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Comparing Party Voters, Members and Candidates

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Chapter 5: Parties' Ideological Representation in the Nordic Countries: Comparing Party Voters, Members, and Candidates

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Abstract

May's Law of Curvilinear Disparity (1973) famously stated that the mid-level elite of a party (e.g., members) hold the most ideologically extreme opinions, while both the non-elite, such as voters, and the elite, such as candidates, hold more moderate opinions. Such an opinion structure within political parties would have important ramifications in times of increasing direct party member influence. In this chapter we combine information from all three levels of party affiliates – voters, party members, and party candidates – and analyse a total of 10 different data sets from four Nordic countries to examine the general opinion structure within parties. We find little systematic evidence for May's law in these countries. The left-right ideology of party members is more extreme than that of party voters in some parties, but not others. What is more, the left-right positions of the candidates for parliament also do not consistently follow the expectations derived from May's law. Instead, although the candidates for office are often more left-leaning than the party's voters or members, on the whole, our chapter reports rather high levels of substantive representation as measured by ideological agreement on the left-right dimension for political parties in Nordic democracies.

The introductory chapter of this book highlights four elements of party linkage between citizens and government: reach, representation, activity, and influence. The preceding chapter (chapter 4) was concerned with the second of these linkages, representation. But representation is itself a multidimensional concept, composed of both social and ideological parts. Chapter 4 focused on the former by examining the socio-demographic representativeness of political party members compared to the broader population of voters. In this chapter, we look more closely at the *ideological* representativeness of party members through a systematic analysis of opinion structures within political parties in the Nordic countries.

Based on John May's (1973) famous law about intra-party opinion structures, one would expect to see that the mid-level elite, party members, are more extreme in their ideological positions than the party elite or party voters. However, there are two important reasons to suspect that this might not be the case. Firstly, the empirical evidence for May's law has been mixed in multiparty-based systems so far (see, e.g., Dahl 2011; Kitschelt 1989; Narud and Skare 1999; Norris 1995; van Haute and Carty 2012; van Holsteyn, den Ridder, and Koole 2017; Widfeldt 1999). Secondly, May formulated his law during a very different time of party politics. Since then, scholars have not only documented the almost universal decline of party membership (van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012; Kölln 2016) but also the increase in intra-party democracy that has empowered individual members at the expense of the candidates or activists within the party (see, e.g., Bolin et al. 2017; Cross and Katz 2013; Hazan and Rahat 2010). Motivated by both aspects, we ask, what is the opinion structure within contemporary Nordic parties? And to what extent are party members more ideologically extreme than parliamentary candidates and party voters in the Nordic party systems? To be clear, our goal is not to settle the debate about the applicability of May's law but rather to provide another and more comprehensive test through systematic comparison of intra-party opinion structures within three levels of a party *and* across four similar countries.

To our knowledge, we are the first to combine national election studies, party membership surveys, and party candidate surveys to investigate the ideological preferences of three levels or strata of a political party: the elite (candidates), the mid-level elite (members), and the non-elite (party voters) (see May 1973; Narud and Skare 1999). Investigating the ideological structure of the party at all three levels informs us about the degree to which the unitary actor assumption common in party politics research (see Polk and Kölln 2017) can be upheld. But more substantively, it also informs us about one of the important preconditions for the policy linkage between political parties and voters. If party voters, members, and candidates are all in

ideological agreement, even highly democratized parties are likely to provide a strong policy linkage with voters. In contrast, ideological disagreement between these three groups can have important ramifications for each of the groups and for the party as a whole: party voters likely feel less represented by their party (see, e.g., Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012), party members likely express their discontent through exit, voice, and disloyal behaviour (see, e.g., Kölln and Polk 2017), and party candidates likely get less electoral support. As a consequence, a party as a whole is substantially constrained or even weakened if it is internally divided (Greene and Haber 2015).

