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Political parties and organization studies: The party as a critical case of organizing

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the isolation of processes of normative and affective commitment; (4) parties prioritize and intensify normative control mechanisms; (5) party organizing currently represents an example of profound institutional change, as new (digital) formations challenge old bureaucratic models. Consequently, we argue that political parties should be seen as 'critical cases' of organizing, meaning that otherwise commonplace phenomena are intensified and exposed in parties. This allows researchers to use parties as magnifying glasses for zooming-in on organizational dynamics that may be suppressed or concealed by the seemingly non-political façade of many contemporary organizations. In conclusion, we argue that organization scholars are in a privileged position to investigate how political parties function today and how their democratic potential can be improved in the future. To this end, we call on Organization and Management Studies to engage actively with alternative parties in an attempt to explore and promote progressive change within the formal political system.

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Political parties and organization studies: The party as a critical case of organizing

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Abstract

Organization scholars have extensively studied both the *politics of organization* and the *organization of politics*. Contributing to the latter, we argue for further and deeper consideration of political parties, since: (1) parties illuminate organizational dynamics of in- and exclusion; (2) internal struggles related to the constitution of identities, practices, and procedures are accentuated in parties; (3) the study of parties allow for the isolation of processes of normative and affective commitment; (4) parties prioritize and intensify normative control mechanisms; (5) party organizing currently represents an example of profound institutional change, as new (digital) formations challenge old bureaucratic models. Consequently, we argue that political parties should be seen as 'critical cases' of organizing, meaning that otherwise commonplace phenomena are intensified and exposed in parties. This allows researchers to use parties as magnifying

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Keywords

Political parties; Organizational politics; Inclusion and exclusion; Normative control; Commitment; Alternative organization; Intellectual activism; Democracy

Introduction

Despite recent calls for renewed engagement with 'politics-in-organization' (O'Doherty and De Cock, 2019) and organizational conflict more broadly (Contu, 2019), organization scholars have always been concerned with questions of power and politics. In fact, the discipline that today calls itself *Organization and Management Studies* (OMS) often traces its origins back to thinkers likewise counted among the founders of political sociology (e.g. Adler, 2009). This shared pedigree suggests that OMS was born as a discipline dedicated at least partially to the study of political dynamics in organized settings (Clegg et al., 2006), which is an ambition that is

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reflected in the vast literature on organizational politics (Drory and Romm, 1990). This

literature often stresses the inherently contested nature of organizational identities,

practices, and procedures. Here, the organization is thus viewed as a 'political coalition'

(March, 1962), and organizational politics is understood as a struggle to influence

sanctioned and non-sanctioned means and ends (Mayes and Allen, 1977). As Fleming

and Spicer (2007: 3) note: '[i]t is this struggle that gives organizations a sense of vitality

and a life-giving political pulse'.

Recently, organization scholars have supplemented this longstanding interest in the

politics of organization with increased concern for what might be called the *organization*

of politics; that is, the internal orchestration of collectives that openly engage with

political issues. This has resulted in empirical work on different political organizations

such as worker collectives, activist networks, and social movements (e.g. Kokkinidis,

2015; Reedy et al., 2016; Reinecke, 2018). However, one type of organization has

been almost entirely neglected: *the political party*. Considering the fundamental role

that parties play in representative democracies (Rosenblum, 2008), it is surprising how

little attention has been awarded to these political behemoths within OMS. A quick

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search through the most well-read journals in the field shows that, save for a few

exceptions (e.g. Moufahim et al., 2015; Husted and Plesner, 2017; Ringel, 2019; Sinha

et al., 2021), hardly any studies investigate parties from a truly organizational point of

view.

This omission is striking considering that foundational texts on parties emphasize

precisely the question of organization as crucial to understanding representative

democracy. For instance, Michels (1915) famously characterized his 'iron law of

oligarchy' as a problem of *organization* rather than a problem of ideology or

membership demographics. Similarly, Duverger (1954: xv) argued that modern parties

are distinguished not by their actual policies but by the 'nature of their organization'.

Hence, for these scholars, studying the organizational dynamics of parties is a

precondition for understanding electoral politics altogether. As another key thinker on

parties notes: 'whatever else parties are and to whatever other solicitations they

respond, they are above all organizations and (…) organizational analysis must

therefore come before any other perspective' (Panebianco, 1988: xi).

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Political parties are fascinating organizations that have managed to remain relevant by

updating their central role in the 'management of democracy' (Mair, 2003: 3) and by

adapting to institutional developments throughout time (Dalton et al., 2011). Their

presence around the world in diverse forms, sizes, and governance structures,

alongside their ability to initiate social change, make them interesting and relevant

study objects for organizations scholars. With an ongoing surge in new and alternative

party formations (see Heath, 2019), the present constitutes an exciting time for

organization scholars to engage with parties in an attempt to understand how they

govern themselves and the world around us, and how their efforts to instigate change

might be advanced along progressive lines.

In this essay, we therefore urge organization scholars to study political parties more

closely. This is important for at least five reasons: (1) parties illuminate organizational

dynamics of in- and exclusion; (2) parties accentuate internal struggles related to the

constitution of identities, practices, and procedures; (3) parties isolate processes of

normative and affective commitment; (4) parties prioritize modes of normative control;

and (5) parties are currently facing profound institutional change. Having identified

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these characteristics, we argue that parties should be seen as 'critical cases'

(Flyvbjerg, 2006) of organizing that expose and intensify commonplace phenomena.

