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Thinking alike: two pathways to leadership-candidate opinion congruence

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Thinking alike: Two pathways to leadership-candidate opinion congruence

Introduction

Parties are one of the most important actors in the political arena and pivotal to the process of substantive political representation. Often, policy platforms are developed at the party level, and their execution depends on party unity (Norris, et al., 1999). This assumption underlies normative theories such as the Responsible Party Model (Adams 2001; Pierce 1999; Schmitt and Thomassen 1999). Furthermore, studies show that parties are remarkably good at achieving this unity (Carey 2009; Sieberer 2006), despite the presence of different factions within parties (Sartori 1976). An important question in political science has thus been to study how this unity comes about. There are several pathways to achieve unity: fear of disciplinary action by the party leadership or loyalty to the party line (Andeweg and Thomassen 2011; Russell 2014). However, the first and most important way in which party unity is achieved, happens through the congruence between the political preferences of candidates (and thus potential future MPs) and those of the party leadership. We label this ‘leadership-candidate opinion congruence’. Indeed, sanctions and party loyalty only come into play when there is disagreement with the official party line.

Yet as far as we know, despite its importance, this congruence has never been studied as dependent variable, but only as an independent variable (see for example Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011; Bowler et al., 1999; Ceron, 2013; Traber et al., 2014). We thus know very little about how it comes about and, as a result, several important questions remain unanswered. First, to what extent are parties and their candidates congruent on policy issues? Second, how does leadership-candidate congruence come about? We seek to fill
these voids in the literature. The leadership of a party, as defined in this paper, is usually the party president and a small group of trustees. While other party members often have their say in the party program, the leadership exerts the largest influence on the party agenda and manifesto (Katz and Mair, 1994). We present evidence that leadership-candidate congruence comes about through two mechanisms: selection and learning. With selection, the party leadership aims to get those candidates elected whose policy preferences are congruent with the party line. However, it will not always be possible for the leadership to find enough qualified candidates that are in agreement with the leadership on all issues. Instead, the leadership is likely to values congruence on core party issues more than congruence on non-core issues when selecting candidates.

Leadership-candidate congruence can also come about through learning. When joining a party, (potential) candidates work in an environment that disseminates a specific set of values, norms and of course policy positions. In the process of socialization, their interaction and engagement with the party makes candidates learn about these positions and assume them as their own. Our analyses indeed show that candidates engaged with the party for a long time and those who exposed themselves to information on their party’s stances during the campaign are more likely to adhere to the party line. Finally, we find that the positions of party voters matter as well. When a party's position is not supported by its voters, its candidates are less likely to share that party's position. Here both mechanisms come together. The party leadership is likely to be less able or even strategically inclined not to select candidates with a leadership-congruent position on that issue. In addition, candidates might be less inclined to assume the position of the party leadership in the face of voter opposition to that position.
Our evidence is based on data containing the policy positions of the party leaderships, candidates and voters in Belgium, who were presented with identical sets of 65 concrete policy positions, which touched upon a wide range of issues and policy domains. The data was collected during the 2014 Belgian electoral campaign.

A conceptual framework of leadership-candidate opinion congruence

While the literature on party unity is vast, it is plagued by conceptual ambiguity (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011; Hazan 2003) Since we do not wish to add to this confusion, it is useful to first clarify how this concept can be positioned within the existing conceptual framework on party unity. One of the first who studied party unity, was Ozbudun (1970). However, he labeled it ‘party cohesion’ and defined it as ‘the extent to which, in a given situation, group members can be observed to work together for the group’s goal in one and the same way’ (p. 305). Yet, confusingly, the term ‘cohesion’ has been used to refer both to unity in behavior (such as legislative voting) and to unity in policy preferences between MPs and their party. Therefore, we instead rely on the terminology of Andeweg and Thomassen (2011). They define parties acting as a single actor in parliament (for instance, during roll call votes) as party unity. This unity can be achieved by disciplinary sanctions, party loyalty or policy preference homogeneity (ibid.), of which the latter is the focus of the present study.

