

Policy, office and votes: An experimental investigation of the dynamic aspect of party goals

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Abstract

Political parties face hard choices when balancing desires to influence public policy, to gain executive office and to win votes. The existing literature examining such party preferences has traditionally focused on rather static aspects of the parties, such as size, policy positions and the level of intraparty democracy. This article argues that party actors' sophisticated estimations of whether to enter into coalition can be affected by fluctuating public opinion, thereby having a more dynamic aspect. Drawing on a survey experiment on youth politicians in Norway, we test how perceived standing in the polls affects how politicians weigh up policy versus office and votes versus office. The experimental effect of perceived standings was investigated in addition to the respondents' positions within the party, as well as their parties' former governing history, political orientation and size. Results show that, in the presence of the treatment condition (party is perceived to do well in the polls), the preference for policy over office is lessened. We find no experimental effect for vote versus office. These results advance our understanding of the dynamic aspects of party goals and coalition formation.

KEYWORDS

coalitions, Norway, opinion polls, party goals, survey experiments

INTRODUCTION

Party actors in parliamentary democracies are sometimes confronted with a difficult dilemma: Should we enter the governing coalition to gain positions and influence, even though it may entail painful policy compromises and potentially cost us votes in future elections, or should we remain outside and influence policy from opposition? These actors face hard choices between the objectives of policy, office and votes (Müller & Strøm, 1999a, 1999b; Strøm, 1990). The literature examining such party preferences has traditionally focused on more

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static aspects of the parties, such as size, policy positions and the level of intraparty democracy (Pedersen, 2012a). However, party preferences are not only subject to organisational differences and cabinet participation but are also dictated by election results (Döring & Hellström, 2013). Rather, in the middle of a legislative term, support parties' sophisticated estimations around whether to enter a coalition can be changed in a short time. Although studies of government formation have a dynamic understanding of formation processes and have acknowledged the variation in party goals (Nyblade, 2013), we are only starting to understand the temporal and dynamic aspects of party goals. This article proposes that party goals have a dynamic aspect closely tied to public opinion. Public opinion is not static but fluctuates, prompting parties to adjust their evaluations—and their party goals—in a fluid and dynamic way. For instance, if opinion polls go up in the legislative term, party leaders will feel they have a strengthened mandate from the electorate and they might be more willing to lose voters or make policy concessions in order to get into office.

We test this novel argument through a randomised survey experiment. This type of method allows direct effects to be isolated. While previous research on party preferences and policy positions has relied on country experts (Laver & Hunt, 1992; Warwick, 2005a), our survey was sent to Norwegian youth politicians, as these are political actors where it is relatively easy to get a sufficient number of respondents. Further on, although not party elites yet, it is a realistic assumption that members of this group will make decisions on behalf of their party sometime in the future. In the survey experiment, all respondents were asked to balance office versus policy and votes in a future scenario, and a randomly assigned group was told that their party was doing well in the polls. The results partly support our argument; in the presence of the treatment condition, the preference for policy over office is lessened. However, the poll stimulus did not affect the balance concerning votes versus office.

Results from the multilevel analyses show that the policy versus office balance is unaffected by respondents' position in the party, and we find no association between party goals and centrist position, governing history or party size. However, respondents from parties in the right block tend to prefer office over policy. This suggests that goals vary within parties and have explanations at both the individual and the contextual level.

The present study responds to calls to examine party goals within the different component parts of political parties (Martin, 2016, p. 283). More importantly, the research advances our understanding of how party actors balance the goals of policy, office or votes based also on tendencies in the electorate.

EXPLAINING PARTY GOALS

According to Strøm (1990), parties have three main goals: policy, office and votes. Policy is defined as the desire to influence public policy, office as the desire to control political office to gain private goods and votes as the desire to

gain electoral support (Strøm, 1990, p. 567). Similarly, Harmel and Janda (1994, pp. 272–273) have distinguished between winning votes, gaining executive office and advocating interests, but they also include implementing party democracy.

Entering the cabinet can be seen as the ultimate goal for political actors (Riker, 1962, p. 33). However, it might prove costly to enter office, leaving party leaders with dilemmas and the need to balance several goals. Strøm (1990, pp. 570–571) has stated that party goals are interrelated and that parties face trade-offs, both in the short and long term. Party leaders engage in calculations and sophisticated estimations in which the balance between office, policy and electoral objectives are considered (Müller & Strøm, 1999b, p. 282). The differently weighted goals can be said to be components of a utility function, trade-offs are considered and decisions are made with the goal of maximising net utility. More recently, the balance between policy, office and votes has also been illustrated as a dilemma between responsiveness and responsibility (Lefkofridi & Nezi, 2020; Mair, 2014).

Votes versus office is a question of entering cabinet at the potential cost of losing votes in future elections. This electoral cost of governing is a well-established empirical phenomenon (Müller & Strøm, 2000; Narud & Valen, 2008). According to Strøm (1990), the potential cost of governing causes some parties to abstain from participating in cabinets. This reflects a hard decision between losing voters in the next election and participating in the cabinet (Müller & Strøm, 1999a).