Within the framework of this book's overarching focus on party members, the goal of this chapter is to assess the political representativeness of party members in four Nordic countries with respect to both party voters and candidates for parliament. We do this on the most dominant and comparable dimension across the 10 surveys we analyse: the general left-right dimension. Even in a time and age of multidimensional party competition, the left-right scale is still today considered a 'super issue' (Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011, 26), not least because most individuals know what researchers are talking about when they ask respondents to place themselves on the left-right scale. For reasons of pragmatism and substance it makes sense to begin with general left-right ideology for any investigation into the political representativeness of Nordic party members compared to voters and candidates.

The next section lays out May's law and discusses the two reasons that speak against finding support for it in the Nordic parties. We then move on to present our analytical strategy and introduce the 10 different data sets we draw on as well as our measure of ideology. The third section presents and discusses our empirical findings from our four Nordic countries: Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. A conclusion summarizes our findings.

May's Law: Evidence For and Against

Party voters, members, and candidates share their positive attitude towards the same party. However, what distinguishes them is the way they express their positive attitude. Party voters express it through their vote every four or five years. Party members go a step further and sign up to the party's membership list, which comes with rights and obligations. Finally, party candidates can be characterized as doing all of the above, but they are additionally willing to be among the public faces of the party. They also promote and vote on the party's policy proposals. Given these differences in involvement in and for the party, it is not surprising that

several studies provide empirical evidence that breaks up the unitary actor assumption of a political party (for recent work, see Aylott and Bolin 2017; Ceron 2017; Kölln and Polk 2017). In fact, it seems almost implausible that a party comprised of such different groups with diverse incentive structures would be entirely united above and beyond a shared positive attitude towards the same party.

One of the most prominent examples of scholarship that breaks up the unitary actor assumption comes in the form of May's 'Law of Curvilinear Disparity' (1973). His proposition is straightforward as he argues that mid-level elites, such as party members, should hold more ideologically extreme policy preferences than the party leadership or a party's broader voter base. May (1973, 143–51) argues based on a number of suppositions that there are at least three clusters of reasons to observe such a pattern of opinion differences within parties: intra-party control, recruitment, and political socialization. In brief, his idea is that the three different groups have different levels of control over each other, differ in their socio-economic and geographical background characteristics, and face different incentives and interactions within the party. All three reasons are not causally responsible for the proposed opinion structure but coincide with it. Yet May provides no empirical evidence for his law.

Subsequent research has taken up this task and so far has shown mixed support for May's hypothesis (Dahl 2011; Kitschelt 1989; Narud and Skare 1999; Norris 1995; van Haute and Carty 2012; van Holsteyn, den Ridder, and Koole 2017; Widfeldt 1999). For example, while Kitschelt's (1989) analysis of Belgian parties shows some support for May's idea under specific conditions, Narud and Skare (1999) were unable to confirm the revisited theory based on Norwegian data. Across four policy issues and the general left-right scale, Narud and Skare (1999, 59) found most support for an opinion structure of 'a fan, in which the top elites hold the most radical opinions, the non-elites are the most moderate, and the sub-elites are in between'. This is echoed in other studies, which report, 'To be sure, voters are more moderate than party members and activists, but party elites are usually just as extreme as the activists, perhaps even more so' (Saglie and Heidar 2004, 387). Analysis of Sweden, another country we investigate in this chapter, reports 'some evidence that members and activists have become radicalized compared to the voters' (Widfeldt 1999, 307). This divergence in the empirical studies warrants renewed attention, not least because most of these studies were case studies from individual countries. What is lacking so far is systematic comparative evidence from a number of countries using the same methodology.

