

# Electoral Volatility and Party Decline in Western Democracies: 1970–1995

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In 1970, Richard Rose and Derek Urwin published a seminal piece on the stability of party support in Western democracies, 'Persistence and Change in Western Party Systems Since 1945'. Everywhere they looked, established parties seemed to reflect stability rather than change, lending credence to the notion that party systems were 'frozen'. Numerous subsequent studies, however, have produced mixed results. Part of what seems to be fueling this debate lies in the disparate measures researchers use to gauge stability. In this update of Rose and Urwin's study, I address the issue of comparable results by maintaining the same data source and methods they used to gauge the stability of party support, extending the study to the present. The results indicate that party system instability is on the rise throughout much of the West since 1970, with statistically significant increases seen in Scandinavia and across all regions combined. Furthermore, the parties which seem to be experiencing the most change are not only the newest parties – as the frozen cleavages thesis might predict – but also those parties formed during the interwar period, the large majority of which showed much greater stability in 1970.

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An ongoing debate in political science focuses on the degree to which democratic party systems are stable. One camp of authors argues that political cleavages endure, and thus party systems show few significant signs of increased instability over the past few decades (Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995; Mair, 1993; 1997), while another group of authors argues that increasing levels of electoral volatility and declining partisan affiliation signal the weakening of political cleavages and growing party system instability (Crewe and Denver, 1985; Dalton *et al.*, 1984; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Franklin *et al.*, 1992; Maguire, 1983; Pedersen, 1983). This research note attempts to shed light on this debate by updating Richard Rose and Derek Urwin's seminal 1970 study of Western party systems, a study which has served for many as a baseline for measuring party system change.

Because the debate seems to be fueled in part by the contrasting methodologies researchers have used to gauge the magnitude and direction of party system change, the strength of this study lies in its ability to produce readily comparable results by updating an old standard in the literature. Using the same methodology, I compare Rose and Urwin's results of party system stability from 1945 to 1970 with new results from 1970 to 1995 for the same countries. This extends the analysis beyond other recent studies of party system stability, and because the method I use here is identical to Rose and Urwin's, any change I find cannot be due to measurement artifacts.



The results of the analysis indicate that, when compared to the previous 25-year period, party system instability is rising throughout the West.<sup>1</sup> Mean measures of volatility, elasticity and variability of party support are on the rise in the overwhelming majority of countries (15 out of 19 are up for the first two measures, 13 out of 19 are up on variability), and this evidence of change remains strong even when the data are aggregated regionally. Anglo-America, Continent and Scandinavia, the three regions Rose and Urwin use to categorize the nineteen countries, have all seen a rise in instability since 1970, with statistically significant increases appearing in Scandinavia and across all regions and parties combined. What explains this shift?

One potential explanation for this rise in instability may be the emergence of New Politics (NP) parties who began competing and winning seats throughout the West in the mid-1980s by promoting issues that cross-cut the more traditional political cleavages of society.<sup>2</sup> There may be some truth to this explanation, as the results indicate that the electoral success of the newest parties has also made them the most volatile – but NP parties are also the smallest parties and in any given region they are greatly outnumbered by the other kinds of parties.

Instead, it seems as though more of the increase in instability is coming from some of the older parties, as statistically significant increases in the volatility of Interwar parties, those founded between the two world wars, have resulted in a general decline in their electoral strength in the vast majority of the countries included in this study. Down too is the relative strength of Old parties which, although they remain remarkably stable over the new period and even show a decrease in electoral volatility, are nonetheless experiencing a downturn in their electoral strength since 1970.

The evidence of change is strong, but these results should not be seen as definitive proof that the political cleavages of old have been replaced, even in part, by newer cleavages. NP parties remain small even though they are trending upward in strength, and New parties, which formed many years after party systems allegedly froze, are today just as likely to lose ground from election to election as they are to gain it. Before proceeding to the results, I begin with a brief discussion of the debate over party system stability, and an overview of the measures used in this study to gauge change in it.

### Constancy and Change

The traditional approach to measuring party system stability is best identified with Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) study of party systems and voter alignments, which tracked the origins of party systems back to the cleavages spawned by the national and industrial revolutions. Lipset and Rokkan argue that once these cleavages became integrated into the party systems of the early twentieth century, this produced a stable system of party competition and voter choice. In their

oft-cited conclusion, they claimed that the 'party systems of the 1960s reflect, with few but significant exceptions, the cleavage structures of the 1920s' (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967, p. 50).

Lipset and Rokkan's early assessments were substantiated by other electoral scholars. In 1970, Rose and Urwin published a seminal piece on the stability of party systems, 'Persistence and Change in Western Party Systems Since 1945'. Their findings, that Western parties were largely stable and the oldest parties were the least volatile of all, largely supported Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan's 'frozen cleavages' thesis that little had changed in Western party systems over the post-war period.

By the end of the 1970s, however, some scholars noticed a shift in the stability of voter alignments that underlay the Lipset/Rokkan thesis (Crewe and Denver, 1985; Dalton *et al.*, 1984; Franklin *et al.*, 1992; Maguire, 1983; Pedersen, 1983). This group of scholars stressed that the system of frozen party cleavages is in fact *thawing*, producing greater volatility and fluidity in contemporary party systems. Dalton and his colleagues drew attention to these changes, stating that 'Electoral alignments are weakening, and party systems are experiencing increased fragmentation and electoral volatility. ... Virtually everywhere among the industrialized democracies, the old order is crumbling' (Dalton *et al.*, 1984). Similarly, Franklin *et al.* (1992) found that political cleavages are becoming more irrelevant to party success and, in some cases, this irrelevance was probably already well under way by 1960.

