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The meaning of parties "in the shadow of power". The inner logic of small and marginal parties (cumulative dissertation)

The published articles:

Bartels J (2023) Are European Elections Second-Order Elections for Everyone? *Swiss Political Science Review*: 1–20. DOI: [10.1111/spsr.12559](https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12559).

Bartels J-E and Remke ML (2021) ‘Parties in the Shadows’ –Do Small and Marginal Parties Cater to a Niche? *German Politics*: 1–32. DOI: [10.1080/09644008.2021.1913725](https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2021.1913725).

Bartels J-E and Springer F (2021) Der Gang in den Schatten der Macht: Warum engagiert man sich überhaupt in einer Klein(st)partei? *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 62(3): 489–517. DOI: [10.1007/s11615-021-00322-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-021-00322-1).

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This thesis examines the rationality of actors in small and marginal parties using the rational choice theory. Various questions are investigated, such as the motivation for membership in a small and marginal party, whether they rationally adjust their programmatic strategy or whether they prioritize different elections. The results show that small parties generally act rationally, but also have limitations. Thus, the thesis contributes to the understanding of parties and party behavior, specifically in relation to small and also new parties.

The first article deals with the membership of small and marginal parties. In political science research, members of large parties are often examined, but members of small and marginal parties are often neglected. The motivations for such membership are more diffuse, but there are rational reasons such as dissatisfaction with the current system or ideological characteristics. Satisfaction with the system greatly influences the decision to become a party member. Since the costs of membership in a small and marginal party are often higher than the benefits, members appear to suffer from bounded rationality as they do not have enough information to evaluate the effectiveness of their membership.

The second article deals with the question of whether small and marginal parties occupy niche issues as a rational approach to distinguish themselves from large parties. For this purpose, manifestos were analyzed, and election results were evaluated. It turns out that small parties do indeed appear more niche and high nicheness leads to better election results. However, if a party is too niche it is difficult for the party to enter parliament and the parties run the risk of falling out of party funding if the programme is broadened – as there are special tipping points. Small and marginal parties have to rely on their niche issue becoming more salient in order to achieve greater success.

The third article deals with the election campaign efforts of small and marginal parties within the framework of the Second-Order-Election theory. This theory states that parties focus their resources on elections that are of greater importance. In second-order elections, voters behave

differently and there are more preference and protest votes. Small and marginal parties may have a greater interest in these elections as they can gain more votes than in national elections. Since the elimination of the five percent hurdle in European elections, these parties must consider them as first-order elections. However, examination of voter turnout, campaign expenditures, and election programs showed that small and marginal parties are only partially rational actors by not prioritizing European elections.

Small and marginal parties do not always act fully rationally, as they often lack sufficient resources and information to identify the best strategy. While their membership often occurs for rational reasons, small and marginal parties nevertheless have little political influence, and it is difficult for them to find the right degree of nicheness to be attractive enough. However, at the programmatic level, small and marginal parties behave more rational, as they use their scarce resources to differentiate themselves from the major parties and possibly be perceived as more competent. At the campaign level, though, they do not always focus on elections that promise them advantages, although they must advertise themselves here. It is argued that small and marginal parties are limited rational actors who want to act rationally but cannot always do so. However, the political space tolerates these supposedly irrational actors, so that these actors will continue to exist in the system.