However, the term ‘preference homogeneity’ only means that all candidates share a similar policy position. While this is suitable approach in systems where there are weak parties and thus weak party leaderships (for instance, in the United States), in many systems, including the case at hand (Belgium), position-setting power is delegated to the
party leadership (Shugart 1998). In those cases, in order for party unity to be achieved, candidates not only need to share a similar position, but this position also needs to coincide with that of the party leadership. Therefore, we believe that the term ‘leadership-candidate congruence’ is a more suitable term for the concept we want to study, as this puts the emphasis on the match between the policy preferences of the candidate and those of the party leadership, the party chair and his or her closest associates. The party leadership often determines the official party positions and policy stances and thus determines the party line (at least at the national level) (Katz and Mair 1994). It is therefore the referent when examining the policy positions of candidates. Andeweg and Thomassen (2011) even hint at this themselves, when they state that in the case of homogeneity of preferences ‘there is no need for sanctions as members’ preferences coincide with their party’s [leadership] position (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011: 3). Studies have often examined how leadership-candidate opinion congruence – mostly (wrongly) operationalized as homogeneity of preferences – leads to party unity in parliament and under which conditions these effects are stronger (Bowler, Farell, and Katz 1999; Ceron 2013; Traber, Hug, and Sciarini 2014). Yet, as far as we know, no research has investigated this congruence itself. Andeweg & Thomassen (2011) theorize that congruence is reached through selection, with party selectorates nominating candidates that share the same ideas, but also through self-selection, with candidates running for the party with which they agree most. However, this link is never directly tested. Additionally, we argue that there is a second mechanism at play with candidates learning about their party’s policy position and adjusting their opinion accordingly through the process of socialization. In the next section, we formulate a number of hypotheses around these two mechanisms.
Selection and learning: A tale of two mechanisms

Selection:

By controlling the composition of the ballot list, the party leadership possesses an important instrument in order to guarantee a high level of leadership-candidate congruence. We should note however, that this instrument is not available to the leadership in all countries. Across Europe we find differences between systems, with some countries having more inclusive selection methods and other more exclusive selection methods (Gallagher and Marsh 1988; Hazan and Rahat 2010). In Belgium however, the party leadership still holds a tight grip on the candidate selection. Even though there are differences with regard to inclusiveness between parties, in general we see that in Belgium even for parties with the most open list formation procedures (the Greens and Liberals), it is still the party leadership that drafts the ballot list position (Vandeleene et al 2016). Only in a second stage are party members consulted and get to approve the draft lists. For many other parties however, the process is more exclusive and only a limited ‘selectorate’ consisting only of the leadership drafts the ballot list, especially when we talk about the so-called “realistic positions” (Vandeleene et al 2016). Therefore, in practice this means that the party leadership can indeed use selection as a means to reach congruence.

Based on the mechanism of selection we can formulate a number of hypotheses about which candidates will be more congruent with the official party line and how this varies over issues. While the party leadership aims to get fully congruent candidates on all ballot list positions, in practice this will be difficult to achieve. Not only is it very unlikely that candidates will agree with a party on every single issue, but also the pool of capable candidates with high congruence may be limited. Consequently, parties have to
make choices when they draft the list and decide on which issues they favor congruence more. This forms the basis for a number of expectations on difference in congruence between candidates and issues.

First, we expect that the leadership will especially reserve the highest ballot list positions for the most congruent candidates. Not only do these candidates receive the most media coverage (Midtbø, 2011; Van Aelst, et al, 2008), but they are also the ones that are most likely to get elected. Even though in Belgium voters can change the order on the list using preferential votes, the weight of these preferential votes is limited and only a few candidates manage to get chosen out of order (Put & Maddens, 2013). Thus, by drafting the ballot list, parties almost completely determine which candidates receive their seats. However, as each party has a ballot list with as many candidates as there are seats in the district, each ballot list contains more candidates than the number of candidates that are elected for that party. Consequently, we can distinguish between ‘realistic positions’, where candidates stand a real chance to get elected, and marginal positions, from which it is difficult to get elected (Put and Maddens 2013). In addition, evidence shows that parties employ this distinction too (ibid.). As the pool of capable and congruent candidates within a district is limited, parties may not always be able to fill the complete list with congruent candidates. Of course, the party leadership will also occupy these ‘realistic’ list positions. However, the majority of candidates with such positions does not belong to the party leadership and are thus depend on the leadership for their place on the list. We therefore expect that the party leadership will try to have all ‘realistic’ positions occupied by congruent candidates. We therefore hypothesize that:

**Hypothesis 1:** Leadership-candidate congruence is higher among candidates with realistic positions than among candidates with marginal positions.
While we will not be able to make definitive causal claims in this paper, hypothesis 1 implicitly relies on the assumption that leadership-candidate opinion congruence leads to a realistic list position. However, could it be that candidates with realistic positions are incentivized to learn about their party’s policy positions during the campaign? Though possible, it is unlikely, as it would mean that party leaderships would allow candidates to learn about positions at a time during which those candidates would already have to take and defend those positions – an electoral campaign. This would increase the likelihood of the party going off message and generating the image of a divided party. This risk is compounded for candidates on realistic positions, as those candidates are the ones most likely to garner media attention. Furthermore, as the lists are already made, it would be more difficult for the party leadership to return to the candidate lists to “punish” those candidates who refuse to learn and follow the party line. For these reasons, we believe that the selection mechanism and not learning is the most likely driving force behind hypothesis 1.

