

ECPR Joint Sessions, St Gallen 2011 / Workshop No. 9: Patterns of Party Persistence,  
Decline and Disintegration

### **Why Do Parties Split?**

#### **A New Measure of Party Coherence Based on the Belief Systems of Party Members in Switzerland and the United States**

Paper Proposal

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Why do some ideologically heterogeneous parties disintegrate and split, while others persist over decades and centuries? Why do party organizations sometimes fall apart despite seemingly high levels of party unity? Recent events like the secession of the “Linke” party from the (quite homogeneous) SPD in Germany or the ongoing debate in the U.S. whether or not the Tea Party movement poses a real threat to the persistence of the (quite heterogeneous) Republicans highlight the need for further research in this regard which goes well beyond the mere calculation of party unity scores. Instead we should be able to simultaneously analyze the stability and diversity of the sub-group structure of parties: How strongly are a party's sub-groups (factions) associated with each other? And how do the single parts react under stress?

Our paper addresses these questions by operationalizing an existing theoretical concept of *party coherence* (see Janda 1980, 1993). We propose an innovative empirical measure which adopts phenomena of physical behavior of magnetic parts in natural sciences for party politics (so-called superparamagnetic clustering; see Christen et al. 2009; Ott et al. 2005). We intend to do this in a comparative research setting which includes recent elections to the U.S. Congress and to the Swiss Federal Assembly (2003-2010). The data source are pre-election surveys among all candidates (smartvote survey for Switzerland, NPAT / The Political Courage Test for the U.S.).<sup>1</sup> While tremendously different in terms of population figures and party system properties (two-party vs. multiparty system), the two countries share some aspects of separation of powers and strong vertical power-sharing institutions (federalism) which result in internally heterogeneous parties. While the internally diverse U.S. parties have not suffered splits in recent time, the Swiss party system has undergone severe changes: the

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1 see <http://www.smartvote.ch> and [http://www.votesmart.org/npat\\_about.php](http://www.votesmart.org/npat_about.php).

Greens and the national-conservative Swiss People's Party have suffered splits, while in the same period two liberal parties have merged.

The paper adds to the aims and topics of the workshop by proposing an empirical measure of party persistence, decline and disintegration which is apt for cross-national comparisons both in long-lived and newly established democracies. The comparison of Switzerland and the U.S. furthermore analyzes party persistence and decline in different electoral and party systems.

## **References**

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