This debate has continued to the present. Peter Mair finds in his 1997 book, *Party System Change*, that 'The electoral balance now is not that substantially different from that of thirty years ago, and, in general, electorates are not now substantially more volatile than once they were' (Mair, 1997, p. 90). Still, Russell Dalton and Martin Wattenberg (2000) argue, in *Parties without Partisans*, that the strength of partisan ties has weakened in 17 of the 19 nations in their study, suggesting a more general de-alignment inconsistent with the Lipset/Rokkan thesis.

Part of the difficulty in reaching a consensus on party system change seems to stem from the fact that researchers have yet to agree on a common way of operationalizing it.<sup>3</sup> The ongoing debate over party system stability is also a debate over methodology, and the lack of a common measure gauging party system stability has resulted in a lack of comparability across studies and time. The focus of this research is to enhance comparability by updating one of the first studies to test the frozen cleavages hypothesis – Rose and Urwin's analysis of Western party systems from 1945 to 1970 – by extending their analysis to the present.

This is not to say that the methods Rose and Urwin use and which I replicate here are more suitable for gauging change than others, or that their results and my update are above critique. On the contrary, Peter Mair levies some of the strongest

criticism against the use of aggregate volatility data to gauge party system stability when he states, 'For while the various indices of aggregate electoral change may tell us a great deal about electoral stability/instability in general, they appear to tell us little about the persistence/decay of cleavages' (Mair, 1997, p. 66).<sup>4</sup> Still, the purpose of this research is not to validate any particular methodology, but rather to produce cumulative results that may shed light on the current debate, and by updating earlier studies, we can learn if change has occurred, and in what direction.

Rose and Urwin analyze party system stability through the use of four main indicators, *electoral volatility*, *elasticity*, *variability* and *persistence of party support*. They apply these indicators to measure fluctuations in party support across 92 parties in 19 democracies,<sup>5</sup> and aggregate their findings to suggest general trends for three regions, Anglo-America, Scandinavia and Continental countries, and for each of the regions' constituent party systems.<sup>6</sup>

Their first indicator, electoral volatility, is calculated by regressing a party's share of the popular vote against the period of time during which the party contested elections.<sup>7</sup> The resultant slope coefficient of these individual regressions, 92 in all representing one for each party, denotes a *per annum* change in a given party's vote share. This measure assesses whether there are systematic long-term trends in each party's support, with positive coefficients indicating the party gained strength over time, and negative slopes indicating a loss of strength.

Their second measure, elasticity of party support, is calculated as the percentage difference between a given party's best and worst electoral performances. To use their analogy, if we consider a single party to be a swinging pendulum, the velocity of that pendulum, both its speed and direction, could represent electoral volatility, while the distance between the highest points on either side of the pendulum would represent the elasticity of the party's support. Very stable parties should show low elasticity as their vote share from election to election should be more consistent.

Rose and Urwin's third indicator for measuring system stability is variability of party support, measured as the standard deviation of the range of a party's performances. If we took snapshots of the pendulum swinging through its arc during the 25-year time period, variability of party support tells us where on the arc in those snapshots we would most likely find the pendulum. High variability of support is an indicator of less stability because it means that a party's vote share fluctuates more widely from its mean than it does for more stable parties.

Finally, Rose and Urwin measure whether a party's gains and losses are relatively steady or are instead increasingly erratic by examining the standard error produced when they regress the party's vote shares against time. Parties that are increasingly erratic will have larger deviations from the vote share predicted by their trend lines, while the less erratic, more stable parties will have smaller standard errors (see Rose and Urwin, 1970, for a more detailed discussion of these measures).

The following analyses summarize the trends in party system stability in Western democracies since 1945 by comparing Rose and Urwin's findings with more recent data on the same indicators from 1970 to 1995.

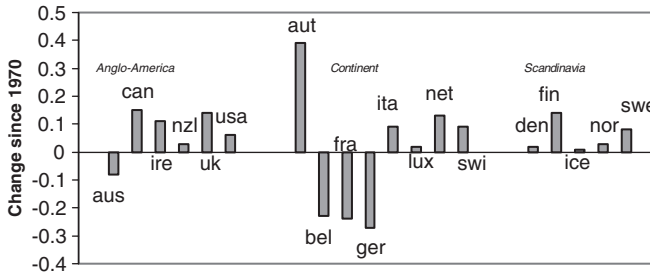
### Stability Interrupted?

Rose and Urwin's investigation of party trends during the post-war period (1945–70) revealed that parties and party systems were stable. Electoral volatility across all parties was low with the median party registering an insignificant *per annum* trend of 0.15 percent (their threshold for significance is 0.25 percent *per annum*), and with more than two-thirds of all parties showing similarly low volatility. Elasticity and variability of party support were also low during the period, with the median party's vote ranging just 7 percent across the 25 years and showing just a 2.6 percent deviation from the mean.

At the country level, the cumulative volatility of parties in each system, the total percentage of votes that would shift across the period summed across parties, led Rose and Urwin to categorize just 6 of the 19 countries as having 'high trends' of 25 percent or more of the vote shifting during the 25-year period. Similarly, none of the regional trends showed median volatility levels close to the  $\pm 0.25$  percent *per annum* threshold of significance, with Anglo-America registering a volatility score of 0.20, and Continent and Scandinavia registering trends of 0.15 and 0.14 percent per annum, respectively. All of this evidence led Rose and Urwin to conclude, 'whatever index of change is used ... the picture is the same: the electoral strength of most parties in Western nations since the war had changed very little from election to election, from decade to decade, or within the lifespan of a generation' (Rose and Urwin, 1970, p. 295).