In addition to the mixed empirical evidence, another reason to reassess the relationship between ideological agreement and position in the chain of party-based representation is the fundamental change in the composition of party membership. May's proposition was developed in a different era of party politics, and the last few decades have seen a large quantitative shift in party membership. Former mass parties characterized by a large body of members were forced to transform into smaller organizations without giving up their advantageous political position targeted at the median voter. And although party membership numbers are and have been in decline for many European parties (see, e.g., van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012), this is not uniformly the case. While most parties lost large numbers of members, new parties emerged and naturally registered a net gain in members (Kölln 2016). From the Feminist Initiative in Sweden (Blombäck and de Fine Licht 2017) to Podemos in Spain (Ramiro and Gomez 2016), new political parties continue to spring up across Europe, many of which have seen a rapid rise in membership. Membership sizes are also more evenly distributed now than before due to an increase in the number of parliamentary parties across European party systems. What is more, in many parties' remaining members have increased power to choose candidates and leaders as well as to shape policy (Bolin et al. 2017; Scarrow and Gezgor 2010). Translated into May's conceptual framework, it means that today's parties are characterized by a mid-level elite that is a lot smaller but potentially also more powerful. The smaller size of the mid-level elite and its weaker position might make it less likely to deviate from the ideological position held by the party elite or the party voters. Therefore, we would expect the political parties' internal opinion structure to be relatively homogeneous today. On the other hand, the increase in direct (formal and informal) power given to party members over the last decades might counteract this force. And so there is also reason to expect that we will find evidence for May's law in today's parties.

Any of these proposed patterns within Nordic political parties also yields more general and substantive interest for party politics strategists and researchers. We should care about intra-party opinion structures, and specifically about ideological disagreement between a party's voters, members, and candidates for office, because they can exert an impact on important political decisions. A recent analysis of the class composition of the British Labour Party presents evidence that working-class members of parliament differed sharply from professional career politicians in their policy positions on the welfare reforms of the 1990s and 2000s (O'Grady 2018). Studies that focus on intra-party ideological, rather than class, heterogeneity come to similar conclusions. For example, more ideologically centrist social democratic voters

in Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom responded to these parties' left-right moderation in the latter part of the twentieth century in a substantially different way than did the more ideologically extreme, highly partisan voter group (Karreth, Polk, and Allen 2013). Intra-party disagreement of members with either the entire party or only parts thereof can also easily have electoral consequences (Polk and Kölln 2018), and it is at the very least a potential broken link in the chain of representation in modern democracies.

In summary, this means that, while we have theoretical reason to believe that party voters, members, and candidates differ in their ideological positions, with members being the most extreme, there is also ample reason to suspect that the opposite is more prevalent. In order to bring more information to this debate we provide below the first systematic comparison of opinion structures in four multiparty countries and across a total of 24 political parties.

Data and Measurement

We provide the first cross-national comparisons of three levels of a party and compare party voters, members, and candidates in Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.² We opt for the mean position of parties' candidates for elected office as an estimate of the position of the parties' leadership both because the central tendencies of candidates are increasingly used in congruence studies (e.g., Andreadis and Stavrakakis 2017; Costello, Thomassen, and Rosema 2012; Leimgruber, Hangartner, and Leemann 2010) and because it allows us to explicitly focus on the self-reported ideological orientations of the three levels of a party. In all four countries we compare the average left-right positions of survey respondents who indicated they had voted for a particular party with the average self-reported left-right positions of that party's members. Each group, the candidates, members, and voters, placed themselves on the same 0 (left) to 10 (right) scale. We did not create mutually exclusive groups for any of our analyses, which means that the group of voters may also comprise party members or even party candidates. Likewise, the group of party members may also include party candidates. We do not separate these three groups for conceptual and empirical reasons. As our discussion above has already made clear, the three levels of the party coincide with different levels of involvement. A level further up in the hierarchy simply adds involvement and does not substitute involvement. Therefore, it would be conceptually incorrect to artificially separate party voters from party members and party candidates. In addition to that, we were also not always able to separate the groups empirically. For example, the national election studies, which form the basis for our measure of party voters,

do not include a variable on party candidacy, sometimes not even on party membership or at least not on membership in individual parties. For these reasons, the three groups overlap conceptually and empirically, and any separation would have been artificial and not clear-cut.

For all four countries, we aimed at analysing surveys for all three levels conducted in close succession to one another. We therefore use for the candidate surveys Wave I (2007–2012) and Wave II (2013–2018) from the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS 2016) project. Unfortunately, the CCS does not include Iceland, and so our analyses in this country are limited to mid-level elite (members) and the non-elite (voters). For voters and members, we obtained data from individual national survey projects.

