



PROGRAM ON U.S.-JAPAN RELATIONS  
**Weatherhead Center** FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS  
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# **THE LIFE (AND DEATH) OF A PARTY: HOW VALENCE AND POLICY INFLUENCE PARTY ENTRY AND EXIT**

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**Harvard Program on U.S.-Japan Relations  
Occasional Paper Series  
22-HJ**

The Life (and Death) of a Party:  
How Valence and Policy Influence Party Entry and Exit

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**Abstract**

Political science has established that political parties' ability to persuade voters to choose them is based on a combination of the party's policies and valence attributes. Given the significance of policy and valence on shaping electoral competition, these factors should also influence how likely new parties are to enter the competition and which parties throw in the towel and retire. Using a negative binomial count model for party entry and a Cox proportional hazards model for party exit, I demonstrate that policy and valence play a dynamic role in determining when parties enter politics and which parties end up leaving. I find that party systems with diverse policy coverage and unequal valence among parties are more likely to have parties enter. For party exit, I find that parties that face more competition on policy and parties that have a downward trend in valence are more likely to leave politics.

**Introduction**

Political competition is increasingly conceptualized by political scientists in terms of policy and valence, the latter referring to non-policy factors like competence or likeability (Stokes 1992, Adams and Merrill 2009, Clark 2009, Ho et al. 2013). Political parties are the focal point of this competition, and scholars have begun to pay more attention to how parties woo voters based on their policy positioning and valence appeal (Adams et al. 2008, Kitschelt and Rehm 2015, Evrenk et al. 2018). At the same time, there is a burgeoning literature on party survival that seeks to understand what leads political parties to enter and exit the competition (e.g., Van Biezen and Rashkova 2014, Cyr 2016, Van de Wardt et al. 2017, Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2018, Zur 2019). The existence of political parties is a near constant in (and even outside) democracy, but individual parties frequently come and go. Given the critical functions that parties perform in organizing legislatures and providing voters their choices come election time, even small shifts in the composition of parties can drastically change the politics of a country. By wedding these bodies of literature, this paper analyzes the entry and exit of political parties in electoral competition through policy and valence.

The intuition behind policy and valence influencing party survival is straightforward. If parties are competing with one another along policy and valence lines, then the state of that competition on those dimensions should create incentives for new parties to organize or for old parties to retire. For party entry, when there is policy space not adequately covered by existing parties, new parties should emerge to compete in that space. Similarly, when current parties have weak valence, new parties should arise to challenge these parties. For party exit, the same logic applies. Parties facing more policy competition or that have weakened valence should, all else equal, be more likely to leave politics.

This paper empirically demonstrates that policy and valence shape party entry and exit in electoral competition. By examining all democratic elections since 1945 in 37 countries, I show using negative binomial regression that elections with less competition over policy and poor valence among current parties are more likely to have new parties enter in the subsequent election. Using survival analysis, I find that parties that face increased competition over policy or lose valence over time are more likely to exit the competition.

## **A Party is Born**

Political scientists have theoretically established why political parties in general are born. In legislatures, parties solve the collective action problem posed by the “legislative state of nature” wherein individual legislators cannot enact agendas on their own (Cox 2006, Koß 2018). For elections, parties provide policy platforms and a brand that make it clearer to voters what their choices are. What drives a specific party to enter the competition, however, is another matter.

Party competition is ultimately just that—a competition. Political parties put forward platforms, recruit candidates, and run campaigns with the intention of winning seats. Whether that behavior is driven by a desire to shape government policy or secure office for members, parties must compete with one another to win the finite resource that is votes. Of course, mounting these efforts, particularly at a national level, is costly. As political actors consider organizing a new party to compete with other parties out there, they are faced with considering how likely their efforts are going to be successful. Existing research establishes that, generally, party entry is sensitive to this cost-benefit incentive structure, with parties more likely to form when institutions are more permissive and other parties have not been around for long—both factors that increase the chances of success for a new entrant (Harmel and Robertson 1985, Tavits 2006, 2008).