It is, however, unlikely that candidates are fully congruent with a party on all issues. Due to the sheer number of issues in the political arena, there will always be some issues on which candidates do not agree with their party. For a party, this means that they have to make trade-offs and value congruence on some issues over congruence on others. We expect that parties make sure that their candidates are especially congruent on issues that are crucial to their policy platform. The theory of issue ownership states that voters associate certain issues with certain parties (Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave & de Swert, 2007). It is on these issues that voters deem the party the most competent, and which parties will try to make salient in their campaign in order to win votes. It is therefore important for the party to stay ‘on message’ on owned issues (Norris et al. 1999), as
mixed messages on these issues may lead to a loss in votes. We therefore expect that parties make sure that candidates on the list are at least congruent on the owned issue. For instance, it is almost inconceivable that a green party would allow a candidate on its list if he or she disagrees with the party on environmental issues such as nuclear energy. In addition, issue ownership arguably affects the type of candidates a party will attract through a “self-selection”-effect. Aspiring candidates join a party because they feel strongly about the same issues the party feels strongly about. For instance, an aspiring candidate who joins the green party is likely to feel strongly about environmental issues and would not want to be candidate for a party that thinks otherwise. In sum, for both the party leadership and the candidates, opinion congruence on owned issues is expected to be pivotal in the (self-)selection process and thus a precondition for a candidacy. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** Leadership-candidate congruence is higher on owned issues by the party for which they are candidating.

**Learning and socialization:**

A second mechanism behind the congruence between candidates and issues revolves around the processes of learning and socialization. Learning is expected to occur because in proportional systems with multiple parties, the number of candidates participating is often extremely high. Consequently, many candidates have not really been politically active before and will not know for each issue exactly their party’s position. However, when being involved with a party, candidates learn where their party stands and adjust their opinions accordingly. This can be either because candidates use party cues to form not yet crystalized policy opinions or because candidates change a

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1 In Belgium for example over 5000 candidates participated in the 2014 elections.
conflicting opinion due to cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957) states that people feel discomfort when they hold beliefs or values that stand in contrast with each other and will therefore adjust their attitudes. We expect a similar mechanism to be at play for candidates. If a candidate learns about the position of a party and notices that they are incongruent, they may feel discomfort and change their opinion to be congruent with the party. Therefore, we can expect that candidates who learn about the party’s issue position are more congruent with the party.

There are several moments at which learning is expected to occur. Electoral campaigns are one of them. Campaigns focus on policies and policy positions of parties (Claassen 2011; Mendelsohn 1996), and thus give candidates an opportunity to learn where their party stands on an issue. News media regularly compare party programs (which are heavily influenced by the party leadership), or force parties to take a position on issues on which they usually remain silent. Also in online VAA’s parties are forced to take a stance on policy issues. The extent to which candidates have exposed themselves to this kind of information makes them more knowledgeable about their party preferences and, either through taking cues from the party or through the potential discomfort felt by candidates when they discover that the party leadership’s position does not match their own, more likely to have congruent policy preferences congruent:

**Hypothesis 3:** Leadership-candidate congruence is higher for candidates who learn about their party’s issue positions during an electoral campaign.

Over a longer period of time candidates who have been active in a party in the past, by, for instance, having held public office or working in the party organization, can also be subjected to party socialization and, as a consequence, learn about the party’s positions. Here too, cognitive dissonance and cue taking are the driving forces behind leadership-
candidate opinion congruence. The discomfort felt by, on the one hand, working for a party with a certain, and, on the other hand, disagreeing with the party’s policy preferences (determined heavily by the party leadership) puts pressure on candidates to bring their own preferences in line with those of the party (leadership). Alternatively, candidates may have entered the party with no or no crystalized opinion and formed their opinions through discussion and debates within the party. While hypothesis three deals with learning in the short term, over the course of an electoral campaign, hypothesis four focuses on (learning through) socialization over a longer period of time. We therefore hypothesize that candidates who have been engaged in the party, are more likely to share their party’s policy positions.

