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Explanatory Factors for the Merger of Political Parties

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Recently, scholars in the field of party organization have become focused on the phenomena of party adaptation and party change.¹ Studies report how long-term structural parameters, for example in institutions, the party system and society, affect the way political parties organize (Harmel and Janda, 1994). The types of party change described by the literature are diverse, and the outcomes of party change encompass different phenomena such as a change in party leadership, policy positions or organizational structure. In the present paper we are interested in the dynamics that underlie a particular, and rather extreme type of party change: the merger of parties. We intend to take a closer look at the dynamics of party merger, and examine the factors that trigger it.

The question why political parties merge has been relatively understudied. An obvious reason for this lack of scholarly attention is that party mergers are not abundant in Western European party-systems. Indeed, for all post-war Western European party systems, the long-term period between 1945 and 1987 exhibits only 18 party mergers (Mair 1990). On top of this observation, Mair (1990) reports that a large 44 percent of all party mergers actually occurred in only two countries: Finland and Italy. However, in Western Europe over the last years, new parties have emerged as a result of a merging process, with the German Die Linke and the Italian Partito Democratico as recent examples.

The first objective of the present paper is to develop a heuristic framework that enables us to closely study the specific factors that affect party merger. A dominant explanation for party mergers holds that electoral results and electoral expectations are the driving forces behind such mergers. The assumption is that risk adverse parties will join forces in order to put a halt to a decline in party popularity. Risk-taking parties will also merge because these parties will anticipate a renewed interest by voters for the new party. However, from Mair's (1990) empirical study it follows that party mergers are not rewarding at all in electoral terms: parties that merge tend to lose. The present paper argues that party mergers are the result of a complex interplay between three types of factors: (a) intra-party factors that drive dynamics within parties, (b) inter-party factors that drive interactions between potential merging partners, and (c) contextual factors.

The second aim of our paper is to apply our heuristic framework to a particular case. As such, we pursue an exploratory case study design to reveal the specific chain of events that lead to a party merger (Yin, 1984; Miles and Huberman, 1994). In particular, we look at the merger of two small Protestant parties in the Netherlands: the Gereformeerd Politiek Verbond (Dutch Reformed Political Union, GPV) and the Reformatorische Politieke Federatie (Reformed Political Federation, RPF). From this merger a new party emerged: the Dutch 'ChristenUnie' (Christian Union).

The structure of the paper is as follows. The next section introduces our heuristic framework that aims to describe the various, interrelated factors that explain party mergers. The framework departs from general theories of party change and introduces conditions under which parties are triggered to consider a party merger with another party, rather than a different type of party change. Subsequently, we describe the merger of the GPV and RPF into the ChristenUnie. The following section presents our case study analysis in which we apply our heuristic framework. The analysis answers the question which conditions have

triggered the merging between the GPV and the RPF into the ChristenUnie. In the final section, we discuss the value added by our heuristic framework in understanding the process that led to the merger of the two parties.

A Heuristic Framework of Party Merger

Since party mergers are a particular kind of party change, we draw upon more general theories of party change (in particular Harmel and Janda, 1994) to explain the phenomenon of party mergers. Of course, theories of party change cannot explain by themselves why parties merge. The reason is that the causal mechanisms that affect party change in general lead to a variety of changes, such as for example the renewal of party programs, adjustments of party strategy, or a transformation of the party organization. Therefore, we introduce specific conditions that could trigger parties to opt for a merger rather than for another type of party change into a general theory of party change. Figure 1 presents our heuristic framework for describing and explaining party mergers.

