

A lack of party unity can have a significant negative effect on the electoral success of European parties.

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/08/15/a-lack-of-party-unity-can-have-a-significant-negative-effect-on-the-electoral-success-of-european-parties/

15/08/2013

How important is intra-party unity to election outcomes? Michael Clark provides an overview of the effect that in-fighting and public disagreements can have on a party's vote share. He notes that a lack of unity is likely to be more damaging when it involves high profile party members, rather than backbenchers, and when clashes are over key policy areas which are electorally salient.



Can intra-party divisions influence the electoral chances of European political parties? The short answer is yes. Intra-party divisions certainly have the potential to cause parties to lose votes, though whether such losses result in electoral defeat is another matter. The basic point is that parties whose politicians openly feud for all to see can be electorally harmed if voters are left with the impression that division means dysfunctionality, and an inability to focus on the important problems of the day – more so when those involved are high-ranking politicians. In short, it does not look good to voters when a party's leadership are at odds with each other.

That being said, we expect to see some level of disagreement. After all, parties are typically composed of various factions, and parties full of “yes” men/women are likely to run into different kinds of problems in time. However, when private disagreements are made public, or when a dispute manifests itself into something more sinister – damaging a party's efforts to tackle a pressing policy issue or crisis for example – then the party in question is more likely to lose votes at the next general election (all else being equal).

With regard to the latter, one could say that intra-party divisions are more likely to inflict electoral damage on governing parties since it stands to reason that they are in a position to enact policy changes and respond to crises. For instance, during John Major's tenure as British Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party, he inherited a group of politicians openly at war with one another over European integration. While the Conservatives were faced with a host of problems in the 1997 general election, it was evident that the party's image had been tarnished by the inability of the leadership to effectively deal with the so-called “Euro-rebels” and “Euro-sceptics,” especially when the internal dramas of the Conservatives were set against the relatively unified image of New Labour. Policy disputes, such as those the Conservatives faced over Europe during the '90s (and currently), are one obvious source of intra-party division for European political parties, and are more likely to affect a given party come Election Day if the issues in question are particularly salient.



John Major, Credit: Chatham House (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Aside from considering factors such as the saliency of issues driving conflicts, and whether the party in question is in government or not, we might also consider the type of party being affected by intra-party divisions: i.e. are we talking about larger, mainstream parties, or those smaller parties which often occupy the ideological fringes? The type of party can be important since these smaller parties

often rely on the ideological clarity of their message to draw support. Similarly, personality clashes or in-fighting over party strategy (think Haider's Austrian Freedom Party during the first half of the last decade), can be particularly damaging. Unsurprisingly, strong leadership and the absence of notable discord have seen the Freedom Party gain strongly in opinion polls over the past several years.

Lastly, we might also consider the timing of intra-party divisions. Are we considering the impact of intra-party squabbles occurring over the course of an entire inter-electoral period (perhaps years from Election Day), or are we more concerned with those incidents that occur in the months immediately prior to Election Day? In different ways, both are important. With regard to the former, while isolated events are unlikely to cause parties any serious problems, frequent recurrence of incidents pertaining to intra-party divisions can cause the party in question to earn itself a reputation for conflict. With regard to the latter, disputes during the run-up to an election are more likely to draw the media's spotlight and be recalled by voters when going to the polls. Of course, a party may suffer from both short and long-term problems, but either way both can prove damaging. Similarly, we might also think about which party members are involved in disputes. Those involving rank-and-file politicians are certainly not irrelevant, but will likely have less impact than arguments involving more senior figures who draw greater media attention, such as those holding cabinet positions.

Despite the prevalence of intra-party divisions, there is actually very little in the way of systematic academic research on the topic of intra-party conflict. My own research has examined several characteristics that can plausibly affect electoral performance, of which party unity was one such characteristic. Using data compiled from the mid-'70s through to about 2002, I find support for the hypothesis that a lack of unity correlates with a loss in votes for European political parties, and when party division is accompanied by concerns over other important party characteristics, such as competence and integrity, those parties generally face notable vote losses. However, more systematic research is certainly needed to validate these findings. Additionally, little is known about how divisions *between* coalition parties affects those parties' electoral chances, and this would appear to be fertile ground for academic study since the compromises made between coalition partners often appear to drive internal feuding.

Beyond the concerns laid out here, it is also worth noting that some of the factors highlighted also raise difficult methodological issues for researchers, particularly if we want to specifically focus on the effects of intra-party divisions. Perhaps the simplest way to think of capturing the effects of intra-party divisions would be to poll the electorate on a regular basis, but few countries actually ask their citizens about topics such as party unity as part of a standard battery of questions (either over time, or simply during the run-up to general elections), which limits the scope of analyses considerably. Nor are respondents typically asked to recall their thoughts on specific instances of party discord, which might offer insights as to whether, how, and which groups, of voters evaluate these sorts of events. Understanding intra-party division is therefore important to political scientists who seek to explain electoral outcomes, but should also be of value to politicians and party strategists since a reputation for division can prove very costly.

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