Entering government is not only a question of votes, and policy versus office represents a question of entering cabinet at the cost of policy. A party can be willing to make policy compromises in order to win office (Pedersen, 2012b), although all parties will have a policy horizon, that is, a limit to the policy compromises they are willing to make as part of a coalition (Warwick, 2005a, 2005b). By remaining outside the office, parties can evade such compromise and retain their primary policy goals (Lefkofridi & Nezi, 2020, p. 336). As underlined by Mattila and Raunio (2004, p. 265), parties may want to stay out of office for ideological reasons, but also because they believe they gain more influence in opposition. Pedersen, (2010, 2012b) separates between influence and purity as two policy-seeking objectives and strategies. While policy influence is about how parties get improvements in public policy by giving way to certain policy beliefs, policy purity is about how parties can have clear principles with no room for concessions (Pedersen, 2010, 2012b).

According to Strøm (1990), which party goal is prioritised the highest depends on both organisational and systemic factors. Organisational factors vary between parties and concerns; for instance, how decentralised decisions are, the internal party democracy, possibilities for promotion (or to oust the party leader) and if they need to consider activism in order not to get removed (Strøm, 1990, pp. 576–579). Systemic factors, meanwhile, are stable within

countries and relate to aspects like party support, election systems, negotiations in parliament and the level of benefits of office (Strøm, 1990, pp. 579–586).

In addition, individual-level factors can potentially help explain why some party actors want their party in office. The decision to enter a coalition often rests with party leaders (or other party elites). As underlined by Strøm (1990, pp. 574–576), party leaders are more office-seeking, while party activists are more policy-seeking. Müller and Strøm (1999a, p. 14) have argued that entrepreneurial party leaders primarily value office benefits, which can be converted into private goods; thus, office benefits figure prominently in their calculations.

Müller and Strøm (1999b, pp. 296–297) have also presented several examples of exogenous situational factors that strongly affect the decision of party leaders. For instance, the state of the economy, as political parties are found to clearly value office more highly when the economy is doing well than in times of crisis. Also, the timing of the trade-off considerations between policy, office and votes relative to the electoral cycle is said to have an effect. For instance, if the general election is impending, party leaders can find it more difficult to ignore voters (Müller & Strøm, 1999a, p. 25).

Regarding empirical research on party goals, organisational differences in parties have proven important in explaining the preferences of parties as units (Pedersen, 2012a, p. 908). For example, party actors may be constrained by their party organisation or their party's history. Previous research has found that centrist parties tend to be more orientated towards office than left- or right-wing parties (Pedersen, 2012a, p. 898). In 75 out of 80 coalitions from France, Germany, Ireland, Italy and the Netherlands, the central core party participated in the coalition (Van Roozendaal, 1990). Adams et al. (2006, p. 525) have shown how niche parties' policy programmes are less responsive to shifts in public opinion than their mainstream counterparts, suggesting that niche parties emphasise policy objectives over votes- or office-based objectives. Similarly, parties with a history of governing will be more inclined to pursue office: Martin and Stevenson (2010) have found that coalitions are more likely to form if their constituent parties have worked together in the recent past (<8 years). Furthermore, Pedersen (2012a, p. 907) has found that party size has a significant positive impact on the parties' propensity to seek office over policy, meaning that larger parties were generally more office-seeking than smaller ones.

Some of the existing literature goes beyond parties as units. The distinction between office-motivated leaders and policy-motivated activists has been used to explain the change in policy positions (Marx & Schumacher, 2013). Further on, Pedersen (2010) and Bäck (2008) have found that parties dominated by activists are less likely to enter coalitions.

Although some researchers have included divergent party goals in their formal models of coalition formation (Sened, 1996; Shikano & Linhart, 2010),

still few studies have yet investigated empirically how individual-level factors can explain party goals. As underlined by Martin (2016), parties are not unitary actors and divergent party goals may exist. To better understand political parties and to avoid applying potentially competing microlevel motivations to macrolevel observations, Martin (2016, p. 283) suggests that we explore ‘inside the box’ and examine party goals within different parts of the party.

BALANCING POLICY, OFFICE, VOTES AND THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC OPINION

In this article, we answer this call by investigating party preferences among individual politicians. The main argument forwarded here is that party goals have a dynamic aspect and that the party actors' sophisticated estimations also depend on how their party is performing in opinion polls measuring the proportion of people who say they will vote for the particular party. This is not to say, however, that previous research has totally ignored the temporal aspect. The contention that party goals are fluid and dynamic has also been made in the literature investigating how parties change their policies (Lehrer, 2012; Schumacher et al., 2013; Somer-Topcu, 2009).

The importance of opinion polls is particularly relevant in parliamentary democracies with frequent minority governments and (more or less fixed) support parties. The question of government participation may arise between elections, and for these support parties, favourable opinion polls reflect whether voters like what the party is currently doing.

Opinion polls are said to be followed with great interest by the parties themselves (Binzer Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008). Standing in polls has been seen to affect when early elections are called, for example (Laver, 1992; Pedersen, 2005), as parties seek to surf on a supportive wave of favourable public opinion (Saalfeld, 2013). As Poguntke (1999, p. 233) writes about the German case, parties make strategic moves based on opinion polls and their opportunities of improving further.