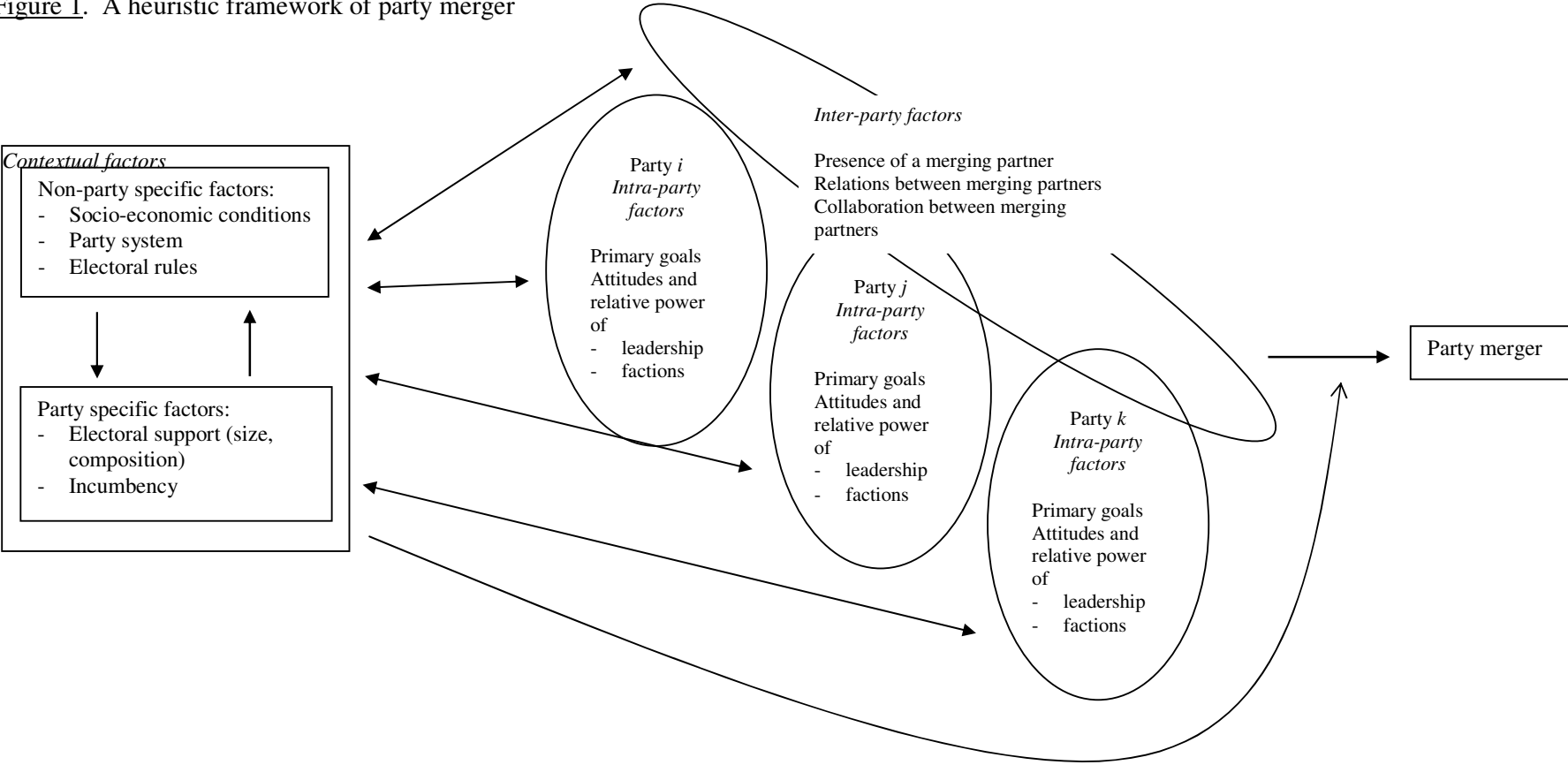
The heuristic framework of party merger includes factors which may lead to the fusion of political parties. It distinguishes three types or 'levels' of factors: contextual, inter-party and intra-party factors. Contextual factors are conditions that are related to the party system and the socio-economic environment. They develop from structural characteristics in the party environment and are presented in the left box of Figure 1. These conditions reflect dynamics outside the party, which can be either non-party specific or party specific (see also Harmel and Janda, 1994). Non-party specific contextual conditions affect all parties, for example the advent of public funding, which increases resources of all parties in the system. Party-specific conditions only affect one party, for example a change in the proportion of seats occupied in parliament.

Inter-party factors are presented in the tilted oval box that relates all potential merging partners (presented by the vertical oval boxes). These factors are dyadic, relational characteristics between parties. Examples of such factors are the availability of potential merging partners, and personal friendship or collegial relations between (powerful members of) different parties. Another factor is the availability of experience with collaboration between parties, such as the use of shared lists.

Internal (or intra-party) factors are specified in the oval boxes in Figure 1, for each of three hypothetical parties involved in a party merger (parties i, j, k) as the internal factors may differ for the different partners included in a party merger. We distinguish between two types of intra-party factors: the primary goals of the party (Strøm, 1990) and the attitudes towards merging and potential merging partner(s) of the main actors within parties: party leadership and dominant party factions.