Twenty-five years later, much has changed. Figure 1 illustrates the increase in average volatility for parties in each country since Rose and Urwin's study. Since 1970, mean volatility has increased in 15 of the 19 countries under study, and of the 4 where volatility is down, 3 of these were the most volatile countries in Rose and Urwin's study (Belgium and Germany are now showing insignificant trends; France is still highly volatile). Cumulative trends, the total percentage of votes fluctuating over the period, although not reported in this figure, are also up for 13 of 19 countries, and the previously low-trend party systems of Italy, Sweden, Canada, Finland, Austria and the UK have now joined the high-trend ranks by having more than 25 percent of their vote shift over the period (while Germany and Norway have just barely slid out to around 23 percent).

Elasticity and variability of party support are also up at the country level (15 out of 19 countries have seen their mean elasticity scores increase and 13 out of 19 countries have seen similar increase in variability. More generally, all of these measures show evidence of increase at the regional level, the primary level of

**Figure 1: Change in Mean Absolute Party Volatility by Country**

Notes: Bars represent the change in mean absolute volatility in each country across the two time periods. Bars above the x-axis mean that the parties in that country are on average more volatile than they were in the previous time period.

analysis on which Rose and Urwin made comparisons. Table 1 reports the change in volatility, elasticity and variability scores for each of the three regions. As the table illustrates, every region has seen an increase in its median volatility measure since 1970.<sup>8</sup> Anglo-America has seen its median volatility rise from the period high but insignificant trend of 0.20 percent *per annum* to a new high and now significant trend of 0.26 percent *per annum*. Scandinavia, up 0.07 percent to 0.21 percent *per annum*, and Continent, up 0.08 percent to 0.23 percent *per annum*, have also seen a rise in median volatility, placing them much closer now to having their median parties register significant volatility trends. When combining all countries and parties, the median party's volatility is now much closer to evidencing a significant trend, up from 0.15 percent *per annum* in 1970 to a new high of 0.22 percent. This means that the median party in 1995 has seen its net vote share either increase or decrease by nearly 2 percent more over this period than it did from 1945 to 1970. While the increases in volatility do not reach the threshold of statistical significance when compared to 1970 levels, the direction is uniformly toward greater volatility in each region and in nearly every country.

Elasticity and variability of party support are also up at the regional level over the second time period. The median Scandinavian party now sees its vote share range by 3.5 percent more than it did in 1970, and its electoral showings are becoming increasingly variable from election to election. Both of these increases are statistically significant. In Anglo-America, although neither increase is statistically significant, the median party's vote range for the period is now up by 4 percent, and its variability has increased by almost 1 percent. Only the Continent region shows a decline in instability on these two measures, down more than 1 percent on elasticity and barely down by 0.2 percent on variability.

Part of the reason why the Continent region shows decreases in these measures is because it includes several of the most volatile countries from the previous

Table 1: Summary of Stability Measures by Region and Period

Stability measure	Anglo-American nations			Scandinavian nations			Continental nations			All regions		
	1945-70 (N)	1970-95 (N)	Change (sig)	1945-70 (N)	1970-95 (N)	Change (sig)	1945-70 (N)	1970-95 (N)	Change (sig)	1945-70 (N)	1970-95 (N)	Change (sig)
Median volatility	0.20% (21)	0.26% (22)	+0.06% (0.827)	0.14% (30)	0.21% (36)	+0.07% (0.246)	0.15% (41)	0.23% (44)	+0.08% (0.501)	0.15% (92)	0.22% (102)	+0.07% (0.216)
Median elasticity	8.4% (21)	12.4% (22)	+4.0% (0.109)	5.3% (30)	8.8% (36)	+3.5%*** (0.001)	7.8% (41)	6.6% (44)	-1.2% (0.689)	7.0% (92)	8.4% (102)	+1.4%* (0.042)
Median variability	3.1% (21)	4.0% (22)	+0.9% (0.177)	2.0% (30)	3.3% (36)	+1.3%*** (0.001)	2.8% (41)	2.6% (44)	-0.2% (0.940)	2.6% (92)	3.2% (102)	+0.6%* (0.021)

Note: Data used in this piece were taken from Mackie and Rose (1991), from the online Election Results Archive hosted by the Center for Democratic Performance at the State University of New York – Binghamton and from Rose and Urwin (1970). Two-tailed significance levels for differences between medians calculated using Wilcoxon Mann-Whitney U test: \* = significant at  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* = significant at  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* = significant at  $p < 0.001$ .

period, two of which (Germany and France) show more stability in this period only when compared to the even wider fluctuation in votes occurring there after the close of the Second World War and the formation of new party systems (Rose and Urwin, 1970, pp. 304–6). Although these party systems began consolidating by the end of Rose and Urwin's time period, the overall level of instability was high, and so anything but significant drops in instability in this period should be taken as a very weak sign of stability, at best. Despite this slight contrary trend in the Continent region, overall, elasticity and variability are both up since 1970, and the change is statistically significant in both cases. Parties' fortunes are less predictable today than they were in 1970, and their patterns of support now more erratic than before.

A sign of just how erratic parties have become is that their support is less persistent today than before. Rose and Urwin test whether the parties in the three regions are relatively persistent in their support by measuring the standard error produced by the party-specific trend lines, arguing that low standard errors would be a sign of a relatively steady party whose vote share followed a stable pattern (Rose and Urwin, 1970, p. 294). Twenty-five years later, will the vote shares of parties be easier or more difficult to predict?

One way to test this is to look for changes in the predictive strength of parties' trend lines since Rose and Urwin's study. To do this, I plot the residual distances between parties' actual vote shares and the ones predicted by their trend lines against time.<sup>9</sup> If parties are indeed less stable today, the residuals should be larger now than they were from 1945 to 1970, and when regressed against time the slope measuring the magnitude of these fluctuations in each region should be steeper for the combined period than from 1945 to 1970 (see Table 2).

From 1945 to 1970, the residual distances between the predicted and actual vote shares of parties across all of the regions were decreasing with a statistically insignificant slope of  $-0.014$ . After adding the second time period to the analysis however, the slope changes direction *and* becomes significant. Over the 50-year period, parties' electoral fortunes have become increasingly unpredictable each year, with a now statistically significant positive slope of  $0.008$ .