Ultimately, the state of electoral competition influences how incentivized political actors will be to form and compete under a new party. As mentioned earlier, policy and valence dynamics are an increasingly common lens used to evaluate this competition and as such, should also shape the incentives of these same actors to form new parties. Thus far, researchers have incorporated policy to some extent in analyses of party entry, finding that

party systems with “openings” in the policy space see more parties enter (Laroze 2019) and that parties are more likely to enter when voter policy demands are not being met by current parties (Van de Wardt and Otjes 2022). Essentially, there is some evidence that the policy coverage of a party system in an election affects the likelihood of a new party forming in the next. This comprises the first hypothesis for my analysis:

H<sub>1</sub>: Low policy competition in an election increases the likelihood that a new party forms in the next election

Valence factors, typically voters’ perceived competence of parties, have also been included in some analyses as well, where scholars have found that high valence keeps parties in power (Oliver and Ostwald 2018) and that low valence among parties drives up the effective number of parties over time (Calvo et al. 2017). As with policy, there is not much empirical validation of the relationship between valence and party entry, but what is there points to the distribution of valence among parties driving party entry. Using the “current parties as competitors” theoretical framework, the logic of valence on party entry is that party systems with a high overall valence distribution should discourage new parties from forming. If current parties begin weakening on valence—whether through scandal, showing signs of incompetence, or the like—political actors should be more incentivized to challenge them with new parties. In addition, the dynamic between policy and valence should have a moderating effect on this relationship. If parties have weaker valence *and* low policy competition, this should be the most conducive environment for new parties. This motivates the second hypothesis for the paper:

H<sub>2</sub>: Reduced valence among current parties in an election increases the likelihood that a new party forms in the next election, especially if there is low policy competition.

## **The Death of a Party**

Once a party has entered the electoral arena, the next question is how long will it last? As with entry, there is growing research into when parties exit the competition. Scholars have found that parties survive based on their organizational strength, how new they are, and the quality of leadership (Beyens et al. 2016, Bollyer and Byztek 2013, 2017). Electoral success, particularly through securing seats in the legislature, also contributes to a party’s ability to survive (Dinas et al. 2015). Intuitively, the literature points to a greater chance of a party sticking around the more competitive advantages it has.

Party survival with respect to policy and valence theoretically build on these findings. On policy, if a party is offering a unique platform, it has greater access to voters who hold preferences close to that platform. However, if a competitor comes along with a similar platform, the resulting competition over voters imposes a greater risk to that party’s survival. Research thus far suggests as much with scholars identifying that parties

with distinctive policy positions survive longer (Van de Wardt et al. 2017, Zur 2019). This creates my third hypothesis:

H<sub>3</sub>: A party facing an increase in policy competition in an election is less likely to survive the next election.

Valence follows the same logic. If voters consider a party to be competent, they will be more likely to support it. In general, parties with high valence are more likely to garner support from voters and poor valence can lead to the collapse of a party (Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2018, Zur 2021). Again, the dynamic between policy and valence should also play a role here. In a vacuum, a voter facing two parties with similar policy platforms should choose the party with higher valence every time (Green 2007). However, if the parties have extremely divergent policies, a voter might be inclined to choose the low valence party if their policy preferences are more closely aligned with the low valence party (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2000). As a result, valence should have more impact when parties are facing greater policy competition.

H<sub>4</sub>: A party that has low valence in previous elections is less likely to survive the next election, particularly if it is facing high policy competition.