**Hypothesis 4: Leadership-candidate congruence is higher for candidates with previous political involvement with their party.**

**Learning and selection:**
Finally, we expect that the support of a party’s policy position among party voters affects the leadership-candidate congruence on that issue. This ties in with both the selection and learning mechanism. On issues where the electorate is more congruent with the party leadership we expect that the leadership will also select candidates who are congruent, in order to avoid confusion on where the party stands. However, on issues on which the electorate is less supportive of the leadership’s position, parties are expected to be less strict in their selection of congruent candidates, as they may prefer to stay more vague on their issue position. It can be even a conscious decision of the party to select some candidates that are not on line with these issues, in order to still satisfy the incongruent voters on this issue, especially if it is not a core issue of the party. In addition, on issues with higher leadership-voter congruence, the likelihood of selecting a
congruent candidate is simply higher, as candidates often come from this congruent pool of voters.

At the same time, leadership-voter congruence can also affect leadership-candidate congruence by influencing the learning pathway. If voters are less congruent with the party, the extent to which candidates feel cognitive dissonance when their opinion is not in line with the party leadership is likely to be less, as they may feel supported in their original opinion by the fact that the electorate also thinks differently. At the same time, when a candidate learns that his position differs not only from the leadership, but also from the electorate, these two may reinforce each other and make it even more likely that a candidate feels discomfort and change his or her opinion accordingly. Hence, we formulate the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 5:** Leadership-candidate congruence is higher on issues where the party leadership’s position is supported by the party electorate.

**Data and method**

To test these five hypotheses, we look at data from the Belgian elections of May 25 2014. More specifically, we use three datasets: on the party leadership, on candidates and on voters. For the first, we use a party leadership survey. The leaderships of all political parties in Belgium with at least one representative sitting in either the regional, federal or European parliament (n = 11) were sent a survey with 65 concrete policy statements. The survey was conducted in the development of an online voting application (VAA). The leaderships were given two weeks to confer with other leadership members to develop a position. The Belgian party landscape is split along the Flemish/Walloon linguistic divide (De Winter, Swyngedouw, and Dumont 2006). There are 6 Flemish and
5 Walloon parties in our sample. To reduce the possibilities of strategic positions, the leaderships could only ‘agree’ or ‘disagree’ with a statement.

For the candidate data, we use a post-electoral survey among Belgian candidates after the elections of May 25 2014\(^2\). The survey took place between May 28 2014 and April 08 2015. In total 5,635 candidates were contacted. After several reminders and the use of both paper and online surveys, a response rate of 34.37 percent was achieved. Given the large timespan during which the data were collected, we control for the number of months after May 25 2014 in all our models. The sample includes both effective and substitute candidates. The members of the party leaderships often also featured as members on the lists, primarily on the highest and most electable positions. However, the majority of elected candidates did not come from the party leadership, preventing causality issues (see below).

In Belgium, voters are presented a ballot list consisting of two parts: a part with effective candidates and a part with substitute candidates (Put and Maddens 2013). Substitute candidates replace effective candidate when the latter joins the executive branch or resigns. In effect, this means that the first candidate on the substitute stands a good chance of getting elected (\textit{ibid.}). In the survey, candidates were asked to react to 30 concrete policy statements, selected out of a batch of 65 statements. However, the selection of 30 statements out of 65 differed between candidates so that all 65 statements were eventually featured in the candidate survey (see Table A1 in the online appendix). A benefit of this approach is that it allows us to tap directly in the policy stances of candidates, instead of having to infer these from speeches in parliament or during the party congress’ (Ceron 2015; Proksch & Slapin 2012). The candidate survey

\footnote{\textsuperscript{2} For more information on the candidate survey, see Appendix note X.}
was conducted after May 25, while the party leadership survey was conducted in March 2014 almost two months before. This time gap between the two surveys has allowed candidates to learn about the party positions and updated their own positions, about which we have formulated several hypotheses. It is thus a necessary condition to expect traces of positional learning.

It could be that candidates at least tried to give the party positions instead of their own in response to the policy statements. However, we believe that the nature of the candidate survey made this bias unlikely. First, the questionnaire asked candidates to give their own position, not the one of the party. Second, candidates were assured that their responses would be kept strictly confidential. Third, the survey was taken after the election and this arguably diminished the incentive for candidates to give the same position as their party. The election was over and appeasing their party by agreeing with its positions was not going to help their electoral prospects anymore. For these reasons, we believe that it is fair to assume that the positions of the candidates are indeed their own positions.