This trend is shared by all three regions as well. In Anglo-America, the addition of the second time period reverses the stabilizing trend from 1945 to 1970 ( $-0.005$ ) to a positive, though statistically insignificant, slope of  $0.018$ . In Scandinavia, the trend goes from  $-0.007$  during Rose and Urwin's period to a statistically significant slope of  $0.022$  for the 50-year period. Finally, in the Continent countries, although the slope is still negative, meaning that over the 50-year period party support has become more stable than it was when several of the party systems were first formed in 1945, the now insignificant combined period slope of  $-0.007$  represents a strong interruption of what had been a significant stabilizing trend throughout Rose and Urwin's period ( $-0.031$ ).

This evidence of increasingly erratic party fortunes, combined with the other measures of party instability like increased volatility, elasticity and variability of

**Table 2: Effect of the Second Time Period on the Persistence of Party Support Across Regions**

Change in residuals	Anglo-America		Scandinavia		Continental		All regions	
	1945-70	1945-95	1945-70	1945-95	1945-70	1945-95	1945-70	1945-95
Constant (sig)	12.302 (0.820)	-31.916 (0.110)	14.138 (0.536)	-42.601*** (0.000)	63.127* (0.041)	14.675 (0.142)	29.117 (0.154)	-14.561* (0.046)
Slope (sig)	-0.005 (0.856)	0.018 (0.083)	-0.007 (0.572)	0.022*** (0.000)	-0.031* (0.047)	-0.007 (0.193)	-0.014 (0.181)	0.008* (0.024)

Note: Slope and Constant values represent results of an OLS regression pitting residual distances for each party between expected and actual vote shares against time. Significance levels denoted by asterisks as follows: \* = significant at  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* = significant at  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* = significant at  $p < 0.001$ .

party support, provide clear evidence that Western party systems have seen a decrease in party system stability since Rose and Urwin studied them in 1970. What explains this reversal?

### New Parties, Old Cleavages

The Lipset/Rokkan thesis holds that the expansion of mass suffrage in the 1920s meant the entrenchment of the existing parties and their established voting blocs. If the endurance of these political cleavages determines which parties persist, testing for instability by party age could help explain where the greatest changes are occurring, and by association, serve as a broad-stroke test for determining whether the cleavages of old are indeed frozen.<sup>10</sup>

Rose and Urwin test this assumption by pitting the age of a party (when the party was founded) against party volatility. Their findings, that 'Old' parties in 1970 were less likely to show negative trends than were parties established later, mostly corroborated Lipset and Rokkan's frozen cleavages thesis, which would predict that the greatest losses will be felt by newer parties who were not around when the electorate expanded (Rose and Urwin, 1970, pp. 296–7). In fact, since Interwar parties also appeared less likely than New parties to show significant down trends, party age seemed to be a plausible determinant of party stability. Could the addition of many more New and NP parties in the second period explain the increase in party system instability?

The answer seems to be both 'yes' and 'no'. Table 3 reports the mean volatility measures of Old, Interwar, New and New + NP parties over the second period, and compares them with identical measures from Rose and Urwin's analysis. As Table 3 illustrates, a good deal of the volatility comes from the NP parties, who increase the rise in volatility of New parties since 1970 when they are included in the combined category, and the most stable parties are, once again, the Old parties, who have actually seen a drop in their median volatility since 1970. Does this mean that political cleavages are frozen? Not exactly. First, despite their drop in volatility, Old parties are becoming more erratic, showing increases in variability and elasticity of party support. An analysis of the residuals created by party trend lines controlling for party age (not shown here), confirms this as the 25 additional years' worth of elections has produced a statistically significant positive slope, both for Old parties (+0.013\*,  $p = 0.047$ ) and for Interwar parties (+0.021\*\*\*,  $p = 0.000$ ), reversing the previous trends of persistence on both accounts.

Second, while NP parties show the highest levels of volatility for the period (alone their volatility is 0.29), the Interwar parties are close behind, having changed the most since 1970 and clearly outpacing the New parties. As opposed to the previous period, Interwar parties have seen a statistically significant increase in their median volatility measure in this period, and the magnitude of the trend

Table 3: Summary of Stability Measures by Party Age and Time Period

Stability measure	Old parties			Interwar parties			New parties			New + NP parties		
	1945-70 (N)	1970-95 (N)	Change (sig)	1945-70 (N)	1970-95 (N)	Change (sig)	1945-70 (N)	1970-95 (N)	Change (sig)	1970-95 (N)	Change (sig)	
Median volatility	0.19% (39)	0.15% (39)	-0.04% (0.901)	0.19% (30)	0.27% (23)	+0.08%* (0.031)	0.18% (23)	0.23% (23)	+0.05% (0.717)	0.25 (40)	+0.07% (0.847)	
Median elasticity	8.0% (39)	10.2% (39)	+2.2% (0.197)	5.8% (30)	11.5% (23)	+5.7%** (0.007)	7.0% (23)	7.7% (23)	+0.7% (0.460)	6.7% (40)	-0.3% (0.830)	
Median variability	2.7% (39)	3.5% (39)	+0.8% (0.330)	2.0% (30)	3.5% (23)	+1.5%** (0.002)	2.6% (23)	2.7% (23)	+0.1% (0.538)	2.7 (40)	+0.1% (0.679)	

Note: Data used in this piece were taken from Mackie and Rose (1991), from the online Election Results Archive hosted by the Center for Democratic Performance at the State University of New York - Binghamton and from Rose and Urwin (1970). Two-tailed significance levels for differences between medians calculated using Wilcoxon Mann-Whitney U test. \* = significant at  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* = significant at  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* = significant at  $p < 0.001$ . Party Age codes: Old = pre-1914; Interwar = 1914-1939; New = after 1939; NP = after 1970 and party platform suggests some focus on new politics.