Likewise, opinion polls may also affect the decision to enter government. Favourable opinion polls should be considered a situational determinant, a short-term condition that will affect the calculations and estimations of the relevant party actors (Müller & Strøm, 1999b, p. 199). In other words, polling status affects the relative weighting of the different goals in the utility function of party actors, a change in the domestic context in which trade-off considerations between policy, office and votes take place.

If the party in the middle of a legislative term is doing well in the polls, party leaders will seek office, and they will wish to enter having a renewed mandate from the voters. Positive tendencies in the electorate (compared to the election result) will make it easier to ignore voters (at least for a while), and in office,

they have greater potential to get things done without fear of an immediate backlash from the electorate. From this, we hypothesise:

H1. If the party is doing well in the polls, politicians will prefer office over votes.

Furthermore, strong poll performance can propel support parties into cabinets with a renewed willingness to give way on policy issues, although they know cabinet participation will involve policy compromises in the short run (and vote losses in the long run). Müller and Strøm (1999a, p. 25) have noted how previously successful parties, starved of office, might be more willing to 'swallow compromises' to get into office. From an instrumental view, some parties are said to take clear policy positions in order to win votes (Pedersen, 2012b). If positive polls show that voters like what the party is currently doing, party actors can be more inclined to abandon this strict line, make policy concessions, swallow compromises and enter the cabinet in order to gain more influence. From this, we hypothesise:

H2. If the party is doing well in the polls, politicians will prefer office over policy.

We should note, however, that parties surfing on a supportive wave of favourable public opinion can meet resistance because their bargaining hand towards the governing coalition is stronger. A party doing well in the polls might be able to ask for higher prizes (better ministries, more policy concessions from others), and this can actually dampen potential coalition partners' willingness to allow that party to enter the coalition. A stronger party led by politicians more inclined to join the coalition, preferring office over vote and policies, may therefore not enter because of other parties' objections.

In this article, we test the two hypotheses and investigate factors at the individual and contextual levels using a survey experiment targeting youth politicians in Norway. Due to limitations in data, the present article does not test how public opinion can also affect the balance of votes versus policy, although it is plausible that if the party is doing well in opinion polls, party actors might be more interested in policy, that is, preserving the ideological and policy purity of the party, even if this implies that the party become less attractive to some voters.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND DESIGN

Survey experiments have become a prominent method to identify causal relationships and isolate direct effects (Gaines et al., 2007). Although experimental methods have gained popularity in studies of bargaining and

legislative voting (Druckman et al., 2014), the literature on party preferences has seldom drawn on experimental methods (see Martin, 2018).

Previous research on party preferences has relied greatly on country experts (Laver & Hunt, 1992; Warwick, 2005a). Asking politicians directly is more beneficial, although answers may be biased towards policy-seeking, that is, at the expense of office- and vote-seeking, as these latter goals may be less socially acceptable and less defensible, at least 'in public' (Elklit, 1999, p. 82). Politicians would be rare to admit that they are driven by money, prestige or luxury cars (Skjæveland, 2015). However, when asked about how they value 'participating in cabinet', as in this experiment, respondents will likely expand on their motivations for seeking political office beyond the simple desire to attain 'private goods' (Strøm, 1990).

This study draws on an electronic survey sent to Norwegian youth politicians. Real party leaders would have been preferable, but they are more difficult to get to respond and are much fewer in numbers (Pedersen, 2012b). Youth politicians were therefore approached. In Norway, it is plausible that some members of this group will be involved in strategic party decisions sometime in the future, as one-third of Norwegian members of parliament have a background in youth parties (Eilertsen, 2014).

Norway is a parliamentary democracy with nine political parties represented in Parliament. Parties below the electoral threshold of 4% do not receive regional compensatory seats but can still be represented in Parliament. Elections are fixed every four years with no constitutional provisions for the prime minister or others for early dissolution of Parliament. The country has a long tradition of coalition governments, and minority cabinets have been commonplace. After a period with a 'centre alternative' in the 1990s, Norway has reverted to a traditional two-bloc party system since the 2000s (Heidar, 2005). The well-developed committee system in Parliament enables policy influence outside the cabinet. Typically, minority cabinets have adhered to the slalom method, darting from one legislative alliance to the next to secure the yearly state budgets (Strøm, 2019).

Since 2013, however, Norway has seen the rise of contract parliamentarism previously found in Sweden and Denmark (Bale & Bergman, 2006; Juul Christiansen & Damgaard, 2008), where written contracts commit the political partners. This has actualised the considerations of office versus policy and votes, since permanent support parties may consider entering the cabinet at some stage. After the 2017 elections, for instance, the Liberals decided to enter Solberg's coalition (2013–2021), despite their previous scepticism towards the Progress Party, and in January 2019, the Christian People's Party joined in the wake of conflicting processes within the party. In January 2020, the Progress Party decided to leave the four-party coalition after a series of conflicts with the other coalition parties. Significantly, the decisions to enter or leave coalitions

seldom rest solely with the party leaders in Norway, but are subject to support from various bodies within the different parties.