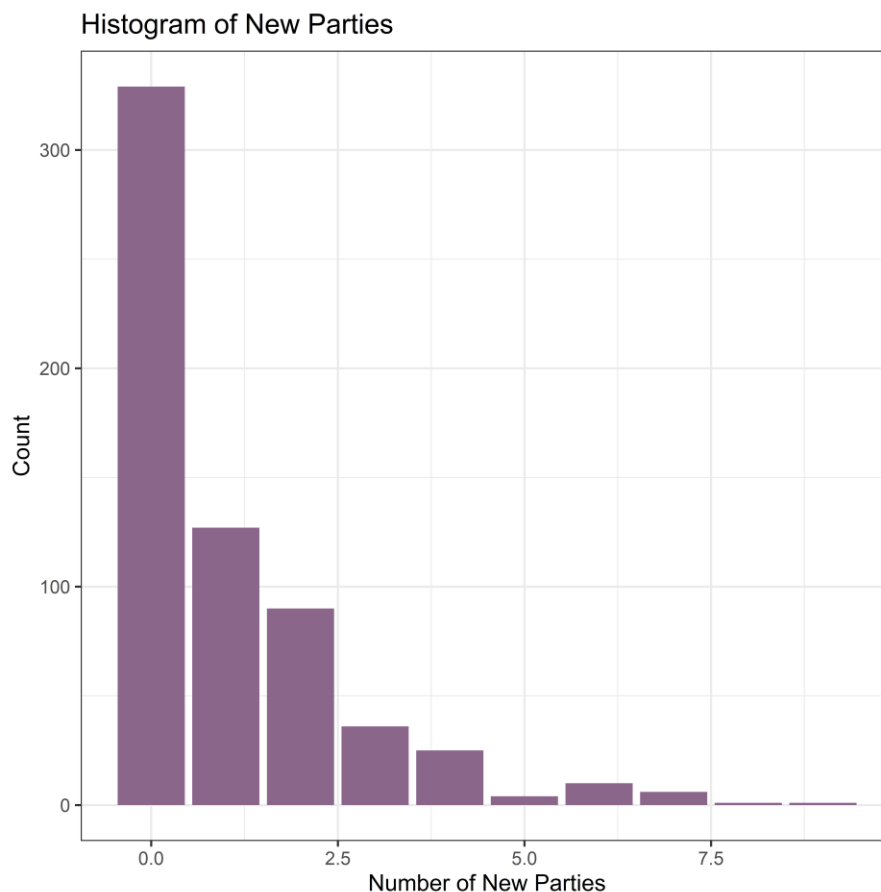
## **Modeling Party Entry**

Since party entry has a different outcome variable (a new party entering the party system) than party exit (a party no longer contesting elections), I use two different modeling strategies. For party entry, I use a negative binomial regression with the number of parties entering the party system as a count variable. For party exit, I use a Cox proportional hazards model that estimates the hazard of a party ceasing to contest elections. Data for both analyses come from ParlGov, a database that covers party competition for 37 countries between 1945 and 2019 that I supplemented to contain information for all elections through 2021.

### *Number of New Parties*

Beginning with party entry, the distribution of the number of new parties that enter an election is displayed in Figure 1. While no new parties entering is the modal observation in the data, at least one new party entering is just as common. Clearly, new parties are throwing their hat into the ring with some frequency.

**Figure 1. The Number of New Parties Entering an Election**



Given the count nature of new party entry and the frequency of zero new parties in the data, I use a negative binomial regression to model party entry. Furthermore, the data only observe a party once it is actively competing in an election. Since new parties affect many of the variables of interest like policy competition and the distribution of valence among parties, I will be looking at the conditions of an election at time  $t-1$  to make predictions about the probability of a party entering an election at time  $t$ . In other words, my model will predict the probability of new parties entering the next election given the nature of competition for the current election.

### *Policy and Valence*

One of the variables that ParlGov has in its dataset is a left-right measure of policy for each party scaled between 0 and 10, with 0 being extreme left, 10 extreme right, and 5 a moderate policy platform. Since openings in the policy space should encourage new parties to compete, I use the variance of party policy in the last election to create an aggregate measure of the overall policy coverage in an election. A higher variance indicates that more

of the policy space is covered by parties and, in accordance with  $H_1$ , should be negatively correlated with new party entry.

For valence, the country-level election unit of analysis requires a measure that captures the overall state of valence in a party system. If current parties are roughly equal on valence, there is not much incentive for a new party to try and challenge any of them. However, if one or more parties have low valence, even if there is a high valence party in the system, new parties may enter to challenge the low valence ones. I measure the distribution of valence in the party system by taking the variance of vote shares in the previous election as a proxy for the distribution of popularity among the various parties. The more equally distributed vote shares are, the more evenly matched the parties should be on valence terms. I also include an interaction term between policy variance and vote variance to account for how policy and valence. The coefficient for vote variance should be positive, indicating that as the distribution of popularity among the party system becomes less equitable in a previous election, the more likely new parties are to enter in the next election. The coefficient for the interaction between policy and valence should be negative as increasing the policy competition in the system should discourage parties from entering even if the valence distribution becomes more favorable to new parties.

#### *Institutions and State of the Party System*

Following what the literature currently says, the permissiveness of electoral institutions should be related to new party entry. I use the log of the seat product model introduced by Taagapera to measure how permissive a country's institutions are for multiple parties (2007). The seat product model multiplies a country's average district magnitude ( $M$ ) by its assembly size ( $S$ ). The larger the product, the more permissive the electoral system and the more parties that should be competing. I use the log of the seat product for more simplicity in its interpretability, denoted  $\text{Log MS}$  in the results (Shugart and Taagapera 2017). The coefficient for the log of the seat product should be positive.

Current research also points to volatility in the party system encouraging new parties. The collapse of parties, measured as the number of parties that ceased to exist between elections, has been found to correlate with new parties forming to take their place (Laroze 2019). In addition, I included country fixed effects to account for country-specific factors not covered by the covariates included in the model.