Obviously, the three different types of factors we distinguish are associated to some extent. These relations are presented by the arrows in Figure 1. External conditions are interrelated with both the internal and intra-party factors. In addition, internal and intra-party factors are associated. We discuss the complex interplay between the different factors in more detail below. We first describe the factors that are potential catalysts for party merger separately by following the structure of the heuristic framework.

Figure 1. A heuristic framework of party merger



Contextual Factors

Non-party specific. Non-party specific, contextual factors at the social level affect all parties in the party system (Harmel and Janda, 1994). Such conditions include various social characteristics and events (social-demographic, economic, cultural or political). Examples are secularization and depillarization, or an economic decline or boom. Other contextual factors refer to the political party system, the electoral system (majoritarian or proportional), and electoral rules such as the provision of public funding, and the electoral threshold. These political factors are highly relevant for the study of party merger because they trigger parties' strategies and consequently influence the probability that parties merge. For example, if parties have little chance of being elected due to high electoral thresholds, the high thresholds may deter parties to compete by themselves in elections. Consequently, small parties will take a merger more easily into consideration in systems characterized by high electoral thresholds.

Party specific. Party-specific contextual factors refer to dynamics outside the internal organization of the parties, but which have an impact specific to a party (Harmel and Janda, 1994). Examples of party specific contextual conditions are the removal from government of an incumbent party, or electoral results. Frantzich (1989) shows that victorious parties seldom introduce innovations in their party organization. Panebianco (1998) interprets this finding as evidence for the idea that the occurrence of electoral loss is a crucial condition for party renewal. An electoral loss may motivate parties to merge as they hope to gain from combining the votes of previously separate constituencies. This motive will be stronger the smaller the party and the higher the electoral threshold. Under these conditions, a merger may be the only way to gain influence. Polls also may affect a party's decision to merge (or at least collaborate with another party). For example, after the media reported disappointing poll results the small Flemish-nationalist party N-VA decided to draft common lists with the Christian Democrats (CD&V) for the Flemish parliamentary elections of 2004..

Inter-party Factors

Obviously, the most important necessary inter-party condition for party merger is the availability of one or more potential merger partners. This argument is not circular, because the availability is to a large extent determined by the similarity between the different potential merger parties. Parties will opt for a partner in a merger only if the partner is similar in some salient respects—even though the potential merging parties may care about different aspects of similarity. The aspects of similarity may include party ideology, party culture, the primary party goals, composition of the constituency and electoral evolution.

A similarity between parties will reduce the possible 'transaction costs' of a party merger for both parties. For example, if two parties with a different ideology merge, both parties need to adapt their program to a significant extent. This adaptation needs to be negotiated between the party leaderships and between the factions of each party. If, by contrast, merging parties have a similar ideology, programmatic adaptation will be limited and thus will involve less transaction costs. Ideological dissimilarity also increases the stakes that both parties have in the merger. If parties have to change more due to a party merger, the higher the probability that they will face subsequent losses in their electorate.

The probability that parties merge will also be affected by inter-party relations. In particular the quality of cooperation and trust between party leaders is reported to be an important variable. As Mair (1994: 140) notes: "Mergers derive from elite behavior, prompted by cross-party friendships". Mair (1994) proposes inter-party friendship as a solution to the paradox why parties merge in the face of joint electoral losses. But there may be other factors.

It is likely that previous experiences in terms of collaboration have proven so compelling, that parties consider merging. The experience from joint activities in local elections, or with regard to specific issues, builds trust and thus reduces the transaction costs of a full-scale party merger. For example, the collaboration between three Dutch Christian parties within the European Parliament stimulated the merger of these three parties at the national level into the CDA (Koole, 1992).

Intra-party Factors

Party leadership and dominant factions within political parties are important actors in any party change process (Harmel and Janda, 1994). Because party leaders put their stamp on the party organization, party ideology and policies, the importance of political leadership for party mergers cannot be underestimated. Wilson (1994) argues that changes will occur only when party leaders believe this is necessary. We argue that the relative power of the dominant faction and the party leader in combination with their attitude towards a merger and potential merging partners determine the probability of a merger. Thus, dynamics within the dominant factions and (changes in) party leadership ultimately determine whether a merger process will be set up. In this dynamic process, the leader's charisma and personality are of crucial importance. Indeed, (s)he will have to be able to overcome internal resistance against the proposed party merger, which is determined by a complex and dynamic interplay of: (a) the power (s)he has within the party, (b) the party leader membership in the dominant faction within the party², and (c) composition and preferences of the dominant faction.

