grouping variable to consider the nested structure of the data. All independent variables, except for binary measures, were standardized to a mean of 0 and a variance of 1 to facilitate comparisons (Gelman 2008). We begin with the Swedish data; the results are shown in Table 1; entries are log-odds and standard errors.

Table 1. Results of modelling defecting vote in Sweden: Random intercept logit models with log-odds ratios and standard errors. Notes: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ ; 7 parties and 8738 observations.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>log-odds</i>	<i>std. error</i>						
<b>Fixed Part</b>								
(Intercept)	-2.72 ***	0.16	-2.79 ***	0.15	-2.83 ***	0.14	-2.83 ***	0.17
age	-0.07	0.09	-0.05	0.09	-0.03	0.09	-0.02	0.09
female	-0.32 ***	0.09	-0.30 ***	0.09	-0.23 **	0.09	-0.23 **	0.09
activity	-1.35 ***	0.17	-1.34 ***	0.17	-1.33 ***	0.17	-1.32 ***	0.17
absolute incongruence	0.99 ***	0.07	0.89 ***	0.09	0.70 ***	0.08	0.69 ***	0.08
right-leaning incongruence			0.23 **	0.10	0.18	0.10	0.10	0.10
incongruence: right incongruence			0.11	0.15				
dissatisfaction w leader					0.84 ***	0.09	0.85 ***	0.09
anti- immigration							-0.13	0.13
KD							-1.06 **	0.48
M							0.03	0.35
Fp							-0.22	0.36
anti- immigration:KD							2.50 ***	0.60
anti-							0.47	0.26

immigration:M				
anti-immigration:Fp			0.82 **	0.34
<b>Random Part</b>				
Variance Intercept <sub>party</sub>	0.138	0.108	0.091	0.079
Tjur's D	.052	.053	.069	.073
AIC	4366.716	4363.483	4270.199	4253.893

In the first model, we estimate the effects of absolute ideological incongruence as well as members' age and gender as basic control variables. We also control for members' level of activity within the party (originally measured as an ordinal variable of hours spent on party activity within a month) with the expectation that those who are more engaged in the party will be less likely to defect. In the second model, we then interact absolute incongruence with right-leaning incongruence to test whether those to the right of their party are more likely to defect. We then add leadership dissatisfaction (model 3), followed by model 4 that estimates the effects of assimilationist immigrant attitudes interacted with party-level dummies for the three mainstream right parties. The results show throughout that women are less likely to defect and that age is not a significant predictor of defection.<sup>14</sup>

According to the substantive results of model 1, absolute ideological incongruence has a positive and significant effect on the likelihood of defection but according to model 2 this effect is not moderated by the directional measure of right-leaning incongruence. It means that incongruent members to the right of their party are not

<sup>14</sup> According to further analyses, women's propensity to defect does not depend on their ideological incongruence (see Table A3 in the appendix). It shows that existing research on MPs' defection in parliament (and their level of agreement with the party is not easily transferable to party members (see Close and Núñez 2017).

more likely to defect than everyone else.<sup>15</sup> Subsequent models therefore do not include the interaction and only model the direct effects of absolute incongruence. We also retain right-leaning incongruence as a predictor in subsequent models to see whether assimilationist attitudes matter for defection above and beyond just generally more right-leaning attitudes. The results of the third model show that the direct effect of absolute incongruence weakens and right-leaning incongruence is no longer statistically significant when the second possible internal push factor of leadership dissatisfaction is taken into account. In turn, leadership dissatisfaction is, as expected, a predictor of defection and indeed has even stronger effects on defection than absolute incongruence.<sup>16</sup> This result is supportive of hypotheses 1 and 2.

In order to meaningfully interpret the size of these effects, Figure 3 shows the predicted probabilities for defection across the full range of absolute incongruence (left) and dissatisfaction with the leadership values (right). They are based on the results of model 3 and illustrate that both internal factors have strong effects on the probability to defect. As can be seen, the highest level of incongruence increases the predicted probability to defect to over 30 percent. The scale is very skewed, however, and predictions become more robust when the reported absolute ideological difference is at 6 or lower (2.4 on the standardized scale in Figure 3), where the associated