For the voter data, we rely on two surveys. The Belgium Election Study, and an online voter survey, both conducted on a sample of Belgian voters\(^3\). The first contains information about the issue ownership of parties and the second has the positions of voters on the same 65 policy statements presented to the party leaderships and the candidates, on the same ‘agree-disagree’ response scale.

The dependent variable is party-candidate opinion congruence. We use the issue positions collected in the party leadership and the candidate survey to calculate it. For each policy statement, we measure whether the position of the candidate coincided with

\(^3\) For more information on both voter surveys, see Appendix note X.
the position of the party leadership, yes (1) or not (0). This measure is different from previous papers that focus on party homogeneity and thus compares how heterogeneous candidates within the same party are compared to each other, rather than comparing the position of a candidate with the official party line.

Hypothesis 1 claims that leadership-candidate opinion congruence is higher among candidates with realistic list positions. To estimate whether a position is realistic (1) or not (0), we rely on Put and Maddens (2013), who argue that the number of realistic positions of a party in a district equals the number of seats won in the previous election plus one. If a party did not win any seats in the last election, the first seat on the list is considered realistic. In addition, given the importance of the first place on the substitute list, this position too is viewed as realistic.

Inevitably, the candidate sample was skewed towards candidates who were not elected and who did not have realistic positions. In the population, 17 percent of all candidates (of our sample of 11 parties) were elected. In our sample, this is 10 percent. The bias for the realistic position variable is smaller. In the population, 24 percent of candidates had list position with a realistic chance of being elected. In our sample this is percent. It is thus the case the candidates with top list positions were less likely to participate in the survey.

However, while it entails the risk of a bias, it can also reduce it. As mentioned before, the party leadership (party chair and his or her close associates) were also candidates, primarily occupying top list and electable positions. The fact that elected candidates and candidates with realistic positions are underrepresented therefore indicates that our sample and the leadership-candidate congruence measures are less likely to be overestimated by the presence of the party leadership in our sample of candidates.
To measure the degree to which issues are owned by a party (hypothesis 2), we use the Belgian Election Study. In the survey, respondents were asked which party comes to mind when thinking about a certain policy domain. The statements were assigned whenever possible to one of the policy domains. This was possible in 53 out the 65 statements. The degree of issue ownership of a candidate's party of a policy statement is the percentage of voters who thought of that candidate's party first when hearing the policy statement’s policy domain.4

Hypothesis 3 predicts that candidates who learn about their party’s policy positions during the campaign are more congruent with them. We preferably need a measure that indicates whether candidates exposed themselves to information on their party’s positions on the policy statements included in the candidate survey. The fact that those precise positions were displayed on the VAA website of Stemtest 2014 / Test Electoral 2014 provides us with such a measure. Candidates who visited this website were arguably better able to learn about their party’s policy preferences, and increase their leadership-candidate opinion congruence. In the candidate survey, a question was included whether a candidate visited the VAA website, yes (1) or no (0). This variable indicates campaign learning. There are undoubtedly other information sources through which candidates could have learned about their party’s positions, but the one we use constitutes the clearest indicator, because it meant exposing oneself to information about party’s stances on policy statements identical to the ones presented to the candidates.

Hypothesis 4 expects that candidates previously involved in party affairs have a higher probability to have assumed the party position as their own and, as a result, to be

4 For more information on the policy domains, and the statements that were assigned to it, see the online appendix.
congruent with the party line through socialization. The candidate survey contains several questions regarding the role candidates played in the party. If a candidate previously worked for the party as an employee, a campaign volunteer, a cabinet employee under a party minister, or held public office, then that candidate has arguably been socialized with the party stances. Whether a candidate has ever worked for a party in any capacity, is our measure of party socialization.

The fifth and final hypothesis argues that leadership-candidate opinion congruence is higher when its voters support the party position. To measure leadership-voter opinion congruence, we use voters’ policy positions from the online voter survey. We calculated, for each party and for each statement, the percentage of their voters that agree with the party position. This percentage is the degree of leadership-voter opinion congruence.