In addition to the characteristics of the key players within parties, the parties' primary goals are crucial determinants for a merger. If the party is *vote seeking*, it may consider a merger if the merger is expected to result in an electoral benefit. If the party is *policy seeking*, it might prefer to retain its (small) niche position within the party system and keep its distinct ideological profile—thus rejecting a merging process. If the party is *office seeking*, it may consider a merger if the merger is expected to increase the probability that the party will be a suitable candidate for a coalition government.

Interplay between the Factors

Although we discussed the three types of factors separately, they are closely related and might reinforce each other. In fact, party mergers result from specific constellations of (interrelated) contextual factors, inter-party factors, and intra-party factors. In figure 1 these relations are expressed by the different arrows. Because we cannot provide an exhaustive discussion of all possible influences and (feedback) relations between all factors in the heuristic framework of party merger, we present some examples.

Contextual factors may directly affect both inter-party and intra-party factors. For example, in The Netherlands the contextual factor of social de-pillarization has reduced ideological differences between the constituencies of potential merging parties (inter-party factor). The introduction of a new party could stimulate party merger—either when the new party becomes a merging partner, or when the threat posed by the new party stimulates cooperation between other potential merging partners. Contextual conditions may also directly influence intra-party factors. The prospect of electoral loss could force a party to adopt a different program, or to change leadership in a direction which stimulates party merger. Thus, electoral considerations could be a rational underpinning of positive attitudes within a party towards merger (intra-party condition).

In addition, contextual factors could reinforce the effect of inter- and intra-party factors of party merger. For example, small parties are more inclined to consider a party merger in a system with high electoral thresholds than in a system with low electoral thresholds (inter-party factor). Moreover, this effect is conditional upon the primary goals of the parties (intra-party factor). For office-seeking parties, the effect of an electoral threshold will be less than for vote-seeking parties, especially for small parties. For a vote-seeking party, the event of an electoral loss will constitute a true shock. For an office-seeking party, the same event could have completely different consequences, especially when the party manages to continue its participation on government. Thus, the effect of electoral loss is highly dependent upon the combination of a party-specific contextual factor (electoral loss) and an intra-party factor (primary goal).

Finally, inter-party factors and intra-party factors have intertwined effects on party merger. Obviously, changes in party leadership may affect—both positively and negatively—relationships and similarities between potential merging partners. The development of a new faction within a party might close an existing gap in ideological distance to potential merging partners. If a parties would decide to change its primary goal, for example from vote-seeking to office-seeking, this may result in a sudden merger with another office-seeking party.

The Case of the ChristenUnie

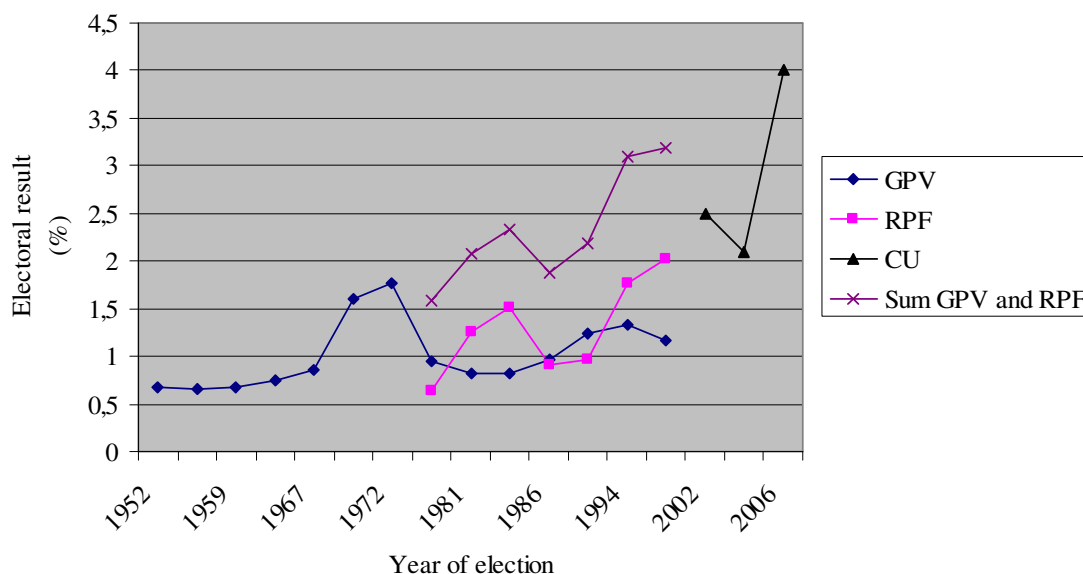
On the basis of our heuristic framework presented in the previous section, we study the factors which have triggered the merger of the Dutch Gereformeerd Politiek Verbond (Dutch Reformed Political Union, GPV) and the Reformatorische Politieke Federatie (Reformed Political Federation, RPF) into the ChristenUnie. We take a look inside each of the parties to isolate the factors that triggered the chain of events towards merging. Thus, we illustrate the applicability of our general framework for the study of specific party mergers, as a first step towards a more comprehensive, comparative case study design.