### **Results—What Brings in New Parties**

The results of the model on party entry are in Table 1<sup>1</sup>. Policy variance is negatively correlated with new party entry, suggesting that party systems with broad policy coverage are less likely to have new parties in accordance with  $H_1$ . In fact, a coefficient of -1.99

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<sup>1</sup> Country fixed effects are not displayed in the table for the sake of clarity. Their inclusion do not significantly alter the estimates for the covariates, but the model presented here was run with them included.

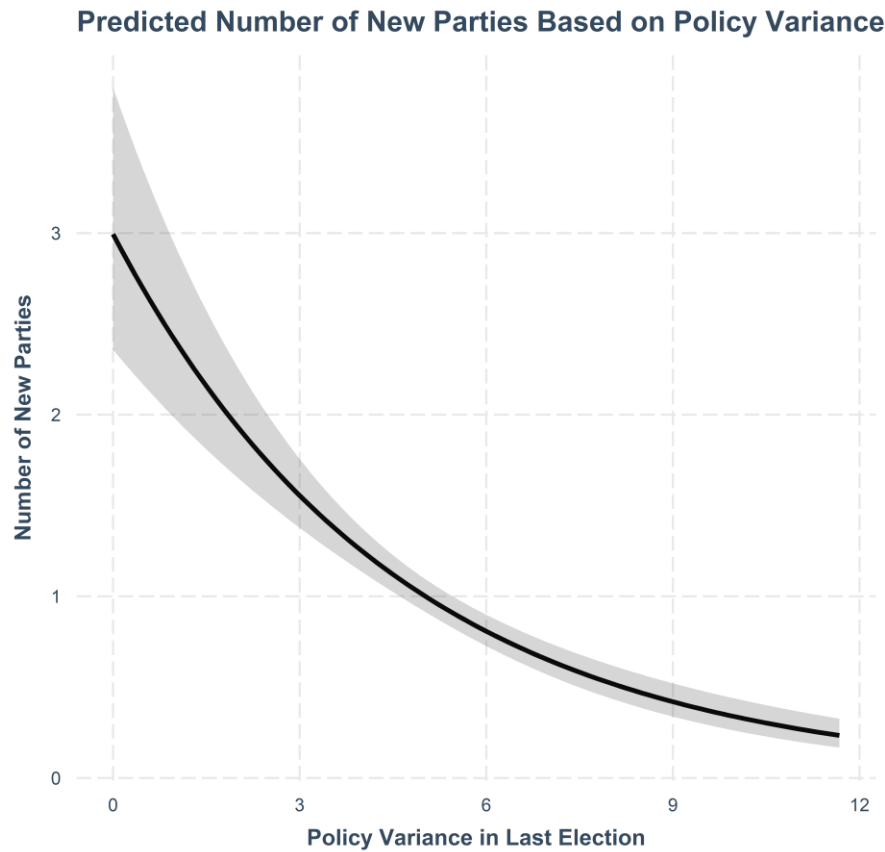
indicates that increasing policy variance by 10% reduces the likelihood of a new party by 18 percentage points. This relationship is made clearer in Figure 2.

**Table 1. Negative Binomial Regression Results of Party Entry**

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Number of New Parties
Policy Variance	-0.122*** (0.032)
Vote Variance	0.036*** (0.005)
Log MS	0.201*** (0.033)
Exited Parties	0.101*** (0.028)
Policy*Vote Variance	-0.005*** (0.001)
Constant	-1.169*** (0.264)
Observations	623
Log Likelihood	-855.559
theta	3.176*** (0.653)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,723.119
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01