Questback was used to design the survey and collect responses. Leaders of local branches and members of the regional boards and central organisations were approached. For some youth party organisations, the members' email addresses were available online. For others, the central youth party organisations were approached, and email lists were provided. The survey was first sent out in December 2019 to 933 youth politicians in total. After three reminders (during January and February 2020), the response rate reached 51%, an acceptable level given today's challenges of survey exhaustion. All parties are represented in the sample, although some are slightly overrepresented, and some are slightly underrepresented in comparison to the numbers of ordinary party members in the youth parties (see Table A1). Overall, the full survey contained 37 questions about their party activities, policy preferences and ambitions. To investigate party preferences, 319 respondents were asked the below question. As a stimulus, a random group of respondents was given the additional input: 'Your party is doing well in the polls'.

Imagine that, at some point in the near future, your party has the opportunity to enter a coalition cabinet, and you have to make the decision. [*Stimulus for a random group*: Your party is doing well in the polls]. The decision demands that you balance policy (concrete issues), participation in cabinet, and votes. We will now ask you to balance these goals in relation to one another.

Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means maximum willingness to prioritise policy and 10 means maximum willingness to prioritise participation in cabinet?

This policy versus office question thus mirrors the question in Laver and Hunt (1992, p. 125) expert survey: 'Forced to make a choice, would party leaders give up policy objectives in order to get into government or would they sacrifice a place in government in order to maintain policy objectives?'. Laver and Hunt defined the value of 1 as the 'maximum willingness to give up office in order to maintain policy', and the value of 20 as the 'maximum willingness to abandon policy to gain office'. For simplicity, scale 0–10 was used in this project.

Further on, the same 319 respondents were given a similar dilemma and asked to place themselves on a scale on how they balance votes versus office:

Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means maximum willingness to prioritise votes and 10 means maximum willingness to prioritise participation in cabinet?

The two questions were used to test Hypotheses 1 and 2. The sample is fairly balanced (see Table A3).

MEASUREMENTS AND MODELLING

Two outcome variables are used in the analysis: votes versus office and policy versus office. Both outcomes are continuous and follow an approximately normal distribution: we used the Shapiro–Wilk test and found that the normality assumptions were upheld.

Survey experiments with random assignments should ensure valid results (Gaines et al., 2007). Control variables are therefore not considered necessary by many. In the analysis, however, we include certain individual- and contextual-level variables since former contributions have underlined the ways in which such factors explain differences in party goals. Three individual-level variables are used: leader position, gender and age. All these individual-level variables stem from questions in the survey. Five contextual-level variables are used: centrist parties, governing parties, right-block parties, threshold parties and party size. To capture leader positions, we include leaders of the local, regional and central branches of the parties. Centrist parties are defined broadly and comprise Labour, the Conservatives, the Christian Democrats, the Liberal Party and the Centre Party. The Red Party, the Socialist Left, the Greens and the Progress Party are then defined as noncentrist parties (niche parties). Of the nine parties, only the Red Party and the Greens have no history of governing. While centrist parties and governing parties may be closely related, the variables do not fully measure the same thing, as Pearson's r is only 0.53 (see Table A4 for relations between all explanatory variables). The right block variable is made up of the Conservatives, the Christian Democrats, the Liberal Party and the Progress Party; the left block comprises the Red Party, the Socialist Left, the Greens, Labour and the Centre Party. We also include threshold parties, small parties below or close to the electoral threshold. Threshold parties are: the Liberal Party, the Christian Democrats, the Red Party and the Greens. Party size is measured as the share of parliamentary seats held by each party after the 2017 elections. The threshold variable and party size correlate strongly (Pearson's r is 0.691).

With data from individuals (level 1) nested within parties (level 2), a two-level model is warranted (Snijders & Bosker, 2012). To reduce the underestimation of fixed-effect standard errors when the number of clusters is small, restricted maximum likelihood (REML) with Kenward–Roger correction was chosen (McNeish & Stapleton, 2016).

The variables are included stepwise. However, given the relatively large number of lower-level units and small number of higher-level units, all contextual variables cannot be included simultaneously: doing so would exceed the number of higher-level units necessary to obtain accurate standard errors

and test statistics. We therefore apply a selection procedure concerning contextual-level variables (Billiet et al., 2014). The contextual-level variables are introduced into the model, the effect is noted in a table and the variable is then removed before a new variable is introduced. Subsequently, only the contextual variables found to have a significant effect are introduced in the final model.

RESULTS

To examine whether party goals have a dynamic aspect, we start by looking at the frequency distribution of the votes versus office questions for the two groups (control and treatment).