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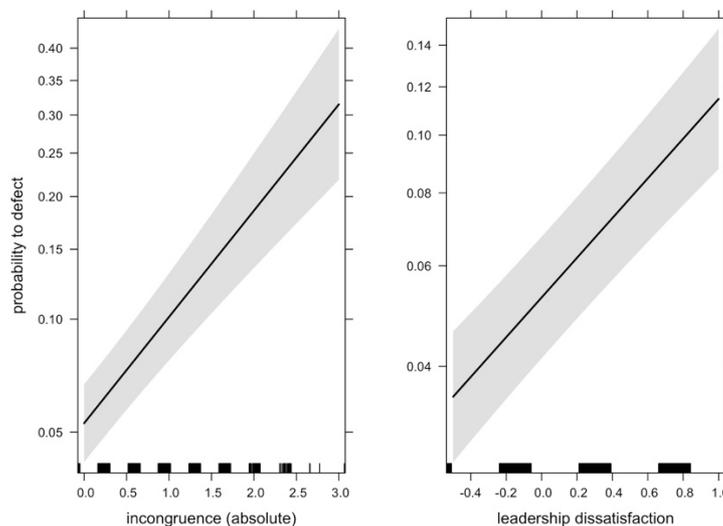
<sup>15</sup> Since the political left has also represented the Swedish working class, we test for the effects of left-leaning directional measure. However, the effects are again not distinguishable from zero.

<sup>16</sup> Given potential differences in the position and selection process of party leaders across parties, we also test whether party leadership effects differ by party and find no statistically significant differences. We also test whether reported importance of belief in what the party stands for as a reason to join the party in the first place changes the results. The main results remain unchanged (see Table A4 and Figures A4, A5, A6 in the appendix) and the new coefficient shows that the more important members thought it was to meet like-minded people the less likely they were to cast a defecting vote. Finally, we also checked whether demands for more membership rights make a difference to our main findings. According to the results (Table A5 in the appendix), the main findings remain substantially the same, and demands for more membership influence is positively correlated with casting a defecting vote.

predicted probability of defection is about 18 percent. The right-hand panel, in turn, shows the effect sizes of different levels of leadership dissatisfaction on defection. It illustrates how the highest levels of dissatisfaction with the party leadership increase the probability to cast a vote for a different party by about 11 percent. Almost 500 sampled party members report this level of leadership dissatisfaction. Although these figures suggest that absolute incongruence has stronger effects on the probability to defect, it has to be borne in mind that the measure of incongruence covers a wider range of values and is heavily skewed compared to leadership dissatisfaction, which has only five levels.

Figure 3. Predicted probabilities and 95 percent confidence bands of absolute incongruence (left) and dissatisfaction with leadership (right) on defection in Swedish parties, Model 3.

Note: Rescaled values on the x-axis. Units on the y-axes are not equally spaced because of the non-linearity of effects.



These effects of the internal factors essentially remain when immigration attitudes are included in model 4.<sup>17</sup> According to hypothesis 3, however, immigration should have varying effects for members of different parties, specifically for members of the Christian Democrats (KD), the Moderates (M), and the Liberals (Fp). We expect the effects of immigration attitudes to be amplified for members of all three parties. Therefore, the model includes interaction terms between three party-dummies and immigration attitudes. The results show a statistically significant interaction effect for the Christian Democrats and the Liberals, yet not for the Moderates. This only partially supports hypothesis 3. It suggests that assimilationist migration attitudes only matter more for members of the Christian Democrats and the Liberals in their decision to defect than for members of other parties. Even in this specification of the model, dissatisfaction with the leader and incongruence still exert strong effects on defection.

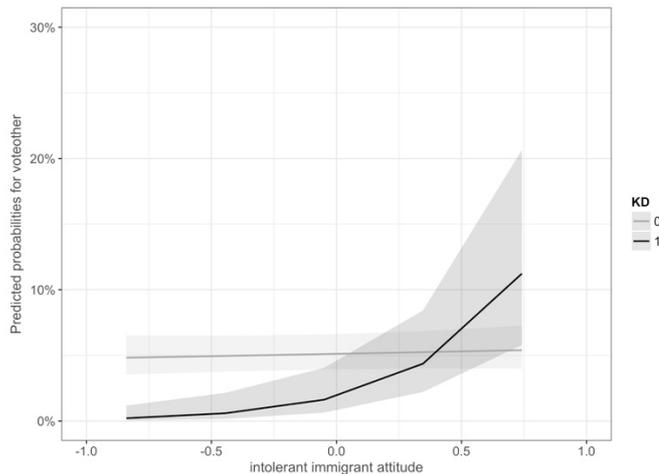
The black line in Figure 4 compares the predicted probabilities for KD members across different values of assimilationist immigration attitudes to non-KD members (grey). Only at lower levels of assimilationist immigration attitudes do KD-members significantly differ from non-KD members and are less likely to defect. However, the predicted probabilities of casting a defecting vote increase the more intolerant Christian Democrats' members are towards immigrants (higher values on the X-axis). This is in line with hypothesis 3 and suggests that the issue of immigration matters for some party members' vote choices more than for others. However, the graph also shows that the difference does not reach statistical significance at the end of the attitude scale. KD members expressing the strongest assimilationist immigrant

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<sup>17</sup> We also replicated the results on the pull factors with an alternative operationalization of the anti-immigration attitudes that taps more into the economic aspects of immigration (Table A6 and Figures A7, A8, A9 in the appendix).

attitude have a heightened probability to cast a defecting vote but not statistically significantly so.