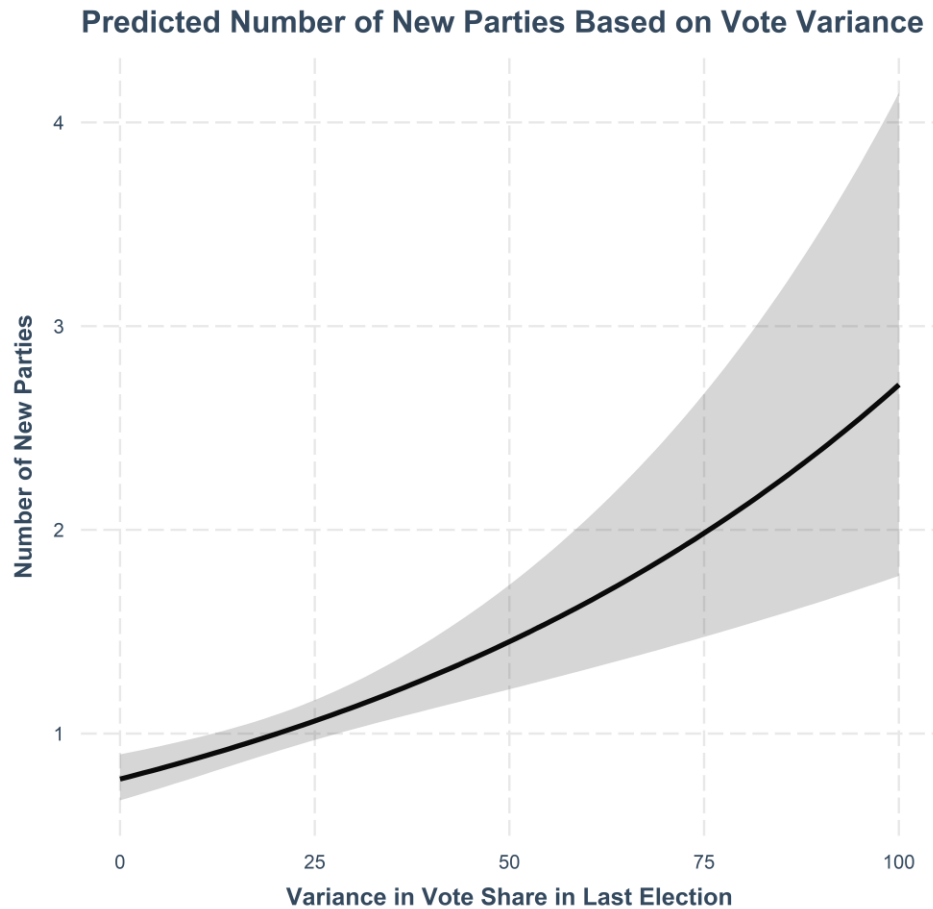


**Figure 2. Plot of Predicted New Parties and Policy Variance**



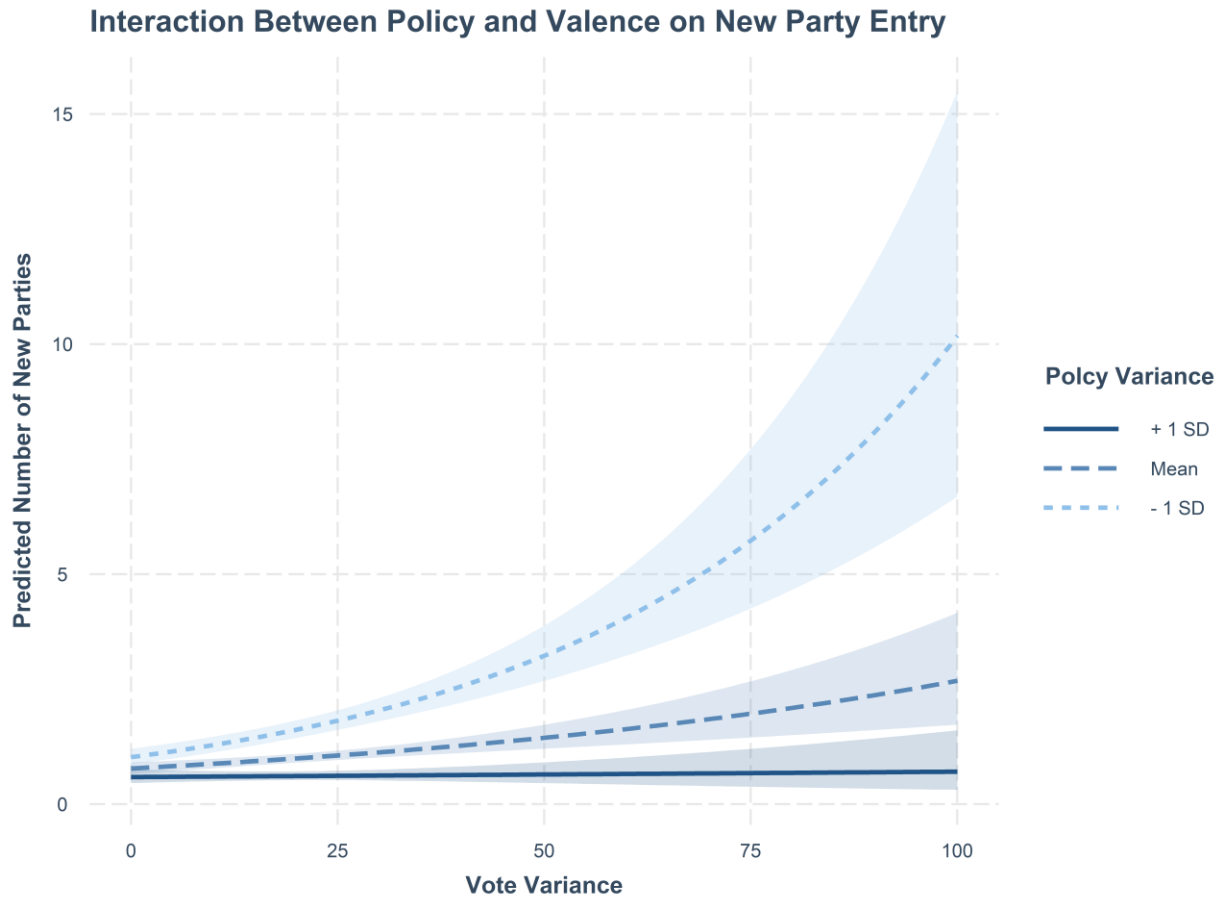
The positive coefficient on vote variance suggests that as a party system has a less equitable distribution of valence, more parties are likely to enter in the next election in accordance with the first prediction in H<sub>2</sub>. Substantively, increasing the vote variance by 10% increases the likelihood of a new party entering by about 10 percentage points, something that can be seen more clearly in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Plot of Predicted New Parties and Vote Variance**