We combined several complementary methodologies for data collection. In the first place, we interviewed two key informants who had been closely involved in the merger process. One of them had been a member of the GPV and one interviewee had belonged to the RPF. The narratives from semi-structured interviews were complemented with journalists' accounts of events, with the analysis of party documents and with the results of applied research on the ChristenUnie. Before we turn to our study of the factors that led to the party merger, we first sketch a short historical background, including the electoral performance of the parties.

Historical Background of the ChristenUnie

The ChristenUnie was founded officially in 2003 as the merger of two small Calvinist parties: the Dutch Reformed Political Union (Gereformeerd Politiek Verbond, GPV) and the Reformed Political Federation (Reformatorische Politieke Federatie, RPF). The merger was the result of a long process which started in the late seventies with discussions among party members about possible collaboration. The process went incrementally, through increased collaboration such as the use of joint lists at the local level, and connected lists during the 1998 parliamentary elections, towards a joint program during the 2002 parliamentary elections.

Figure 2. Percentage of the popular vote cast for GPV, RPF and CU (Dutch national parliamentary elections)



How did the ChristenUnie perform in electoral terms? Figure 2 shows the trends in percentage of the votes casted in elections for the two different parties, and for the new merger party as of 2002, when the GPV and RPF had a joint list and joint program. For comparison, Figure 2 also displays the aggregate electoral result for the GPV and RPF before 2002. It shows that—despite all promising polls—the 2002 parliamentary elections were not successful for the ChristenUnie. The percentage of the popular vote in 2002 was considerably lower (more than half a percent lower) than the aggregate of the percentages of the two composite parts in 1998 (when the two parties connected their lists). The following elections, of 2003, where the parties had fully merged, show a similar pattern. Again, the new party loses about half a percent of its previous electoral result. As a result, the two Christian parties lost one third of its votes between 1998 and 2003. The electoral results for the ChristenUnie in 2003 as a whole almost equal the results of the RPF in 1998.

These trends corroborate the findings of Mair (1990) who reports that party mergers are not rewarding. Indeed, the parties lost significantly after merger. Thus, the electoral gains hypothesis is clearly rejected by this case. In addition, Figure 2 shows that the hypothesis that electoral losses would lead parties to consider a merger is also rejected. The GPV, showed a stable pattern. But, why would the successful RPF have merged? Between 1986 and 1998 this party had seen an increase in votes of 200 percent. Hence, electoral losses could clearly not have been a driving force for party merger. Again, this is completely in line with Mair's (1990) conclusion that in Western Europe between 1945 and 1987 at least one of the merging parties enjoyed electoral growth.

Yet, in the longer run the picture becomes different. The elections of 2006 show a different picture: the ChristenUnie reached a highest electoral success ever in its history. It received about four percent of the Dutch popular vote. After coalition negotiations, the ChristenUnie became a member of a newly formed coalition government with the Christian Democratic Party CDA and with the labor party PVDA.

Contextual Factors

Non-party specific. A highly important non-party specific factor that brought about significant change for the two Christian parties was the process of *secularization*. As in most Western countries, the Netherlands witnessed a process of secularization over the last decades. Whereas 24 percent of the population did not belong to any church in 1958, almost 65 percent of the Dutch population did not belong to any church in 1999 (Becker and de Wit, 2000). This trend of secularization did not negatively affect the traditional constituencies of the RPF and GPV, and thus their electoral success (see Figure 2). The secularization process particularly affected the larger religious parties and largely passed by the smaller, more traditional religious parties (Koole, 1992). Yet, secularization had important social consequences and moreover affected traditional political thoughts. The process of secularization directly resulted in two important political mergers: the first merger brought about the CDA (Christian Democratic Party) in 1980 and the second merger brought about GroenLinks (Green-Left Party) in 1990 (Hippe and Voerman, 1994).