In Denmark, mean party voter placements are derived from the 2011 Danish National Election Study, and those of the party members are from the most proximate member study, which was administered in 2012 (Kosiara-Pedersen and Hansen 2012). Iceland does not have a study of party members, so the positions of party voters and party members are each calculated from the 2013 national election study. The data on Norwegian voters and members were both collected in 2009 in separate studies (Jupskås and Heidar 2009). Finally, the information for party voters is taken from the 2014 Swedish National Election Study (SNES), and the estimates for the aggregate position of Swedish party members are derived from the 2015 Swedish Party Membership Survey (SPMS) (Kölln and Polk 2017). While the timing of these various surveys is not identical, the surveys were conducted rather close to one another within each country and across all countries, providing a useful snapshot of the contemporary political preferences of party members and voters across the Nordic region.

We choose to focus on left-right ideology for substantive and practical reasons. Although we recognize the multidimensional nature of contemporary European politics (Bakker, Jolly, and Polk 2012), party politics in the Nordic democracies in particular have been shaped by and according to the left-right dimension (Rovny and Polk forthcoming). In Sweden, for instance, left-right ideology has been so dominant that analysts have referred to it as one of the most unidimensional political systems in the world (Oscarsson and Holmberg 2016). The specific content, measurement, and validity of the left-right dimension often varies from country to country (see, e.g., Gabel and Huber 2000; Benoit and Laver 2006; Bauer et al. 2017; Däubler and Benoit 2017), but few would dispute that left-right ideology has served as a dominant organizing structure to political competition in Western Europe in the era of mass participation (for recent discussions, see Dalton and McAllister 2015; Somer-Topcu 2015, 846). This makes

left-right ideology one of the most important means of investigating the functioning of party-based representation. On a more practical level, with a total of 10 data sets under scrutiny, it was difficult to find other measures of ideological preferences that existed across all levels and countries.

Results

To investigate our research question, we inspect the placement of candidates, members, and voters across parties and countries on the left-right scale. In order to find support for May’s hypothesis, two conditions need to be met: (1) members need to be ideologically more extreme than candidates, and (2) members need to be ideologically more extreme than voters. Figures 5.1–5.4 allow us to assess these conditions because they show mean positions for candidates (grey), members (black), and voters (red) per country per party within the same graph. For Iceland, we do not have information on candidates’ positions. Several noteworthy patterns appear in the figures.

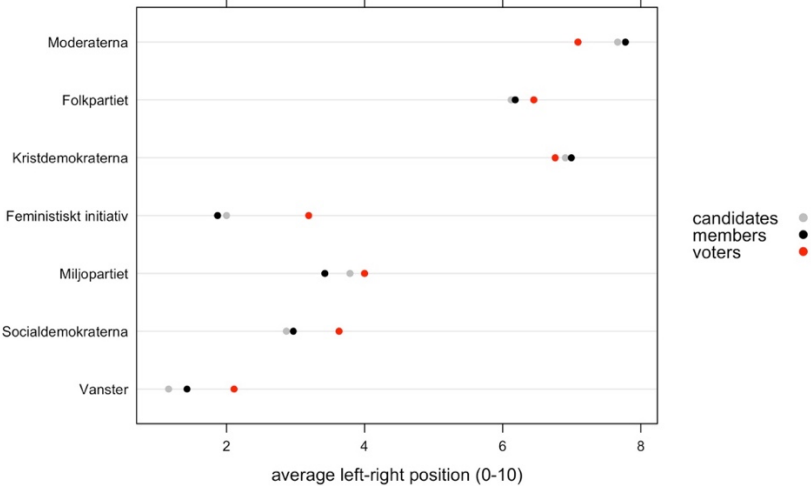


Figure 5.1: Sweden. Mean left-right ideology positions of party voters, members, and candidates in Sweden 2014/15.