Figure 4. Predicted probabilities and confidence bands (5-percent level) for defection across different values of intolerant immigration attitudes, dependent on KD-membership.



The graphical display of the results for the Liberals shows that the differences between Liberal members and other members are not statistically significant for the range of observable values of assimilationist attitudes (see Figure A3 in the appendix).

Our results from Sweden provide only limited support for hypothesis 3, while strongly supporting hypotheses 1 and 2. It is largely internal push factors that seem to be driving party members in Sweden towards casting a defecting vote. Ideological incongruence and even more so leadership dissatisfaction emerged as robust and sizeable predictors of this behaviour.

Our hypothesis tests from the British panel data lend additional credibility to these findings, where primary explanatory factors are measured prior to the outcome variable. Table 2 presents the results and follows the same structure as the table above but here we add, as mentioned, a dummy variable for Scottish respondents in all

models. We control again for age, gender, and activism. Activism is operationalized in the BES data by combining the Yes or No responses to four types of political participation into an additive activism index. The four sub-items are: “Done any work on behalf of a political party or action group”, “Given any money to a political party, organization or cause”, “Displayed an election poster”, and “Listened to or watched a party election broadcast”. All variables except for binary measures are again standardized.

Table 2. Results of modelling defecting vote in Britain: Random intercept logit models with log-odds ratios and standard errors. Notes: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ ; W4 and W6 refer to waves 4 and 6; 7 parties and 2442 observations.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>log-odds</i>	<i>std. error</i>						
<b>Fixed Part</b>								
(Intercept)	-3.31 ***	0.52	-3.47 ***	0.52	-3.60 ***	0.49	-3.55 ***	0.53
age (W6)	-0.16	0.10	-0.17	0.10	-0.08	0.10	-0.13	0.10
female (W6)	0.80 ***	0.20	0.80 ***	0.20	0.85 ***	0.21	0.86 **	0.21
activity (W6)	-0.45 ***	0.10	-0.44 ***	0.10	-0.40 ***	0.10	-0.40 ***	0.10
Scotland (W6)	1.22 ***	0.30	1.14 ***	0.31	1.27 ***	0.31	1.31 ***	0.32
absolute incongruence (W4)	0.38 ***	0.08	0.28 ***	0.10	0.24 **	0.09	0.24 **	0.09
right-leaning incongruence (W4)			0.45	0.23	0.56 **	0.21	0.48 *	0.22
incongruence (W4): right incongruence (W4)			0.17	0.18				
dissatisfaction w leader (W4)					0.53 ***	0.08	0.52 ***	0.09
anti-immigration (W4)							0.20	0.12

Conservatives (W6)			-0.48	1.26
imm (W4): Con (W6)			-0.03	0.27
<b>Random Part</b>				
Variance intercept <sub>party</sub>	1.514	1.481	1.269	1.242
Tjur's D	.150	.152	.174	.173
AIC	822.422	819.152	780.681	783.494

Despite important differences in electoral rules and party systems, as well as slightly different questions in the surveys, the results from the UK are remarkably similar to those from Sweden. The results of model 1 show that absolute ideological incongruence has a positive and significant effect on the likelihood of defection but this effect is again not moderated by the directional measure of incongruence (model 2). Incongruent members in the BES to the right of their party are not more likely to defect than everyone else. The results of the third model again show that the direct effect of absolute incongruence weakens when the other internal push factor of leadership dissatisfaction is included. Dissatisfaction with the party leadership is again consistently and statistically significantly associated with casting a defecting vote, and more active party members are again less likely to do so. The dummy variable for Scottish members is significant and strongly associated with casting a defecting vote across models.<sup>18</sup>

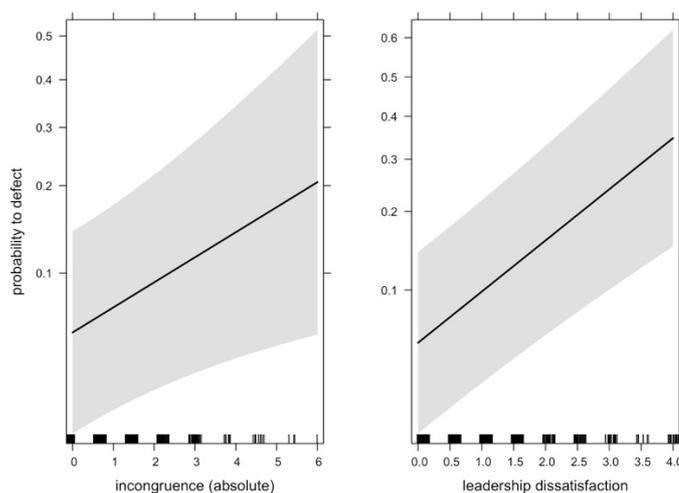
Figure 5 illustrates again the predicted probabilities for both internal push factors. Just as in the Swedish data, the predicted probabilities show that absolute incongruence (left panel) and even more so dissatisfaction with the party leader (right panel) exert positive effects on the probability to defect among party members. For example, the