The merger of three religious parties into the CDA was the direct result of the electoral losses of each of the merger parties, which were induced by secularization and the cultural / moral change which undermined traditional feelings of securities. The rise of the CDA substantially altered the political landscape because it positioned a new and important confessional competitor at the right center of the political spectrum. As Mair (1990: 140) note, the pan-Christian merger of the CDA in the Netherlands was of central importance for the Dutch party system and competition. A similar change in the political landscape took place ten years later, when four progressive (leftist) parties decided to merge into one party, GroenLinks. Thus, both at the left and at the moderate right of the political spectrum, concentration processes took place.

The smaller and ideologically more distant GroenLinks party did not affect the Christian parties GPV and RPF as much as did the merger of the larger, religious parties into the CDA. Indeed, the foundation of the CDA has been a direct source for the foundation of the RPF. A small, rightist group within the ARP—one of the merger partners of the CDA—was unwilling to collaborate with the Catholics and decided to start an independent party (Koole, 1995). The changes in the political landscape stimulated further discussions within both parties about a potential merger between the GPV and RPF. Both parties had to focus themselves on the common competitor CDA, and cooperate rather than compete (Hippe and Voerman, 1994) to distinguish themselves from their much larger Christian counterpart.

Thus, the secularization trend brought about fundamental changes in the party system and further reinforced cooperation. This had an important, combined effect on the ideological program of both smaller Protestant parties. Close cooperation, and a later merger, would be instrumental to stimulate a new Christian mood against the background of a secularizing world. A merger between the two parties would result in more and better attention for ‘the word of God’ in Dutch politics. Both parties were highly conscious about the further marginalization of their principled issues and positions. For example, in the early 1990s they rigidly rejected a governmental proposal on euthanasia in parliament, which stirred considerable societal incomprehension (Hippe and Voerman, 1994). In the 1990s, their programmatic efforts were further reinforced with the rise of the *purple cabinet*, a government coalition without Christian parties which pursued a progressive policy with respect to ethical and moral issues.

A more specific, but equally important contextual factor which boosted the party merger of the GPV and RPF was the foundation of the *Evangelic Broadcast* (EO, ‘Evangelische Omroep’) in April 1967. The aim of the EO was to spread the Gospel of Jezus

Christ through radio and television broadcast (Article 3 of its statutes). The broadcast aimed to bring together all Protestant Christians from different religious subgroups. The Netherlands has traditionally been a multi-religious country. The Protestants were deeply divided in many different subgroups, with the more latitudinarian (Reformed Protestants) and the orthodox (Re-Reformed) as the most important subgroups. When it brought together all these subgroups, the EO broke down the huge barriers for direct contact between that had existed previously. In addition, during the 1980s the orthodox Protestant newspaper *Dutch Journal* (Nederlands Dagblad)—spokesman of the GPV for many decades—opened up itself towards a broader Protestant public. Thus, developments in the media enabled the different Protestant subgroups to span boundaries and *bridge* their religious differences.

The final contextual factor that enabled the merger of the two parties is the Dutch electoral system, which is characterized by strongly proportional representation and a very low threshold.³ Consequently, parties are rewarded relatively easily for their activities. Discussions at the end of 1970s, about a possible introduction of a higher electoral threshold, put the issue of a merger higher on the political agenda (Hippe and Voerman, 1994).

Party specific. The electoral loss of parties has been considered to be an important party specific contextual stimulus for party change. Particularly for *vote-maximizing* parties, electoral losses send shock waves to the party members and generate discussions about the need for change. We discussed above that neither the RPF nor the GPV have shown a clear pattern of electoral decline in the decade before the eventual merger. Quite on the contrary, the GPV expanded its electoral base since the mid eighties. Hence, there was no electoral pressure for the parties to merge. Yet, the ongoing trend of secularization made the party leaders aware that eventually a decline in electoral results would develop. As one of our interviewees stated: “If the GPV would have continued to exist, we would have disappeared anyway or have got a maximum of one percent of the votes. Polls organized by the GPV and the media indeed showed a decline in electoral support. So, even if the parties could not be labeled as vote-seeking during the nineties as Buelens and Lucardie (1998) note, electoral considerations clearly played a secondary role. The fear—in particular within the GPV—that a fusion would result in an electoral loss, was countered by the argument that a merger would increase the power to influence policy. Other arguments also played a role, for example that MPs of a merged party are better able to specialize themselves in specific issues.