As for the second portion of H<sub>2</sub> regarding the interactive relationship between policy and valence, the coefficient is negative as expected. This means that even as the distribution of valence becomes less equitable and therefore new parties are encouraged to enter the system, broader policy coverage within the system moderates that relationship such that fewer parties are likely to enter compared to a party system with less policy coverage. The substantive strength of this interaction is most easily assessed in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. Plot of Interaction Between Policy and Valence**



This figure shows how policy and valence dynamics can drastically alter how likely parties are to enter electoral competition. With policy coverage at its mean level, the center line in the plot, a more favorable valence distribution for new parties only encourages a small increase in the number of new parties. If policy coverage is one standard deviation above the mean—a party system with much of the policy space covered by existing parties—the number of new parties does not increase at all regardless of changes to the valence environment. However, party systems with sparse policy coverage, the top line in the plot, are extremely sensitive to valence changes. As the valence environment becomes more conducive to new party entry, the predicted number of new parties entering jumps from one or two new parties to four or more at moderate to high levels of vote variance.

## Modeling Party Exit

As previously mentioned, I model party exit using a Cox proportional hazard model. I approached party survival in similar fashion to studies on patient survival where a party (the patient) has numerous risk factors that contribute to its exit from electoral competition (death). Of the 989 parties in the data, 649 (a little over 65%) cease contesting elections at one point or another. The risk factors contributing to these party “deaths” are outlined below. Since this model is mainly concerned with how changes in covariates affect the risk of a party exiting, I present my expectations on the relationship between the independent and dependent variables in terms of the hazard ratio. A hazard ratio is centered on 1, which means that a variable neither increases nor decreases the risk of exit. Hazard ratios greater than 1 indicate an increase the risk of a party exiting the competition while a ratio less than 1 indicates a decrease to that risk.

### *Policy and Valence*

Parties that compete with others on policy are going to be exposed to at least some increased risk of exiting. I measure policy competition by taking the left-right policy scale included in the ParlGov dataset and dividing it into thirds. Parties with policies less than 3.5 are left-wing parties, between 3.5 and 6.5 are moderate, and parties greater than 6.5 are right-wing parties. For each party, I count the number of other parties occupying the same policy space to create a measure of how competitive that policy space is. Policy competition should increase the risk of a party exiting so the hazard ratio in the model should be greater than 1.

For valence, I looked at polls in party popularity a year prior to an election. I took the party’s poll result and weighted it by the variance in popularity among all parties to create a measure of popularity that considers the overall distribution of popularity in the party system. I then did the same thing for party popularity a few months before an election to create a change in the share of a party’s popularity. While the popularity of a party as measured in polls can be the product of valence and policy factors, it is unlikely that changes in that popularity over the course of a year will be primarily driven by policy given that parties typically do not drastically change their policy preferences in such a short time. As such, I argue that changes in popularity as outlined here can be reasonably attributed to valence. Parties that see their popularity drop relative to their rivals in the runup to an election are more at risk of exiting by the next one. The hazard ratio for changes in party popularity should be less than 1, indicating that an increase in party popularity should reduce the risk of a party exiting.

Following my theory on the dynamic between policy and valence in party, parties that have lower popularity should be particularly vulnerable when they also face high policy competition. I include an interaction between the policy competition and change in popularity variables to account for this dynamic. The interaction should be negative as high policy competition should reduce the influence of positive changes in party popularity.