Because we have multiple statements per candidate, we stack our dataset. In the stacked dataset, there are multiple observations per candidate, one for every policy statement. Stacking the dataset results in 25,517 candidate-statement combinations, embedded in statements (n=30) and candidates (n=920). While there are two higher levels in our data, our variables are situated either on the candidate or the statement-candidate combination level. Therefore, we use multilevel logistic regression with a random intercept for the candidate level. In order to control for the clustering within statements and parties, we use fixed effects by including statements and party dummies

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5 We acknowledge that this operationalization has limitations. Party socialization has two underlying dimensions, the level of involvement and the duration of this involvement. This operationalization only takes into account one dimension and thus only captures a part of the party socialization effect. If we had been able to capture the full effect of party socialization, this relation would have been even stronger. Our test of the party socialization hypothesis can therefore be considered as a conservative test of how party socialization affects leadership-candidate congruence.

6 While there could be district-level differences in leadership-voter congruence, there are not any outspoken differences in policy preferences between districts in Belgium. In addition, the voter survey does not allow us to measure leadership-voter congruence on a district level, as this would produce unreliably small samples of voters, even for the largest parties.

7 An example of a stacked dataset is given in the online appendix.
in all our analyses. We also add a substantial number of control variables, all of which are explained in the Online appendix. Table 1 gives an overview of all the variables.

[Table 1 about here]

Results

Before testing the hypotheses, we need to know whether there is variation in leadership-candidate congruence. This is not self-evident, given the almost perfect party cohesion observed in parliaments in Belgium. The descriptives in table 1, however, show that in almost 30 percent of the candidate-statement combinations, candidates have a different opinion than their party. To give a full picture of the variation in the dependent variable, we calculate a percentage of party-candidate opinion per candidate. The results are plotted in a histogram in Figure 1. It shows that leadership-candidate congruence can go as low as 9 percent and as high as 100 percent, with a standard deviation of 13 percent. This indicates a substantial degree of variation, warranting an analysis of which candidates agree more with their party, and on which issues.

[Figure 1 about here]

The first two hypotheses revolved around the mechanism of selection: They are tested in model 1 in Table 2. Table 2 presents the marginal effects of the multilevel analyses; the coefficients can be found in the appendix. The first of these hypotheses predicts that candidates on realistic positions have a higher level of leadership-candidate opinion congruence, which is supported by the results in model 1. These candidates are more
likely to be congruent with their party leadership than candidates without, although the
difference is moderate (74% versus 77%).

[Table 2 about here]

The second selection hypothesis predicts that on owned issues the party, leadership-
candidate opinion congruence is higher. It is unlikely that aspiring candidates would
want to candidate for a party if they disagree on issues that are at the very core of a
party’s policy platform, or that a party would allow such a candidate on its list. The
results in table 2 support this expectation: the more a party owns an issue, the more its
candidates agree with the party position. When an issue is completely unowned by a
party, the likelihood of a candidate agreeing with the party line on that issue is 71
percent. However, on issues that are completely owned by a party, this likelihood
increases to 87 percent.

The learning hypotheses are tested in model 2 in Table 2. The first learning hypothesis
(H3) predicts that candidates who learned about their party’s policy positions, by
visiting the VAA website on which the positions of parties on policy issues was displayed
are more congruent with their party. The results in model 2 give support for this
hypothesis, although the effect is moderate. If we estimate the relation between opinion
congruence and campaign learning, we find that a candidate who has learned during the
campaign has a 72 percent chance of agreeing the party line, while this is 3 percent
lower for candidates who did not visit the VAA website. This supports hypothesis three.

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8 Robustness checks showed that the main mechanism behind hypothesis 1 was indeed selection and not
learning; see Appendix note X.
9 A full picture of the relation between issue ownership and leadership-candidate congruence is given in Figure
A1 in the appendix.
The second learning hypothesis (H4) argues that candidates who have been involved with the party in the past, have been socialized by the party. They have had opportunities to learn about the party’s policy positions and assume them as their own. The results support this expectation: candidates who have worked for the party, in the party organization or as a public office holder, are more likely to have congruent policy preferences than candidates who have not. Candidates in the latter situation have a 72 percent chance of agreeing with their party on an issue, while for candidates in the former situation, this is 75 percent. This supports hypothesis 4.