First of all, it is worth noting that a substantial share of respondents from both groups fully would prioritise votes over office (value = 0), and a small share fully would prioritise office over policy (value = 10). Figure 1 shows that the respondents from the two groups are quite evenly distributed concerning the votes versus office questions. The overall difference in mean between the treatment group and the control group is 0.434, with a one-tailed p value of 0.044. The mean value of votes versus office is therefore significantly larger for the treatment group than for the control group, giving an initial indication of an

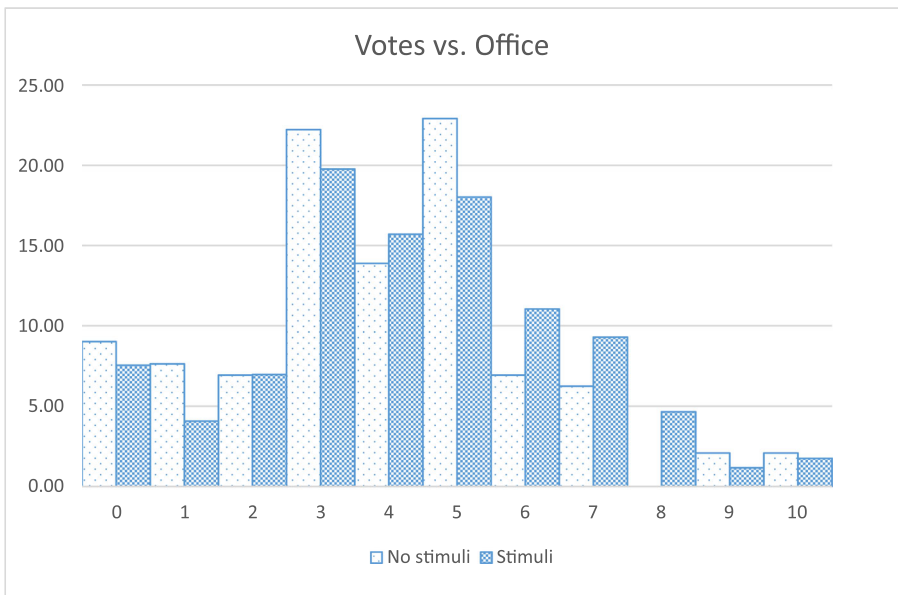


FIGURE 1 Frequency willingness to prioritise votes versus office. Shares ($n = 316$).

experimental effect that youth politicians prefer office over votes when the party is perceived to do well in the polls. We should note, however, that the experimental effect does not seem very strong (difference in means is 0.434 on an 11-point scale, and the 95% confidence interval contains zero: $-0.066, 0.934$), suggesting that public opinion is far from the only factor political actors take into account when balancing party goals.

As Figure 2 shows, a substantial share of respondents from both groups fully would prioritise policy over office (value = 0), and a small share fully would prioritise office over policy (value = 10). This finding differs slightly from Pedersen's conclusion from Laver and Hunt's expert survey that only a few parties were solely office- or policy-seekers (2012a, p. 905). As Figure 2 shows, both distributions are slightly right-skewed, suggesting that respondents from both groups mainly prefer policy over office. However, respondents from the treatment group seem slightly more office-oriented, the overall difference in mean between the treatment group and the control group is 0.666. With a one-tailed p value of 0.004, the mean value of policy versus office for the treatment group is significantly larger than for the control group, again giving an indication of an experimental effect that youth politicians prefer office over policy when the party is perceived to do well in the polls. The experimental effect seems somewhat stronger on office versus policy (difference in means is

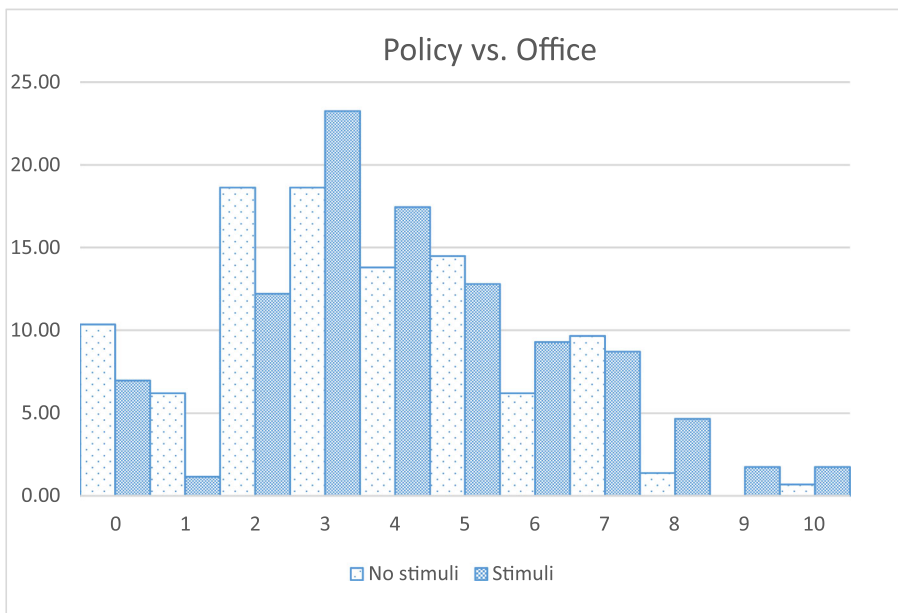


FIGURE 2 Frequency willingness to prioritise policy versus office. Shares ($n = 317$).

0.666 on an 11-point scale, and the 95% confidence interval does not contain zero: 0.177, 1.155).