Inter-party Factors

‘Spreading the word of God’ appears to have been the parties’ main motivation for the merger. Indeed, with respect to their ideology, both parties were ‘natural’ partners. Even though dissimilarities existed between the parties’ programs on specific issues (Weggeman, 1995), both parties were orthodox Protestant. Both parties also had an organizational structure which distinguished themselves from other Dutch parties. They assigned much more power to the local or regional ‘election associations’ (Koole, 1994: 282). As one of our interviewees noted: “There were too little substantial ideological differences to stay independent of one another.” Yet, apart from this ‘rational’ argument, there were emotions and there existed strong attachments to a particular church and related party. Such feelings, as well as the history of conflict between the churches, obviously stood in the way of a rapid merger process.

In addition to the similarities in ideology, both parties were also similar with respect to electoral size and the socio-demographic background of their constituency. A survey among participants at a joint meeting of the GPV and RPF in 2000 (Lucardie et al., 2001) revealed similar political attitudes and social characteristics for the members of both parties. Yet, the

members of the GPV showed a stronger identification with their own party than did the adherents of the RPF. Whereas the GPV members were—without exception—orthodox Reformed, the RPF members belonged to different religious denominations. Thus, the willingness to cooperate and open up the party for members from different denominations was particularly strong with the RPF.

There were no particular good friendship relations between the party leaders. The leaders of the GPV and the RPF, who started the process towards a union (Thijs van Daalen and Janco Cnossen), even did not know one another personally beforehand. However, during the process both leaders developed sound *professional* relations with mutual trust and respect.

As mentioned above, the party merger of the GPV and RPF into the ChristenUnie was the final step in a long period characterized by different types of collaboration. Before the merger, both parties had already developed joint activities. For example, in several communities, long standing collaboration and joint electoral lists existed between the GPV and RPF (often expanded to a third Protestant party, the SGP). The number of these electoral collaborations grew since the 1970s, particularly at the local, the provincial and European level where the electoral threshold is higher than on the national level and where the fear for the decay of the party's profile is lower given that the national organization can keep its independency (Voerman, 1992).

At the local level, the shift towards increasing collaboration is clearly visible. Whereas in 1978 the RPF and GPV submitted independent lists at local elections in respectively 39 percent and 77 percent of the communities in which they participated, in 1994 these numbers dropped to 25 percent and 28 percent respectively. The collaboration between the RPF and GPV grew from seven percent in 1978 to a 35 percent in 1994 (Hippe and Voerman, 1994). The use of joint lists also showed a significant growth in both electoral and policy success between the 1994 and 1998 local elections. For the RPF, the close collaboration at local elections had an electoral-geographical background: in contrast to the GPV, the RPF had only few strong communities in which it dominated (Hippe and Voerman, 1993). The success of the local collaboration clearly 'pushed' both parties towards a merger at the national level. At the European level, the GPV and RPF submitted—together with the SGP—joint lists since 1984. The high electoral threshold—at least in Dutch norms—of four percent was an important explanation for this collaboration on the European level (Koole, 1995).

Besides electoral collaborations, other forms of cooperation existed. For example, in both Houses of Parliament, the MP's met regularly and standpoints were regularly attuned. Also subsidiary organizations such as the youth organizations intensified their collaboration over the years. Hence, there was a long tradition of both electoral and non-electoral collaboration before the eventual merger of the two parties (Hippe and Voerman, 1994).

Intra-party Factors

RPF. Since the foundation of the RPF in 1975, the party pursued collaboration with other political groups, which stood for a policy on the basis of 'the word of God'. It should be noted that the RPF was—in contrast to the GPV—not attached to one particular church and may thus be considered as a 'broader' party compared to the GPV. A first action with respect to a collaboration between different Protestant parties was the proposal for a connection of the party lists of the RPF, GPV and SGP (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij, Political Reformed Party; a third orthodox Calvinist party), in the scope of the 1977 National Parliamentary elections. With clock-like regularity, prominent members of the RPF held a discourse in favor of a merger of the Reformed-Christian political powers. The party argued that differences between the different Protestant religions should not influence general political ideas and

politics. As long as such a merger was not established, the RPF was in favor of collaboration in different fields, not only at elections, but also between party related organizations. A survey conducted in 1998 on demand of the Evangelic broadcast EO (Evangelische Omroep) revealed that 92 percent of the RPF voters were in favor of a merger (de Boer et al., 1999).