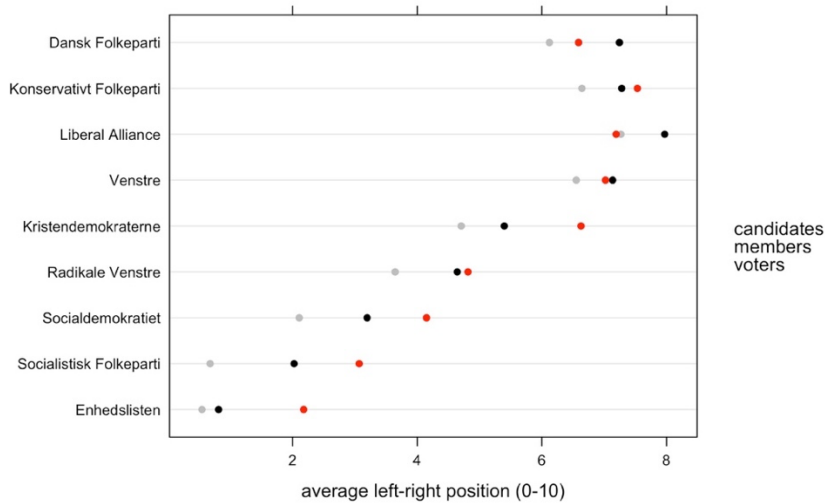


Figure 5.2: Denmark. Mean left-right ideology positions of party voters, members, and candidates in Denmark 2011/12.

The first observation to make is that we do not see a coherent pattern in support of May’s law with respect to the first condition. On the whole, the pattern within Swedish parties is generally supportive of the first condition of May’s law because only members of the Social Democrats report themselves as more moderate than the party’s candidates. In all other Swedish parties, candidates hold the more moderate ideological position. Yet the differences between candidates and members in the Swedish parties are all quite small (figure 5.1), particularly in comparison to differences in the other countries. Amongst Danish and Norwegian parties (figures 5.2 and 5.4), candidates seem to be consistently more left leaning than their own members – irrespective of the general political leaning of the party. The right-leaning parties in Norway do show members as more ideologically extreme than candidates, but if May’s law were supported more generally, we should see that members are more right leaning amongst the conservative parties, and also that they are more left leaning than their own candidates amongst the left-leaning parties. However, this is not the case here. Candidates belonging to all Norwegian and Danish parties included in the data set place themselves further to the left on the left-right scale than their own members. This is a very curious pattern, and it thus only supports the first condition of May’s hypothesis for parties on the right but not on the left.

It is interesting to observe that within countries, party-level differences are relatively coherent. All Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish parties cluster around similar country-level distances between candidates' and members' average left-right placements. This suggests that unmeasured country-level factors might be playing a more prominent role.

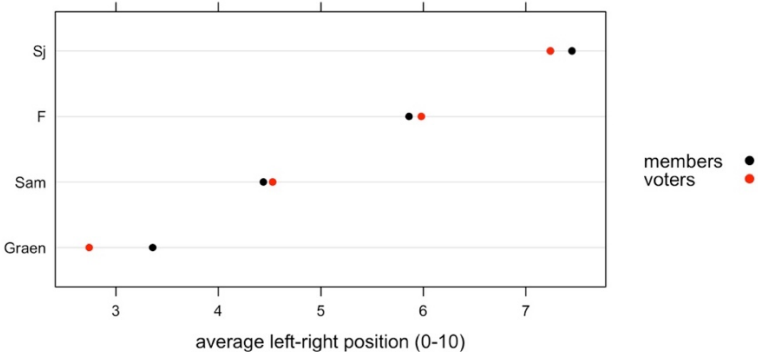


Figure 5.3: Iceland. Mean left-right ideology positions of party voters and members in Iceland 2013.