We then estimated a series of multilevel models to investigate the relationship between vote versus office and policy versus office concerning the experimental treatment and key individual- and contextual-level factors. Estimation of an empty two-level model (see Table A5) confirms that votes versus office and policy versus office vary significantly across political parties. The intraclass correlation—measuring the proportion of variance at the party level—is 18% for votes versus office and 11% for policy versus office, both well above the level at which multilevel modelling is warranted.

As model 1 in Table 1 shows, no significant experimental effect is observed for vote versus office. The coefficient has the expected sign, but the significance level is above the selected threshold. Hypothesis 1 is therefore refuted. Further on, there is no indication that people in leading positions prefer office over votes (model 2). To test how the balance of votes versus office is affected by contextual-level variables, five variables are considered: centrist parties,

TABLE 1 Votes versus office, unstandardised Par. Est. with SEs.

Fixed effects	Model 1		Model 2	
	Par. Est.	SE	Par. Est.	SE
Stimuli (positive polls)	0.317	0.242	0.323	0.243
Leader position			-0.054	0.273
Male			-0.048	0.250
Age			0.040	0.042
Constant	3.777***	0.365	3.005***	0.981
Random effects				
Level 2: Intercept	0.902	0.552	0.883	0.543
Level 1: Residual variance	4.360***	0.358	4.388***	0.362
AIC	1344.946		1350.008	
BIC	1352.387		1357.429	
Log likelihood	1340.946		1346.008	

Note: Estimates retrieved using REML with Kenward–Roger correction. The reference categories are stimuli: no stimuli; leader position: no leader position; gender: women; age: from low to high; parliament: low strength; poll tendency: low tendency; governing: nongoverning; centrist party: noncentrist party; right block: left block.

$n_{\text{individuals}} = 307$; $n_{\text{parties}} = 9$.

Abbreviations: AIC, Akaike's information criteria; BIC, Bayesian information criteria; Par. Est., parameter estimates; REML, restricted maximum likelihood; SE, standard error.

Two-tailed p values: * $p \leq 0.050$, ** $p \leq 0.010$, and *** $p \leq 0.001$.

governing parties, party size, threshold parties and right block. To obtain accurate standard errors and test statistics with a large number of lower-level units and a small number of higher-level units, these contextual-level variables are introduced via a selection procedure whereby the variable is removed before a new variable is introduced. The effects are shown in Table A6. However, there are no significant effects of the contextual-level variables introduced in the model through the selection procedure.

As shown in model 1 (Table 2), there is an experimental effect of polls on the balance between policy and office. In other words, when the surveyed youth politicians believed that their party was doing well in the polls, they tended to move towards entering cabinet. This supports our Hypothesis 2, and our argument that, in the context of strong poll performance, party actors are more inclined to enter cabinet at the expense of potential policy compromises. We found no effect of leader position, gender and age on party goals (model 2).

The selection procedure shows that there is a strong effect of centrist parties, but the significance level (significance = 0.095) is above the selected threshold

TABLE 2 Policy versus office, Par. Est. with SEs.

Fixed effects	Model 1 (307)		Model 2 (307)		Model 3	
	Par. Est.	SE	Par. Est.	SE	Par. Est.	SE
Stimuli (positive polls)	0.680**	0.240	0.712**	0.241	0.731**	0.241
Leader position			0.410	0.270	0.379	0.270
Male			-0.057	0.247	-0.020	0.247
Age			0.040	0.041	0.038	0.041
Right block					1.090*	0.413
Constant	3.460***	0.305	2.537***	0.950	2.088***	0.939
Random effects						
Level 2: Intercept	0.543	0.354	0.537	0.354	0.234	0.216
Level 1: Residual variance	4.298***	0.353	4.302***	0.355	4.305***	0.356
AIC	1337.305		1340.906		1335.360	
BIC	1344.745		1348.326		1342.774	
Log likelihood	1333.305		1336.906		1331.360	

Note: Estimates retrieved using REML with Kenward–Roger correction. The reference categories are stimuli: no stimuli; leader position: no leader position; gender: women; age: from low to high; right block: left block.

$n_{\text{individuals}} = 307$, $n_{\text{parties}} = 9$.

Abbreviations: AIC, Akaike's information criteria; BIC, Bayesian information criteria; Par. Est., parameter estimates; REML, restricted maximum likelihood; SE, standard error.

Two-tailed p values: * $p \leq 0.050$, ** $p \leq 0.010$, and *** $p \leq 0.001$.

(0.050). However, a strong and significant effect of the right block is observed, suggesting that respondents from right-wing parties prefer office over policy (model 3). The decrease in log likelihood, Akaike's information criteria and Bayesian information criteria from models 1 to 3 in Table 1 shows how an additional variable at the contextual level improves the fit of the model (compared with a model with only individual-level variables).