## *Institutions and Party Performance*

Party survival may be influenced by the same institutional factors that I discussed for party entry. Institutions that are more permissive could introduce more rivals that in turn make competing more difficult for existing parties. At the same time, less permissive systems could encourage smaller parties to merge with larger ones, which for the purposes of this analysis, also constitute a party death. I include the log of the seat product in this model as well to account for the possible influence of electoral institutions on party survival.

Electoral success is perhaps one of the most direct evaluations of party strength and, by extension, should correspond with the likelihood of party survival. I used a party's seat share in each election as a measure of electoral success. The hazard ratio should be less than 1 as higher vote shares should reduce the risk of party exit.

In addition, numerous scholars have found that parties with extreme policy positions have a higher chance of survival (Zur 2019, Wieringa and Meijers 2022). To account for this phenomenon, I used the left-right measure of policy preferences and coded party extremism as a dichotomous variable. I counted parties with scores greater than two standard deviations from the median policy preference in an election as extreme parties. The hazard ratio for extreme policy preferences should be less than 1.

Finally, country-specific factors not covered by these covariates could also play a role in influencing how likely parties are to exit politics. I include country fixed effects to the model to account for this possibility, but the results are not greatly altered whether these fixed effects are included or not.

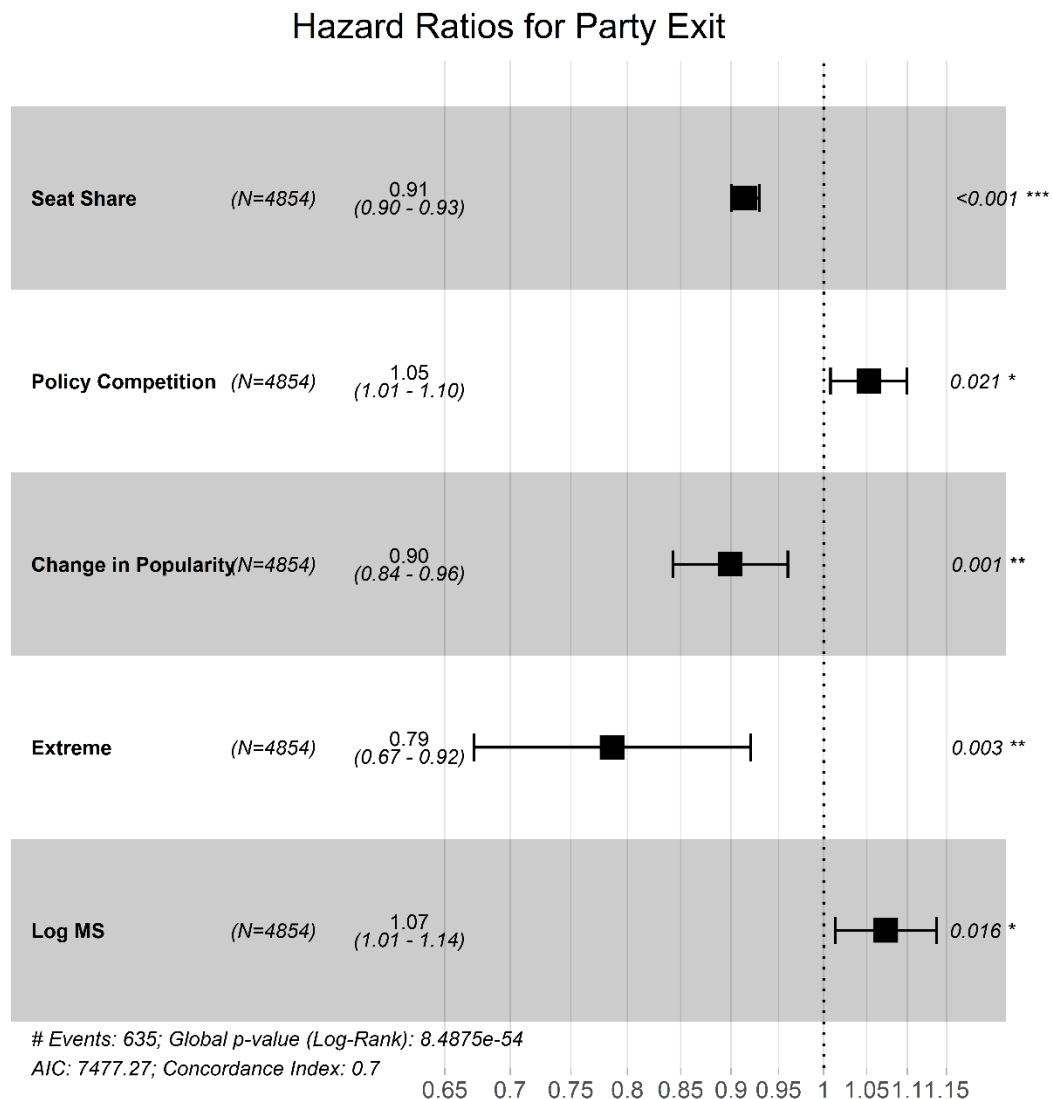
### **Results—What Leads to Party Exit**