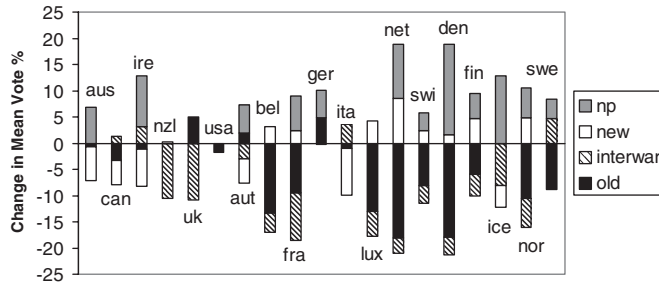
is now significant by Rose and Urwin's original standard of  $\pm 0.25$  percent *per annum*. Controlling for regional effects produces a similarly strong, though insignificant decline in the Continent region, along with very strong and significant declines in Anglo-America, in Scandinavia and when all regions are combined.

Finally, New parties, which had been the most volatile in the preceding period, are now among the more stable. Evidence from the residual analysis shows that these parties are becoming less erratic despite some small increases in other measures of instability and, for the 50-year period, they are the only parties with negative (stabilizing) persistence trends over time. Thus, while we should not overlook the contribution of NP parties to the increased instability of Western party systems, because Interwar parties are larger on average than either NP or New parties, it is these parties founded between 1914 and 1939 that are most likely driving the majority of the increase in party system instability throughout the West. Furthermore, because the newer parties seem to be trending in the opposite direction from the older parties, it is difficult to accept any notion that cleavages are frozen.

Perhaps even more indicative of change in party systems than increased volatility and erratic vote swings is a uniform decline in a party's strength. If entrenched political cleavages benefit the parties that were established at the time of their entrenchment, then we should expect that if the political cleavages of the 1920s are frozen, then the party fortunes of the newest parties will likely show the greatest evidence of decline. Interestingly, this is not the case. More than half of the NP parties registering significant trends during the second period, 7 of 11, have seen that increasing electoral volatility translate into electoral gains. By contrast, nearly every Interwar party manifesting a significant trend during the period is losing support – 11 out of 13 are down since 1970.<sup>11</sup> Old parties too have seen near-uniform decline, with a majority of them showing negative trends since 1970, while New parties produce a more mixed profile of change.

Figure 2 produces a more systematic look at the changing fortunes of Western parties in each of the nineteen countries, by stacking the actual gains and losses of Old, Interwar, New and NP parties in terms of the proportion of the total electorate the parties represented in 1970 versus 1995.<sup>12</sup> As Figure 2 illustrates, Old and Interwar parties have seen the greatest decline in their mean vote shares since 1970 – in 14 of 19 countries, Old parties now represent less of the electorate than they did in 1970 as their size means even small down trends in their vote shares will translate into real losses over the period. Similarly, Interwar parties show evidence of decline in their overall strength in 12 of 19 countries. By contrast, New parties are somewhat more mixed in what their small increase in volatility has meant to their overall strength (8 up and 6 down) and NP parties show up in Figure 2 as positive everywhere simply because there were no NP parties in 1970. This of course does not mean that they are all increasing their vote shares *within* the period, but including them

**Figure 2: Change since 1970 in the Amount of the Electorate Accounted for by Old, Interwar, New and NP Parties**



*Notes: Bars represent the difference between the mean vote shares of the Old, Interwar, New and NP parties across the two time periods. Increases fall above the x-axis and decreases below. Values are stacked such that the value of the next party should be measured from the end point of the previous. Values above and below the x-axis will not necessarily add up to zero because not all of the parties gaining votes in the time period are included in this study (many are too small).*

in this way gives us some idea where NP parties are strongest, and whether more established parties seem to be losing ground at the same time and in the same places they are gaining.<sup>13</sup>

From this chart, it is quickly evident that the most stable region in 1970, and the one which has seen the most significant increases in instability since, Scandinavia, has also seen the greatest shift in the strength of Old and Interwar parties downward, and the greatest shift up in New and NP party shares. Additionally, although the incorporation of NP parties here is less uniform, and the upward trend of New parties less evident, the Continent region has also seen a small shift down in the strength of Old and Interwar parties. By contrast, there seems to be no discernible trend in Anglo-America hinting at the growing relevance of newer parties, as in Australia and Ireland New party losses are seen at the same time as NP gains, and elsewhere in Canada, New Zealand, USA and the UK, overall net losses in the portion of the electorate represented by Old, Interwar, New and NP parties appearing in either the Rose and Urwin study or this one signal that these party systems are becoming more fractionalized. In the end, it may be the electoral design in some of the Anglo-American countries that limits the potential of newer parties, especially if cleavages really are less frozen than they once appeared to be.

## Conclusions

The results of this updated study are clear, even if the implications are not. Rose and Urwin found that from 1945 to 1970 their indicators of party instability showed few signs of decline in Western party systems, painting a consistently stable picture of party support. Twenty-five years later, the data point to a general

increase on nearly every indicator of party instability in Anglo-America and in Scandinavia, where the proof of change is strongest. Only in the Continent region do we see any pattern of stability reminiscent of the 1950s and 60s, and even there the second 25-year period has seen the strength of that trend erode as well. Throughout the West, party fortunes are becoming less predictable, and their fluctuations from election to election are now more erratic.