DISCUSSION

Drawing on a survey of Norwegian youth politicians, the article investigates how standing in opinion polls and other factors affect how political actors balance policy, office and votes. First, the stimulus did not have any significant effect on votes versus office,¹ while we find an experimental effect of perceived standing in opinion polls on policy versus office. This is somewhat puzzling because the stimulus refers directly to moods in the electorate, but the results suggest that favourable polls do not clearly increase the willingness to deprioritise votes. Crucially, the fact that our stimulus had no significant effect on votes versus office does not necessarily mean that public opinion is irrelevant to these calculations. The stimulus used in the present survey experiment, for instance, should not be considered particularly strong and certainly not an unrealistically powerful manipulation that rarely occurs (Kinder & Palfrey, 1993, p. 27). Another methodological explanation can be related to the placement of the treatment. The statement 'your party is doing well in the polls' was placed in the question introduction, before the two dilemmas (first votes versus office and then policy versus office). As the 'endurance' of treatment effects in survey experiments can be limited (Gaines et al., 2007), future research should place manipulation closer to each dilemma, and alternate treatment and control groups across questions to avoid consistency pressures (Clifford et al., 2021). We found no correlations between our outcome variables and centrist parties, governing history or parliamentary size. Conversely, we observed that right-block parties were associated with a tendency to prefer office over policy. In other words, respondents from parties on the right side of the political spectrum are more inclined to seek office at the expense of policy. This suggests that party goals have explanations at both the individual level and the contextual level.

Second, our results show that respondents in both groups were willing to prefer either policy or office. In other words, their priorities are somewhat more extreme. Previous studies have found that few parties are solely office- or policy-seekers (Laver & Hunt, 1992; Pedersen, 2012a, p. 905). However, the present results should be treated with some caution. Key differences may be attributable to our survey of youth politicians, given that youth party members and youth parties have been found to be more radical than their mother parties (Rainsford, 2018; Weber, 2017).

Survey experiments can be accused of a lack of realism if there is a discrepancy between the stated dilemmas and real-world behaviour (Barabas & Jerit, 2010). Here, while the surveyed youth politicians are not party decision-makers, it nonetheless remains a realistic scenario for the future. We cannot exclude, however, that youth politicians' goal orientation and consequently decision-making processes will be altered as they advance to be a part of the (parent) party elite.

The hard choice between policy, office and votes is rarely so clear-cut in reality as the experimental scale (0–10) would suggest. Further on, the answer category 'policy (specific issues)' is quite general, without acknowledging the differences between policy influence and policy purity, as suggested by (Pedersen, 2010, 2012b). Future research should investigate if and how moods in the electorate affect these different policy-seeking objectives and strategies of political parties.

A lack of external validity in survey experiments can make generalisability difficult (Mullinix et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the scenario presented in this study is suitably realistic. While, on the one hand, as underlined by Müller and Strøm (1999b, p. 297), situational factors vary greatly and are notoriously ill-suited for generalisation, on the other hand, opinion polls—as the main dynamic factor focused on here—should be more easily compared across time and space. However, to 'perform well in polls' can be interpreted differently. Some parties perform well in real-world polls, while others do not; some belong to large parties, while others do not. As treatments can be interpreted differently, future experiments should consider including treatments with exact poll changes.

The survey experiment was conducted in Norway. Like several other parliamentary democracies, a country where the question of cabinet participation frequently emerges for political leaders. Unlike most other countries, however, the lack of dissolution rights makes Norway somewhat special. Temporal dynamics and the importance of opinion polls during the interelectoral period may therefore operate differently in Norway compared to countries where early elections are available and common. The main finding that strong poll performance can propel support parties into cabinets with a renewed willingness to make painful compromises is therefore not necessarily generalisable to other empirical contexts. More broadly, as party preferences can be affected by country-level factors such as political culture (Pedersen, 2012a), future research should investigate the importance of opinion polls across countries.

CONCLUSION

Political party actors face hard choices between the objectives of policy, office and votes (Müller & Strøm, 1999a; Strøm, 1990). Previous research into party priorities has looked at their dependency on relatively stable factors, such as

party size, policy positions and internal party democracy (Pedersen, 2012a; Strøm, 1990). On the contrary, this study argues that these important decisions in political systems can also be affected by shifting public opinion.

Theories of coalition formation base their predictions on fundamental assumptions about party goals (Laver & Schofield, 1990). In their need to balance their desires to influence public policy, attain executive office and win votes (Harmel & Janda, 1994; Strøm, 1990), political parties are torn between responsiveness and responsibility (Lefkofridi & Nezi, 2020; Mair, 2014). While previous research has focused on more static aspects of the parties involved, this article has shown that divergent goals may exist and that party goals can be linked to positive opinion polls. These results therefore have important implications for the study of party goals and coalition formation. In particular, the factors that cause certain parties to decide to enter (or leave) a coalition at a given point in time cannot be found solely by examining their size or internal structures. Equally, this is not only a question of certain parties having traditions of governing, or that seeking office is difficult in parties where a strong member base influences party strategy. Rather, party goals also have a more dynamic aspect related to public opinion. Furthermore, instead of talking about policy-, office- or vote-seeking *parties*, we should be conscious of policy-, office- or vote-seeking *individuals*, with an acknowledgement that individuals and different components of a party can have divergent motivations and preferences (Fjellman & Rosén Sundström, 2021; Heidar & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020; Martin, 2016). Important questions remain, however, around how different party actors' sophisticated calculations of the consequences of their strategic coalition-making decisions are affected by current moods in the electorate. Future research is needed to elaborate on the role of opinion polls and other situational factors.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The project has been approved by the Data Protection Official at the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). The project complies with the guidelines of the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH). Respondents gave their consent through a designated question at the start of the survey. For respondents under the age of 15, parents were contacted after the survey was conducted.