GPV. The same survey of the Evangelic broadcast EO showed that also within the GPV-electorate, a large majority (82 percent) had a positive attitude towards a merger. Members of the GPV were generally more reserved with respect to a merger. At the end of the 1970s, the party did not feel like losing its identity, and consistently refused invitations of the GPV to create a formal association. Yet, one particular faction within the party was in favor of collaboration in order to be able to realize at least a part of the party's program. After the disappointing results of the 1981 general elections, this faction flourished. Some prominent GPV-members made an appeal in the newspaper to defend a policy "which is concentrated on an increase of influence and the attraction of associates" (Hippe and Voerman, 1993: 181). A previous Member of Parliament, Bart Verbrugh, argued that differences in churches should not influence politics. After this publication, a change occurred, and the influence of some prominent persons with a positive attitude towards a merger cannot be underestimated. The General Assembly of September 1981 decided—with an overwhelming majority—that connecting lists should be made possible for those cases in which independent participation at elections was not favorable. Even though some level of disagreement continued to exist within the party, opponents lost more and more ground. Nevertheless, an independent list of the GPV party remained the principle, with a focus on the party's specific identity and denominational background. At the end of the 1990s, party leader Gerrit Jan Schutte supported "collaboration with engagement and obligations, but also independency" (de Boer et al., 1999: 50). Schutte left the party one week after the ChristenUnie officially became a joint fraction with Dutch Parliament.

Conclusion

During the last decades, scholars have attempted to build theories or models to explain party change and adaptation (e.g. Panebianco, 1988; Harmel and Janda, 1994). However, the merger of parties—which may be considered as a specific type of party change—has hitherto attracted little attention and no study has—to the best of our knowledge—explicitly explored the driving forces behind mergers. The purpose of this contribution was to fill this gap and to present a heuristic framework that seeks to explain why parties merge. It is a framework that allows us to identify crucial events and changes that may lead to a party merger. Taking insights from the rich literature on party change, the model introduces a complex interplay between three different types of factors: (a) contextual factors, (b) intra-party factors, and (c) and inter-party factors.

We applied the heuristic framework to the case of the Dutch ChristenUnie, which was found in 2003 after a merger process of two minor Protestant parties (GPV and RPF). The case shows how secularization, the opening and broadening of Protestant institutions and organizations, and changes in the Dutch party system and policy all initiated collaboration between two parties with a similar background and primary goal. Both parties could indeed be considered as being policy seeking, aiming at 'spreading the word of God'. Despite the similarities between the parties and the bridges that were built between the different Protestant groups, the decision to merge was the result of a long process over two decades. In particular the RPF with its monolithic bloc of orthodox Reformed members and its outspoken and principled ideology had always been skeptical towards a merger. Obviously, the electoral risk that is being taken when joining can be higher for parties with a very particular ideology

and profile. At the same time, the RPF was aware of the fact that it would possibly disappear or become trifling in a secularizing society if it would continue to exist independently. This argument, and the hope to take (policy) advantage of becoming a larger formation eventually resulted in the choice for a full scale merger.

This article is intended as an original addition to the rich literature on party change and a first attempt to fill the gap in research on party mergers as a particular type of party change. Our effort has been directed towards providing a heuristic framework that explains why parties merge and applying this model to a single case. Our single case study demonstrates that the decision to merge is a complex interplay between different contextual, intra-party and inter-party factors as presented in our model. Hence, we believe to have shown that our framework is a useful tool that allows to clarify the complex dynamics that initiate a merger. However, we recognize that one example does not constitute a true test of our framework. The next step consists precisely in a more comprehensive comparative case study design that may open the way for further model and hypotheses testing.

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Notes

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² In practice, the party leader will most often belong to the dominant faction since party leadership is often the result of a struggle between the various factions in which the winner delivers the leadership (Verstraete, 2003).

³ The threshold in the system has been set at only 0.67 percent of the national vote (Koole, 1994: 283).