Does this mean cleavages are no longer frozen? In 1970, Old parties were the most stable. Today they remain remarkably unchanged and very nearly as strong in number and size. Old parties are still the dominant players in Western party systems, and if the test of party system stability is whether the oldest parties endure despite the change we find all around them, then, clearly, Western party systems *are* frozen. If on the other hand, we examine the entire constellation of parties and the competition between them, we will see change nearly everywhere that bespeaks a growing instability. The Interwar parties of the 1920s and 30s, which were among the most stable in 1970, have become as unstable today as the NP parties of the 1980s and 90s, and the New parties of the 1940s and 50s are beginning to rival the stability of Old parties, which predate them by half a century.

And, the greatest change may still be coming. Throughout the West, New Politics parties have had success running campaigns that cross-cut traditional political cleavages, running on issues of environmentalism, humanitarianism and sometimes even on nationalism and xenophobia. And they are succeeding. NP parties like the Greens in Germany and the National Front in France have steadily increased their stake in most party systems and managed to survive while many other established parties have failed. In the 25 years following Rose and Urwin's study, 17 NP parties emerged in Western party systems and enjoyed some modicum of sustained success, and in the same period, nearly a quarter (7) of the much older and longer-established Interwar parties from 1970 have either disbanded or fallen into relative obscurity. Old parties may still be dominant, but the headway NP parties have made throughout most of the West, combined with the precipitous decline of the Interwar parties and the growing stability of New parties since 1970, belies the notion that party systems are actually frozen.

Future research should seek to explain with comparable methods whether the magnitude of change we see here over this 50-year period among Interwar parties especially, as well as among the New and NP parties more generally, are unique shifts in instability or are more minor when viewed in greater historical context, as Mair contends (1997, p. 80). Doing so would provide valuable insight as to what these changes mean for the entrenchment of parties that formed after Western party systems were alleged to have frozen. Additionally, as it seems apparent that electoral design has contributed to the continued dominance of Old parties throughout much of the Anglo-American region, additional research should also be conducted to determine whether electoral design holds some explanatory value for the decline of Interwar parties and the slight stabilizing trend we see taking shape there for New parties.

Appendix: Party and Country Data<sup>†</sup> for 1970–1995

<i>Country</i> <i>years (elections)</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Per annum</i>	<i>Elasticity</i> <i>(%V)</i>	<i>Standard</i> <i>deviation</i>	<i>Party age</i>
<b>Anglo-American countries</b>					
Australia 21 (10)	<b>Labour</b>	-0.15	10.2	3.8	Old
	<b>Country</b>	-0.09	4.3	1.4	New
	<b>Liberals</b>	-0.04	9.8	2.7	New
	<b>Dem Liberal</b>	-0.28	5.1	1.8	New
	<b>Aus Democrats</b>	-0.10	7.5	2.6	NP
Canada 21 (7)	<b>Conservatives</b>	-0.39	34.0	10.5	Old
	<b>Liberals</b>	-0.25	16.3	6.0	Old
	<b>New Dem CCF</b>	-0.27	13.5	4.6	Interwar
	<b>Social Credit</b>	-0.58	7.5	3.0	Interwar
Ireland 19 (8)	<b>Irish Labour</b>	0.08	12.9	3.9	Old
	<b>Fianna Fáil</b>	-0.40	11.5	3.3	Interwar
	<b>Fine Gael</b>	-0.52	14.7	5.3	Interwar
	<b>Workers' Party</b>	0.09	4.3	1.5	NP
New Zealand 21 (8)	<b>Progressive Dem</b>	-1.33	7.1	3.9	NP
	<b>Labour</b>	-0.36	13.7	5.2	Interwar
	<b>National</b>	-0.13	13.2	5.0	Interwar
United Kingdom 25 (8)	<b>Social Credit</b>	-0.26	19.0	7.0	New
	<b>Conservatives</b>	0.04	10.6	3.6	Old
	<b>Liberals</b>	0.13	11.8	5.4	Old
United States <sup>†</sup> 20 (6)	<b>Labour</b>	-0.48	15.5	4.1	Interwar
	<b>Democrats</b>	0.10	14.6	4.4	Old
	<b>Republicans</b>	-0.66	33.3	8.4	Old
<b>Scandinavian countries</b>					
Denmark 24 (11)	<b>Conservatives</b>	0.39	17.9	5.5	Old
	<b>Social Dems</b>	0.03	12.7	4.2	Old
	<b>Radicals</b>	-0.30	10.8	3.3	Old
	<b>Liberals</b>	0.08	12.8	4.6	Old
	<b>Socialist People's</b>	0.21	10.7	3.5	New
	<b>Christian People's</b>	-0.08	3.4	1.0	NP
	<b>Centre Dems</b>	-0.10	6.1	2.0	NP
	<b>Progress</b>	-0.50	12.3	4.3	NP
	<b>Social Dems</b>	0.05	6.2	2.0	Old
Finland 25 (8)	<b>Swedish People's</b>	0.01	1.2	0.4	Old
	<b>Agrarian</b>	0.20	8.4	2.7	Old
	<b>National Coalition</b>	0.06	5.5	2.2	Interwar
	<b>Nat. Progressives</b>	-0.21	5.3	2.2	Interwar
	<b>Finnish People's</b>	-0.41	9.5	3.3	Interwar
	<b>Rural</b>	-0.23	9.2	3.3	New
	<b>Greens</b>	0.45	5.4	2.5	NP
	<b>Social Dems</b>	0.04	12.9	4.3	Interwar