<sup>18</sup> Table A7 in the appendix also shows the models without the Scotland dummy. The relationships between our central variables of interest are substantively similar in both model specifications.

highest level of absolute incongruence (6 on the standardized scale) increases the probability to defect by around 21 percent, and the highest dissatisfaction level (4 on the standardized scale) raises the likelihood to defect by almost 35 percent. These results are very similar to the ones found in the Swedish data and offer further support of hypotheses 1 and 2.

Figure 5. Predicted probabilities and 95 percent confidence bands of absolute incongruence (left) and dissatisfaction with leadership (right) on defection in British parties, model 3.

Note: Rescaled values on the x-axis. Units on the y-axis are not equally spaced because of the non-linearity of effects.



Again, largely mirroring the Swedish results, anti-immigration attitudes are neither a statistically significant predictor of defection among all party members nor for Conservative members in particular.<sup>19</sup> Taken on the whole, although the British data do not offer support for an anti-immigration hypothesis (H3), we again find support for the first and second hypotheses on ideological incongruence and dissatisfaction with party leadership, respectively. This provides additional evidence from a

<sup>19</sup> We re-ran the analyses using alternative operationalizations of anti-immigration attitudes that tap more into the economic and cultural aspects of immigration, respectively. As Tables A8 and A9 in the appendix show, the operationalizations did not alter the substantive results.

substantially different political system, and using panel data, that ideological incongruence and lack of satisfaction with party leadership drive defecting votes among political party members across Europe, but that anti-immigration attitudes have not.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This article set out to study the choice of party members to vote for a different party in national parliamentary elections, which data from the European Social Survey suggest occurs across European democracies. Drawing on a high-quality survey of more than 10,000 party members in Sweden and an online panel from the British Election Study with a large number of party members we focused on intra-party disagreement and cross-party policy pressures as push and pull factors, respectively. Across data sets and thus party and electoral systems, dissatisfaction with the party leader and ideological incongruence are significantly and strongly associated with higher probabilities to defect.

Within the British and Swedish party members surveyed, on average, around 9 percent of members defected in the countries' last general elections. This share of members can be potentially pivotal for electoral victories in Swedish elections of bloc politics or in swing constituencies in Britain but also in other multi-party systems with small electoral margins.

Two of the most prominent features of contemporary European party politics are declining membership numbers and the elevated stature of party leaders. Our article combines these trends to make a provocative argument about the causes of membership defection in general legislative elections. Parties in essence live by the

sword and die by the sword of charismatic party leaders. A prominent and popular leader can raise a party's profile, and recent research has shown that a change in party leadership clarifies the positions of the party in the minds of voters (Somer-Topcu 2017). This would appear to recommend increasing the power of party leaders as a winning electoral strategy. However, the findings presented here indicate that dissatisfaction with party leadership can prompt even the most committed voters – party members – to select a different party than their own in important elections. No doubt some of these members made strategic votes based on district competitiveness or coalition preferences, but in both Sweden and Britain dissatisfaction with the party leadership as well as general ideological disagreement were consistently associated with casting a defecting vote. Further, these relationships take place at a time when member preferences shape the outcomes of party leadership contests. In the two countries, we focus on in this article, one need only look at recent leadership challenges within the British Labour Party and the Swedish Christian Democrats to find examples of members driving leadership decisions.

Our findings suggest that the issue of immigration provides some cross-cutting policy pressure and reasons to defect, but that this was concentrated among right-leaning members of Sweden (and not in Britain) and has not exerted a particularly strong effect yet. Although the effects in the Swedish data were not strong, they nevertheless provide hints that anti-immigration sentiment was a relevant factor in the choice to defect among party members of some center-right parties that would later become more open to political talks with the formerly *persona non grata* anti-immigration Sweden Democrats. Contested and salient issues not taken up by established parties might be reason enough to defect to new parties – even for party members. But it must be stressed that these cross-party pressures are smaller than those related to

internal satisfaction with the member's party. Beyond these system-dynamics, this analysis also leads us to suggest revising the often-cited benefit of members as loyal voters. The above findings qualify this expectation and indicate that even members, perhaps akin to party identifiers, can go through phases of (temporary) dealignment and realignment.

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