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ENDNOTE

¹ Note that the tables report two-tailed *p* values. The one-sided *p* value for the stimulus on vote versus office ($p = 0.093$) is not very far from conventional levels of statistical significance.

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APPENDIX A

(See Tables A1–A6).

TABLE A1 Affiliation respondents and youth party members, shares.

Party	Sampled youth party elites (2020)	Members of youth parties (2011)
Centre Youth (Senterungdommen)	11.9	7.1
Progress Party's Youth (Fremskrittspartiets Ungdom)	8.8	12.9
Red Youth (Rød Ungdom)	6.0	3.1
Socialist Youth (Sosialistisk Ungdom)	12.9	4.7
Workers' Youth League (Arbeidernes ungdomsfylking)	20.4	33.9
Young Christian Democrats (Kristelig Folkepartis Ungdom)	9.1	6.4
Young Conservatives (Unge Høyre)	13.5	23.9
Young Greens (Grønn Ungdom)	7.5	NA
Young Liberals (Unge Venstre)	10.0	7.9
Total number of respondents and registered party members (<i>n</i>)	319	17,066

Note: Numbers on Youth Party Members are from Ødegaard (2014, p. 142).

Abbreviation: NA, not available.

TABLE A2 Descriptive statistics for continuous variables (outcomes and predictors).

	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	<i>n</i>
Votes versus office	4.07	2.257	0	10	316
Policy versus office	3.86	2.227	0	10	317
Age	20.32	3.287	14	39	317
Party size	13.451	9.827	2.40	27.2	319

TABLE A3 Frequency distribution for binary variables.

	%	<i>n</i>
Stimuli		
No	46.1	147
Yes	53.9	172
Leader position		
No	69.9	223
Yes	30.1	96
Gender		
Female	45.5	141
Male	54.5	169
Governing history		
No	13.5	43
Yes	86.5	276
Right block		
No	58.6	187
Yes	41.4	132
Threshold party		
No	67.4	215
Yes	32.6	104
Centrist party		
No	35.1	112
Yes	64.9	207

TABLE A4 Bivariate correlations between predictors (Pearson's *R* and *N*).

	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Positive stimuli	-0.079 (319)	-0.028 (310)	-0.054 (317)	0.060 (319)	0.014 (319)	-0.015 (319)	0.018 (319)	-0.041 (319)
2. Leader position		0.045 (310)	-0.228** (317)	-0.004 (319)	0.063 (319)	0.019 (319)	-0.076 (319)	0.004 (319)
3. Gender			-0.149** (309)	-0.102 (310)	-0.113* (310)	-0.078 (310)	0.027 (310)	-0.108 (310)
4. Age				-0.043 (317)	0.052 (317)	0.109 (317)	0.121* (317)	0.073 (317)
5. Party size					0.691** (319)	0.427** (319)	0.477** (319)	-0.008 (319)
6. Threshold party						0.568** (319)	0.091 (319)	-0.244** (319)
7. Governing history							0.537** (319)	0.332** (319)
8. Centrist parties								0.245** (319)
9. Right block								

Correlation is statistically significant at the **0.01 level (two-tailed) and *0.05 level (two-tailed).

TABLE A5 Empty models, votes versus office and policy versus office.

Fixed effects	Model 0 (votes versus office)		Model 0 (policy versus office)	
	Par. Est.	SE	Par. Est.	SE
Constant	3.947***	0.347	3.801***	0.279
Random effects				
Level 2: Intercept	0.939	0.570	0.556	0.365
Level 1: Residual variance	4.366***	0.358	4.538***	0.366
ICC	0.177		109	
AIC	1341.655		1397.449	
BIC	1345.655		1404.960	
Log likelihood	1353.103		1393.449	
<i>N</i>	307		317	

Note: Unstandardised Par. Est. and SEs. Empty model. Estimates were retrieved using REML with Kenward–Roger correction.

Abbreviations: AIC, Akaike's information criteria; BIC, Bayesian information criteria; ICC, intraclass correlation; Par. Est., parameter estimates; REML, restricted maximum likelihood; SE, standard error. Two-tailed *p* values: **p* ≤ 0.05, ***p* ≤ 0.01, and ****p* ≤ 0.001.

TABLE A6 Effect of contextual variables.

Contextual variable	Votes versus office	Policy versus office
Centrist parties	0.670 (0.689)	0.936 (0.480)
Governing parties	0.743 (0.851)	1.040 (0.636)
Party size	0.040 (0.037)	0.037 (0.029)
Threshold party	0.253 (0.740)	0.248 (0.593)
Right block	0.758 (0.671)	1.090* (0.413)

Note: Unstandardised parameter estimates with standard errors. The reference categories are centrist parties: noncentrist party; governing history: nongoverning; threshold party; nonthreshold party; right block: left block. Two-tailed *p* values: **p* ≤ 0.050, ***p* ≤ 0.010, and ****p* ≤ 0.001.