## Appendix: Continued

Country years (elections)	Party	Per annum	Elasticity (%V)	Standard deviation	Party age
Iceland 24 (8)	<b>Progressives</b>	-0.16	8.4	3.5	Interwar
	<b>Independence II</b>	-0.09	15.5	4.6	Interwar
	<b>Communists</b>	-0.25	9.6	3.2	Interwar
	<b>Union Lib + Left</b>	-0.77	5.6	2.9	NP
	<b>Women's Alliance</b>	-0.09	5.3	2.5	NP
	<b>Conservatives</b>	-0.07	14.7	6.3	Old
Norway 20 (6)	<b>Labour</b>	-0.09	8.0	3.1	Old
	<b>Farmers'/Centre</b>	0.34	12.5	4.4	Interwar
	<b>Christian People's</b>	0.17	4.0	1.5	Interwar
	<b>Joint Non-Socialist</b>	0.30	2.4	1.2	New
	<b>Socialist People's</b>	0.01	7.0	2.9	New
	<b>Anders Lange</b>	0.28	11.1	3.8	NP
Sweden 24 (9)	<b>Social Dems</b>	-0.09	7.9	2.4	Old
	<b>Conservatives</b>	0.40	12.1	4.1	Old
	<b>Agrarian</b>	-0.73	17.6	6.4	Interwar
	<b>Communists</b>	-0.05	1.1	1.5	Interwar
	<b>People's</b>	-0.23	10.3	3.5	Old
	<b>Christian Dems</b>	0.22	11.0	3.9	New
<b>Continental Countries</b>					
Austria 25 (9)	<b>Ecology</b>	0.28	4.0	1.8	NP
	<b>Socialists</b>	-0.54	16.3	5.8	Old
	<b>People's</b>	-0.65	17.2	6.9	New
	<b>Freedom</b>	0.69	17.4	7.4	New
Belgium 24 (9)	<b>Green Alternative</b>	0.12	2.2	1.1	NP
	<b>Socialists</b>	-0.03	0.5	0.3	Old
	<b>Volkunie</b>	-0.24	6.4	2.2	New
	<b>Walloon Rally</b>	-0.36	6.6	2.6	New
	<b>Christian People's</b>	-0.28	9.4	3.5	Old
	<b>Christian Social</b>	-0.12	3.2	1.2	Old
	<b>PVV</b>	0.16	4.6	1.6	Old
	<b>Franc. Liberals</b>	0.22	5.1	2.1	Old
	<b>Flem. Socialists</b>	0.00	2.9	1.2	Old
<b>Franc. Socialists</b>	-0.02	3.8	1.3	Old	
France 20 (6)	<b>Socialists</b>	0.23	17.6	8.3	Old
	<b>Communists</b>	0.64	11.7	5.1	Interwar
	<b>Gaullists</b>	-0.25	7.7	3.2	New
	<b>National Front</b>	0.95	12.5	5.9	NP
	<b>UDF</b>	-0.15	6.2	2.2	New
	<b>Social Dems</b>	-0.51	22.3	4.4	Old

## Appendix: Continued

Country years (elections)	Party	Per annum	Elasticity (%V)	Standard deviation	Party age
Germany 22 (7)	<b>Christian Dems</b>	-0.06	4.0	1.8	New
	<b>Free Dems</b>	0.0	4.1	1.6	New
	<b>Greens</b>	0.29	6.8	2.7	NP
	<b>Socialists</b>	0.26	4.7	2.1	Old
Italy 20 (6)	<b>Republicans</b>	0.08	2.2	0.9	Old
	<b>Communists</b>	-0.63	18.3	6.8	Interwar
	<b>Christian Dems</b>	-0.47	9.0	3.7	New
	<b>Liberals</b>	-0.23	10.3	3.9	Old
	<b>Social Dems</b>	-0.10	2.4	0.9	New
	<b>MSI</b>	0.0	8.0	2.7	New
	<b>Christian Socialists</b>	-0.06	6.7	3.2	Old
Luxembourg 20 (5)	<b>Socialist Workers'</b>	0.01	9.3	3.4	Old
	<b>Communists</b>	-0.29	7.1	2.5	Interwar
	<b>Democrats</b>	-0.25	6.1	2.4	New
	<b>Labour</b>	0.04	9.80	3.80	New
Netherlands 23 (8)	<b>Liberals</b>	0.25	12.80	3.90	New
	<b>Democrats '66</b>	0.31	11.30	3.90	NP
	<b>Dem Soc. '70</b>	-0.48	4.70	2.40	NP
	<b>Christian Dems</b>	-0.32	13.10	4.70	Old
	<b>Christian Dems</b>	-0.17	4.70	1.70	Old
Switzerland 24 (7)	<b>Radical Dems</b>	-0.07	3.90	1.40	Old
	<b>Social Dems</b>	-0.20	6.50	2.60	Old
	<b>Swiss People's</b>	0.14	5.00	1.60	Interwar
	<b>Independents'</b>	-0.17	4.30	1.60	Interwar
	<b>Greens</b>	0.33	5.50	2.40	NP

<sup>†</sup>Data employed in this study are taken from Mackie and Rose (1991), and from the online Election Results Archive hosted by the Center for Democratic Performance at the State University of New York – Binghamton. Per annum measure represents the slope of each party's trend line when its vote shares are regressed against time during the 1970–95 period. Values indicate, in percentage of the vote, how much change per year occurred for each party. Elasticity represents the absolute difference between the party's best and worst showings during the period with larger values indicating greater instability. The variability of a party's support is given by the standard deviation from its mean vote share over the period with larger values once again representing greater instability. Party age classification is determined by the year in which a party first began contesting elections: Old = before 1914, Interwar = 1914–39, New = after 1939, NP = after 1970 and party's platform suggests some focus on new politics.

<sup>‡</sup>United States data represent presidential elections.