Finally, the fifth hypothesis expects a higher likelihood of leadership-candidate opinion congruence on issues where the party position is supported by many of its voters (leadership-voter opinion congruence). This expectation is fueled by both the selection and the learning mechanism. On the one hand, as candidates originate mostly from a party’s base, if a party’s base disagrees with the party line, aspiring candidates are more likely to share this disagreement. This gives party leaderships fewer opportunities to select congruent candidates. On the other hand, if many of the party’s voters have a different policy preference, candidates are more likely to learn about this leadership-voter incongruence during the campaign. Candidates could change their policy views in order to bring them in line with the voters they pledge to represent. Because the hypothesis relates to both mechanisms, we test it in a model that includes all selection (hypothesis one and two) and learning (hypothesis three and four) variables. The result is shown in model 3 in Table 2.
It is clear from the results that leadership-voter opinion congruence has a strong and positive relation with leadership-candidate opinion congruence. When none of its voters support a party’s position, a party candidate has a 34 percent likelihood of sharing the party’s position. However, when a party’s policy position received the support of all its voters, this likelihood increases to 90 percent. This clearly supports hypothesis six. It also shows that leadership-candidate opinion congruence cannot be viewed in isolation, but should also be considered in light of how well a party’s position resonates with other actors, such as a party’s voters.

If we look at the control variables, we see that leadership candidate congruence decreases in the months after the campaign. This may due to some parties entering government coalitions, which can cause parties to abandon certain positions. Also, leadership-candidate congruence seems to be lower for centrists parties than for extreme parties. The other control variables do not show a consistent pattern across the three models.

**Conclusion and discussion**

Previous studies often focused on the extent to which parties behave as unitary actors and the various pathways through which this unity is achieved. While we thus know what the components are inside the black box of party unity, we have yet to uncover when and where parties need to rely on the various pathways. The present study contributes to the literature by studying leadership-candidate opinion congruence, the agreement between the policy preferences of the party leadership and their candidates. Leadership-candidate congruence is the pathway to party unity that precedes all others.

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10 A full picture of the relation between leadership-voter congruence and leadership-candidate congruence is given in Figure A2 in the appendix.

11 Party dummies are not reported in Table 2, but can be requested from the authors.
After all, party leaderships need not rely on coercion or a sense of loyalty when candidates already share their stances. By studying the congruence between candidates and their party leadership, we provide insights into when parties must rely on sanctions and loyalty; when agreement breaks down and is insufficient to ensure unity.

Our analyses show that leadership-candidate opinion congruence is reached through two different mechanisms: selection and learning. With regard to selection, the party leadership will be more prone to select candidates that are in agreement with the official party line. However, the pool of high congruent candidates is limited and candidates will not be congruent on all issues. Consequently, it are especially candidates on a realistic ballot list position (those who likely make it in parliament) who are more congruent. Moreover, congruence will be highest on owned issues for which it is more important that that the party stays ‘on message’ (Norris et al 1999). Candidates may also become more congruent as they learn about their party’s position. This can happen in short term, by the information they receive during the campaign, or in long term, due to their involvement in the party. Finally, we find that leadership-candidate congruence is dependent on whether voters support the party issue position. Here the mechanisms of selection and learning come together. On the one hand, if voters disagree with the party’s position, then the leadership is less likely to find a candidate who does agree with it. On the other, candidates learn about voters’ positions during the campaign and can choose to adjust their own position accordingly.

However, this study is not without its shortcomings. The main limitation is that, while the found results are most likely explained by selection and learning, the available data does not allow to directly measure selection and learning effects. We would need preference data on both aspiring candidates and actual candidates, on multiple
occasions during an electoral campaign to do so. However, this is nearly impossible due to the saturated agendas of candidates during a campaign. The time it took to gather the data used in this study makes clear that a multiple wave design would not have been feasible. Nevertheless, future research should seek to develop new methods to go beyond cross-sectional surveys in order to examine the mechanisms for which we find evidence in this study.

In addition, our results may be more applicable to proportional multiparty system. Our findings for Belgium will hold in many of the Western European multi-party systems. Yet, in more personalized systems, such as the Single Member District systems in the UK and the US, congruence is likely to be lower. In these systems there are less effective parties for which candidates can run, resulting in more fractions within the party and thus a higher likelihood to disagree with the party on certain issues. Also, candidates have to keep both their party as well as their constituency satisfied. Consequently, parties may need to rely more on disciplinary measures instead of opinion congruence. In addition, the selection mechanism is likely to be even stronger in these systems, considering the fact that there is only one candidate in a district, whereas the learning mechanism is likely to have less of an effect, because there are only a few candidates of whom it is unlikely that they are not aware of the party’s policy position. Next to the electoral system, also the candidate selection procedure will impact the strength of the selection mechanism. In general, most European countries and parties still have selection procedures in which the (local) party leadership exerts the most influence, with members usually only having a say in the final stage or not at all. Nevertheless, examples can be found where party members had full or a dominant influence on the composition of the ballot, such as the mayor Israeli parties in the 1990’s and a number
of Danish parties (Hazan & Rahat, 2010). We can assume that with more open selection procedures more incongruent candidates will be placed on a realistic position. However, in order to investigate how these differences in electoral systems and candidate selection procedures impact the mechanisms of leadership-candidate opinion congruence exactly, a comparative design is necessary in future research.