The results from the Cox proportional hazards model are presented in Figure 5<sup>2</sup>. This figure presents the hazard ratio estimate with confidence intervals as well as statistical significance for the covariates discussed above.

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<sup>2</sup> Country fixed effects are not included in the figure for the sake of clarity, but they were included in the model. However, the results are not significantly altered by the inclusion or exclusion of country fixed effects.

**Figure 5. Plot of Hazard Ratio Estimates for Party Exit**



As the plot demonstrates, both policy and valence measures have a statistically significant relationship with party exit. On policy, parties that face an increase in party competition increase their risk of exiting by about 5 percentage points, supporting H<sub>3</sub>. For valence, parties that have their share of popularity increase by 1 (a 2% increase), reduce their risk of exiting by 10 percentage points in support of the first portion of H<sub>4</sub>. However, the interaction between policy and valence (not shown here) was both not statistically significant and substantively small.

Both an increase in a party's performance (share of seats won in the election) and being an extreme party reduce the risk of exiting as well. Though I did not have expectations on the influence of the electoral system on the risk of party exit, the results

here indicate that parties competing in more permissive systems are at a higher risk of exiting than those competing in less permissive ones. While the mechanism driving this relationship is not clear, it could be that more permissive systems encourage more parties to enter, making the party system more competitive.

## **Conclusion**

Recent research has explored party entry and exit on the one hand and the influence of policy and valence on electoral competition on the other. This paper combined the two, following the logic that if policy and valence shape electoral competition, these factors should also have a hand in driving the exit and entry of parties into that competition. For party entry, countries that have less of the policy space covered by existing parties are more likely to have new parties enter. As the distribution of valence (measured by variance in vote shares in the previous election) becomes less equitably distributed, this also encourages new parties to enter. Furthermore, policy and valence exhibit a dynamic relationship wherein the influence of valence on party entry is greatly enhanced when there is more policy space available for new parties to potentially stake their claim.

For party exit, greater policy competition increases the risk of a party leaving the competition as does a decrease in a party's valence (measure as the change in a party's share of popularity within the party system). The biggest takeaway from this analysis is simple: policy and valence have a significant role in driving entry into political competition as well as who ends up leaving that competition.

Of course, there are shortcomings that need to be addressed. First and foremost, the measures I use for valence are far from ideal. Data for more common measures of valence like voter perceptions of competence or party leadership evaluations are not available for either not enough countries, parties, or years. The models for party entry and exit rely on parties' vote share or polls on which party voters support. Both measures arguably involve policy considerations to some extent, as what leads voters to lend their support to a party via the ballot box or in a poll is some combination of policy and valence. While the valence measure of party entry (variance of vote share in the last election) likely has policy elements mixed in, two things are in its favor. First, the variable is not correlated with the policy measure (variance in party policy platforms). This means that even if policy has some role in the distribution of vote shares among parties, there is enough influence from valence to make the measure stand independent from policy. Second, the regression output exhibits statistical significance for both measures as well as an interaction between the two. Again, if vote variance is mostly attributable to the distribution of party policy, this would not be the case.

For party exit, I tried to mitigate the influence of policy on the measure of party valence by using the change in a party's share of popularity one year prior to an election. By making this variable a time-based variable, it should emphasize changes in valence. This assumes that voters' policy preferences and party policy platforms do not change as quickly as perceptions of valence do, something that has at least some backing in political science

(Adams et al. 2004, Somer-Topcu 2009, Clark 2014). Still, the analysis would be better served with more direct measures of valence.

This paper exposes the need for political scientists to seek for and encourage better measures of valence. The valence literature has sound theoretical roots and numerous formal theories that develop it but still lacks robust empirical validation. This paper also does not distinguish between party mergers, splits, and actual party retirement nor is there much research into these potentially significant differences. As I said at the outset, the party survival literature is still being developed and there are many avenues for fruitful research.



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