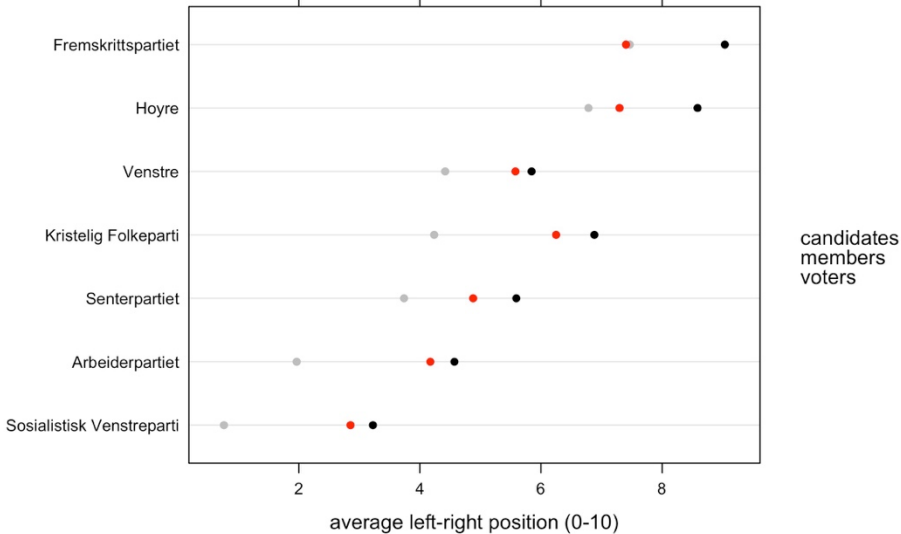


Figure 5.4: Norway. Mean left-right ideology positions of party voters, members, and candidates in Norway 2009.

With respect to condition two, figures 5.1–5.4 also make apparent that the voters and members of political parties place themselves on the left-right ideological spectrum more or less where we would expect them to be based on the party families to which they belong (see chapter 1). Looking at Sweden in figure 5.1, for example, voters and members of the Left Party (Vänster), Feminist Initiative (Feministiskt initiativ), Greens (Miljöpartiet), and Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna) are all to the left of the mid-point, with the Left Party furthest to the left. The same is true for the other ideological bloc in Sweden. Voters and members of the Moderates (Moderaterna), Liberals (Folkpartiet), and Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna) are all to the right of the mid-point, with the Moderates the most right-leaning party in the system, though not by much. We also see a substantial gap between the left- and the right-leaning parties, which reinforces Swedish politics' reputation as being structured by ideological blocs (see, e.g., Allern and Aylott 2009; Hinnfors 2015), but of course these data precede the 2018 general election, the results of which place increasing strain on bloc politics in Sweden. Looking at the three other Nordic democracies displayed in the figure reveals similar patterns, with, for example, voters and members of the Norwegian Socialist and Labour parties to the left and the Conservative and Progress Party to the right of the ideological divide. This provides both some face validity on data quality and preliminary evidence that voters and party members can meaningfully sort themselves according to left-right ideology.

An additional pattern apparent throughout all four figures is the rather high level of agreement between the average position of party voters and party members on the general left-right dimension, although there is interesting variation here as well. For most parties, particularly in Iceland, the two groups are rather closely aligned in their left-right preferences. Although there is never perfect overlap between the voters and the members, for parties such as the Danish (Venstre) and Swedish Liberals or Swedish Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna), differences are nearly impossible to detect. This pattern speaks in favour of the ideological representativeness of political parties when it comes to the comparability of the left-right position of members and the wider group of party voters.

Finally, and as the most straightforward test of the second condition of May's law, we would expect voters of all parties to be more moderate and members to be more extreme in their ideological positions. However, this is not what we always find. In Sweden, voters of the Liberal Party (Folkpartiet) are the most extreme in their ideological placement rather than the most moderate. In Denmark (figure 5.2), another three parties do not fit the party-voter pattern hypothesized by May and formalized in our second condition: voters of the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti), the Conservative People's Party (Konservativt Folkeparti), and the Liberals (Venstre) are all more extreme than these parties' members. Within the Icelandic Left Green Movement (Graen), members are again less extreme than voters, and in Norway, party voters of almost all parties see themselves, on average, as more extreme in their ideological placements than members' own self-placements. The notable exceptions here are the Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet) and the Conservatives (Høyre). These opinion structures within our 24 political parties in the Nordic countries suggest that a) the second condition of May's law is regularly not supported by our data, b) often, particular members of right-leaning parties are more extreme than their parties' voters, and c) the ideological representativeness of members is still relatively high, or at least higher than that of candidates.