Finally, one could argue that there is a possible third mechanism that could increase leadership-candidate opinion congruence. Over the course of the electoral cycle those candidates that are in disagreement with the party leadership, may leave the party. This exit mechanism could be an additional reason why those who have been involved for a longer time in the party are more congruent as the members with conflicting preferences already left. Unfortunately, because lacking longitudinal data, we could not test this third mechanism.

Despite these limitations and questions for further research our study finds that already in the earliest stage of the election cycle parties guarantee that their candidates are congruent, increasing party unity in parliament and reducing their need to rely on disciplinary measure and party loyalty. While this congruence underlies assumptions of the Responsible Party Model it does raise the question what this means for the deliberative process within the party. Or to quote Lippmann (1932, 51): ‘Where all think alike, no one thinks very much’.
References


Table 1: Descriptives of all the variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership-candidate opinion congruence</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistic position</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue ownership</td>
<td>16.01</td>
<td>21.32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>93.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign learning</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party socialization</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership-voter opinion congruence</td>
<td>59.38</td>
<td>23.48</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Months after the election</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>9.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey method (paper vs digital)</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political level (regional vs national)</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue saliency</td>
<td>7.15</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>8.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party chair</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior mandate</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valance (voters)</td>
<td>43.38</td>
<td>25.91</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valance (candidates)</td>
<td>39.91</td>
<td>31.23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valance (parties)</td>
<td>54.39</td>
<td>28.39</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Analyses of leadership-candidate congruence opinion congruence *(marginal effects)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1: Selection model</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 2: Learning model</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1: Total model</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M.E.</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>M.E.</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistic position</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>[3.40%]</td>
<td>(0.01) **</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>[3.45%]</td>
<td>(0.01) **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue ownership</td>
<td>0.10 [16.08%]</td>
<td>(0.01) ***</td>
<td>0.03 [2.66%]</td>
<td>(0.01) ***</td>
<td>0.07 [12.91%]</td>
<td>(0.01) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign learning</td>
<td>0.03 [3.37%]</td>
<td>(0.01) ***</td>
<td>0.03 [3.40%]</td>
<td>(0.01) ***</td>
<td>0.03 [3.40%]</td>
<td>(0.01) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party socialization</td>
<td>0.17 [35.36%]</td>
<td>(0.01) ***</td>
<td>-0.02 [-3.25%]</td>
<td>(0.01) *</td>
<td>-0.02 [-3.25%]</td>
<td>(0.01) *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership-voter opinion congruence</td>
<td>-0.02 [-3.49%]</td>
<td>(0.01) *</td>
<td>-0.02 [-3.46%]</td>
<td>(0.01) *</td>
<td>-0.02 [-3.46%]</td>
<td>(0.01) *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Months after the election</td>
<td>-0.01 [-1.41%]</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>-0.01 [-1.51%]</td>
<td>(0.01) *</td>
<td>-0.02 [-1.52%]</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper compared to digital survey method</td>
<td>0.00 [-0.14%]</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>0.00 [-0.21%]</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>0.00 [-0.40%]</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional compared to federal candidates</td>
<td>-0.02 [-1.05%]</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>0.01 [1.11%]</td>
<td>(0.01) *</td>
<td>0.01 [1.09%]</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue saliency</td>
<td>0.03 [5.61%]</td>
<td>(0.01) **</td>
<td>0.03 [6.19%]</td>
<td>(0.01) **</td>
<td>-0.03 [-5.87%]</td>
<td>(0.01) **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party chair</td>
<td>0.28 [47.83%]</td>
<td>(0.01) ***</td>
<td>0.28 [48.82%]</td>
<td>(0.01) ***</td>
<td>0.22 [39.54%]</td>
<td>(0.01) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior mandate</td>
<td>0.05 [7.31%]</td>
<td>(0.01) ***</td>
<td>0.04 [6.85%]</td>
<td>(0.01) **</td>
<td>-0.01 [-2.30%]</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Marginal effects of multilevel logistic regression model with standardized IVs (standardized using Gelman’s (2008) approach; coefficients reported in the appendix); square brackets report effect of difference between maximum and minimum value of the unstandardized IVs on DV.
Figure 1: A histogram of leadership-candidate of opinion congruence