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## Notes

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- 1 There are multiple ways to conceive of the term *party system*, and thus, many ways to study the stability of it. In this study, when I refer to the party system, I am thinking of what Douglas Rae termed the 'elective' party system, which he defined as 'a system of competitive relationships measured in votes' (Rae, 1971, p. 48). This is not far off, if at all, from how I think Rose and Urwin conceptualized the party system. In fact, their measures of party system stability are based on the cumulative change in all of the parties over the period as predicted by the individual party trend lines. This seems to be a fair operationalization of Rae's 'electoral party system' so the use of this definition seems justified.
- 2 NP parties are usually thought of as parties whose issues of environmentalism, direct and transparent democracy and non-violence are clear markers of the New Politics cleavage, or, in fewer cases, whose platforms and goals differ substantially from these 'Green' parties to the extent that their goals are centered on nationalism and law and order. As such, these parties can be seen as more right-wing counterparts of left-wing NP parties. This distinction is taken up in numerous places by many more authors than I will go into here, but this distinction between New Left and New Right is amply discussed in Inglehart's *Modernization and Postmodernization* (Inglehart, 1997, ch. 8). It is with this conception of the difference between new and old political cleavages that I have coded the seventeen NP parties here.
- 3 A quick review of the literature on party system change will reveal the consensus regarding how best to measure change is sorely lacking. For example, the Rose and Urwin study, which I replicate here, measures change at the party level, while others have used electoral volatility of entire party systems (Pedersen, 1983), party bloc volatility (Bartolini and Mair, 1990) and even the degree to which partisan affiliation has declined (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000) to make their claims of party system stability or change.
- 4 Mair instead advocates the use of bloc volatility measures as a more accurate way of gauging the endurance of political cleavages because measuring party blocs can help distinguish between volatility arising from intra-family shifts (those who leave one party on the left, for instance, for another party on the left) and inter-family shifts (Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Mair, 1997).
- 5 Rose and Urwin gauge party support by examining legislative elections in each country during the 25-year time period, a practice which I continue here with two exceptions. The 1994 Italian election, where the reformulation of the parties and the party system following the change in electoral rules was arguably drastic enough to make consistent measures of party volatility beyond 1992 nearly impossible, has been excluded. Additionally, in the United States, presidential elections were used instead of Congressional elections as in Rose and Urwin's original study.
- 6 The three regions are: Anglo-America (parties from the USA, UK, Australia, Canada, Ireland and New Zealand), Scandinavia (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) and Continental countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands and Switzerland).
- 7 While much of the critique of Rose and Urwin's methods has focused on the suitability of these measures for accurately gauging party system stability, there is reason to believe that at least one of the measures is itself biased toward stability and, therefore, less reliable as an indicator of party change. This is primarily because Rose and Urwin decided that zero vote shares in the middle or at the end of a party's electoral life should be excluded as signs that a party did not compete in the particular election. Because these zero terms often represent the deaths of parties, however, excluding them can lead to a more modest amount of electoral volatility for the party's trend. Despite this bias toward constancy, I continue this practice of omitting zero vote shares here for two reasons. First, I have conducted the analyses both ways and the impact of the zero terms in these particular instances was marginal. About half of the parties for which the missing zero terms were included already had negative trends that were above Rose and Urwin's threshold for significance. For some, including the zero term actually weakened this trend since a zero vote share was actually higher (!) than the expected value given the trend line. In none of the cases did including the zero term result in pushing a party over, or pulling it back from, the threshold of significance (+/-0.25 percent *per annum*). Second, this ensures once again that the results of the second time period remain comparable to Rose and Urwin's. Furthermore, since the expected direction of the bias is toward stability, any evidence of increasing instability in this or in subsequent studies using an identical method would only be more pronounced if the bias toward constancy were corrected.
- 8 At the regional level, I make comparisons between the medians of the measures since aggregating the volatility measures of multiple countries means comparing many disparate parties where exceptionally high volatility scores in one country will skew the mean for the entire region.
- 9 Plotting residuals from each party's own trend line against time for each region results in a measure which tells us whether parties are becoming more erratic over time – a trend that could not be discerned by simply taking the standard error measures for each party and then calculating the median.

- 10 To be sure, the indicators of party system stability that Rose and Urwin employ and are replicated here are not well suited for determining the persistence of political cleavages. In fact, many have argued that the use of volatility data as a means of testing political cleavages is misguided, an argument made most recently by Mair (1997, pp. 54–66).
- 11 The Interwar parties experiencing decline include 4 Communist parties, 3 Social Democratic, 1 Christian Democratic, 1 Liberal, 1 Centrist and 1 Nationalist. The ideological diversity here suggests that the decline of Interwar parties is not solely a function of declining Communist party support. By contrast, NP parties are up on average, including 4 Green parties, 1 Nationalist, 1 Liberal and 1 Social Liberal.
- 12 If Old parties account for more votes today than in 1970 (taken as the sum of the mean of the vote shares over the period of each Old party in the system), then the bar representing Old parties in that country will be above the x-axis. And, if New parties also account for more votes, then they will be stacked on top of the Old party bar, and so on. NP parties are always positive since they did not exist in the previous time period. In general, the amount of bar above the x-axis will be roughly equal to the amount of bar below it. This does not always happen though for at least two reasons. First, we are taking mean values over the period, and since not all parties compete the entire period and since we do not count zeros, this at minimum has caused some small amounts of variation. Second, these changes are not corrected for the varying amount of the party system accounted for by the parties studied here – the vote shares of all of the parties in a system represented here do not total 100 percent necessarily. For instance, in Germany during the first period, there were many votes unaccounted for by the party age variable, and this is because these parties did not meet the inclusion criteria for the study (three elections contested gaining at least 5 percent of the vote). As such, these are not absolute proportions of the amount of votes in a system for each type of party, as some smaller New and Interwar parties, for instance, may still be competing and winning some votes from election to election. Because of this, there can be more gains than losses, which should be seen as a consolidation of the electorate behind the established parties that appear in this study, and more losses than gains, which should be seen as a fractionalization of the system.
- 13 Because of the potential for NP parties to gain votes from other small parties not included in this study (see above endnote), it is possible for NP parties to be gaining with no discernible loss of votes from any of the established parties. This is the case in Germany, where whatever losses may correspond to NP gains do not show up because not all parties met the threshold of inclusion in this study.

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