The finding that the members of some right-leaning Scandinavian parties appear to be more ideologically extreme than the voters and candidates of that same party is interesting given that recent studies provide little support for the hypothesis in the context of other Northern European democracies, such as the Netherlands (van Holsteyn, den Ridder, and Koole 2017). Of course, we must reiterate that for some parties, such as the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna) in Sweden, these distances are not large, and we also find much less support for the ideological extremity of members relative to party voters or candidates among the parties of the left. While there does appear to be a clear trend towards more ideological extremity in party members compared to the voters for these parties in Denmark and Sweden, this is not the case in Norway.³ A big part of the reason we do not find support for May's law on the left is the overall more left-leaning orientation of the candidates in Denmark and Norway compared to the voters. Concerning the possibility of a 'fan-like' opinion structure in which the elites are the most extreme, followed by members and then voters as the most moderate group (Narud and Skare 1999), we only see this pattern among the parties of the ideological left in Denmark. On the whole, the variation we report across the countries of our sample and ideological blocs could at most be read as mixed support for 'May's law' in Nordic democracies (e.g., Narud and Skare

1999; Nielsen 2003; Widfeldt 1999), but these qualifications call into question the law-like nature of May's central hypothesis in this region.

Discussion and Outlook

In this chapter, we make three interrelated contributions to our understanding of the relationship between party members, candidates, and voters in Nordic democracies and the ability of political parties to serve as organizations that link members of society to the state through political representation. First, taken on the whole, the members, candidates for parliament, and voters of political parties place themselves on the left-right scale in a position that makes sense given the parties that they support. Candidates, members, and voters of social democratic parties place themselves on the centre-left portion of the scale, the members and voters of the parties further to the left of social democrats also place themselves further to the left than social democrats, and so on. Second, while the distance between candidates and other parts of a party can be larger for parties of the left in Denmark and Norway, the absolute distance between party members and voters in the Nordic democracies is not that large. Third, we find some qualified support for the idea that party members are more ideologically extreme than party voters and candidates, but this pattern is not uniform across countries or parties and must be understood in light of the relatively small absolute distances between members and party voters in the region. Overall, the chapter reports rather high agreement or representativeness in the Nordic democracies when it comes to party member and party voter ideological preferences as measured by the general left-right dimension. When it comes to representativeness of candidates and members, there seems to be more variation. A curious pattern that emerged from our analysis in this respect is that candidates of all parties in Denmark and in Norway place themselves further to the left than their own members.

This chapter has provided an overview of the ideological representativeness of political parties in Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden by examining the relative agreement of party voters, party members, and party candidates on the general left-right dimension. This is a key concept to party systems in Western European, party-based democracy. In general, our findings point in a normatively desirable direction. The voters and members of political parties are rather similar to each other in their ideological preferences. Nevertheless, there is interesting variation beneath this top-level story that is worthy of additional exploration, and there are other areas that we were not able to explore because of data limitations. Among the latter, one of the most

important would be the level of member-voter agreement on the socio-cultural dimension or issues closely related to it, such as immigration.

A number of researchers highlight the relevance of the socio-cultural dimension to contemporary European politics (e.g., Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002; Kriesi et al. 2006; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Bornschier 2010; Hobolt and de Vries 2015), and it is widely discussed in the Nordic countries in light of the influx of refugees between 2015 and 2016. What is more, other scholars emphasize that while there are relatively substantial numbers of citizens with left-leaning economic preferences and more authoritarian cultural attitudes, this particular package of policy preferences is offered by few if any Western European parties (Lefkofridi, Wagner, and Willmann 2014; Thomassen 2012; van der Brug and van Spanje 2009). The tensions involved in attempting to simultaneously represent multiple groups of voters on multiple dimensions give rise to what Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012) describe as ‘the strain of representation’. We lacked comparable data on second-dimension politics to examine party candidates, members, and voters across the Nordic countries here, but we hope that future data collection efforts will advance this cause, and in chapter 9 we turn to a fuller examination of ideological representativeness between members and parliamentary candidates that begins to tackle some of the questions surrounding multidimensionality. We report a rather rosy picture of representation in this chapter, but even in the famously unidimensional politics of Sweden, second-dimension contestation is increasingly present.

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³ Recall that the Norwegian data are from 2009, which opens the possibility that analysis of more recent data for members and voters could follow the trends present in the Danish and Swedish data.