This allows researchers to use parties as magnifying glasses for zooming-in on

organizational dynamics that may be suppressed or concealed in seemingly non-

political organizations. In conclusion, we encourage organization scholars to engage

with alternative parties in an attempt to explore and promote progressive change.

What is a party?

In perhaps the most widespread definition, Downs (1957: 25) identifies a political party

as 'a coalition of men [sic!] seeking to control the governing apparatus by legal means'.

In this paper, we focus on Chambers' (1967: 5) more comprehensive definition of the

party as:

> … a relatively *durable* social formation which seeks office or power in government,
>
> exhibits a structure or organization which *links leaders at the centers* of
>
> government to a significant popular following in the political arena and its local

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enclaves, and generates *in-group perspectives* or at least symbols of identification

or loyalty [our emphasis].

We believe that this definition provides a good starting point for an organizational study

of parties, since it highlights the characteristics that make the political party an

interesting object of study for OMS. First, it defines the party as a 'durable' entity,

meaning that parties are subjected to ongoing political, social, and technological

developments. Second, it indicates an organizational structure whose legitimacy and

political impact depends on connecting the power at the center to local 'enclaves' and

a wider popular movement, which actualizes problems of inclusion, exclusion, and

representation. Indeed, while a number of organizations have served to mobilize and

integrate the public into civic and political life (e.g. trade unions and social movements),

parties are particular in their role of 'linking' the public directly to the government

(Dalton et al., 2011), because of their 'more of less single-minded focus on mobilising

for political effect' (Rogers, 2005: 606). Finally, Chambers' definition implies that the

party is inherently a value community that relies on shared norms and patterns of

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commitment. We shall return to these aspects after briefly considering the role of

political parties in the history of Western democracy.

Political parties as bastard children of democracy

Although the roots of Western democracy are planted deep in ancient Greek soil, the

above definition is clearly the product of a 'modernising topos' (Anastasiadis, 1999).

Back then, political leaders did indeed form small groups, but since ancient Greek city-

states were direct and not representative democracies, modern conceptions of parties

sit uneasily with ancient understandings of *dēmokratia* (Hansen, 2014). Furthermore,

the notion of factionalism, later engrained in the word 'party' (from the Latin *partire*,

meaning 'to divide'), was unanimously criticized by leading figures of ancient Greece

for corrupting 'holist' understandings of the common good (Rosenblum, 2008).

These negative connotations associated with parties and factions were later solidified

by Roman thinkers such as Cicero and Sallust who, perhaps even more forcefully,

underscored the problems of promoting *partial* interests at the expense of society as a

whole (Ignazi, 2017). Such holist conceptions laid the foundation for a profound

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skepticism toward all kinds of partisan expression, which came to dominate political

thinking for almost two millennia and shape the common understanding of state

building in the early modern era. As Hume (1742: 33) later put it in his essay *Of parties*

in general: '[a]s much as legislators and founders of states ought to be honored and

respected among men, as much ought the founders of sects and factions to be

detested and hated'.

The development of the modern party

The contours of modern party politics emerged in the middle of the seventeenth century

when English politicians began forming groups in Westminster (Ostrogorski, 1902).

However, parties with actual members 'on the ground' did not appear in Europe until

the immediate aftermath of the French revolution, where the so-called Jacobin Clubs

proliferated by organizing members of the National Assembly around a common

strategy for protecting the outcome of the revolution (Brinton, 1961). Although the

Jacobin Clubs were soon disbanded, the seeds for the political party as the dominant

template for political organization had been sown.

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With the expansion of male suffrage in the mid-nineteenth century, parties gradually became accepted as legitimate and necessary actors in electoral politics. While parties might still have been frowned upon in elite circles, they were largely regarded as 'beneficial mediators' that gave voice to 'individual and group demands' (Scarrow, 2006: 21). In the spirit of holism, larger parties that advocated common interests were generally preferred to smaller partier, which many still perceived as divisive. This 'selective rejection of parties' provided a fertile ground for the rise of several mass parties that we know today (Daalder, 1992).

The resurgence of European democracies in the postwar years further confirmed the (pluralist) party system's role in guaranteeing democracy. At this point, the mass parties gained legitimacy by manifesting a way to channel the political demands of previously excluded parts of the electorate along a left-right scale based on class-distinctions spawned by industrialization. This meant that 'the party' became the main object of class-based identification, with some parts of the electorate (mostly trade union members) automatically enrolled as rank and file (Wilson, 1974). However, with the postindustrial turn of the 1970s and 80s, this logic became less evident. As children

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of the industrial revolution, mass parties had problems reflecting concerns over gender,

ethnicity, and environmentalism, and even greater difficulties responding to demands

for intra-party democratization (Ignazi, 2017). This reconfiguration of the political

landscape marked the end of the 'golden age' of political parties (Mair, 1994: 1).

Party decline and revival

As popular support for mass parties declined, they transformed into what has been

described as 'cartel parties' (Katz and Mair, 1995). Cartel parties form stronger bonds

with the state and collect more state funding, thereby becoming less dependent on the

recruitment of members. The cartel party is thus less of a popular movement and more

of a career route for politicians and functionaries, which has arguably contributed to

the disillusionment with parties that gave rise to many 'new' social movements in the

late 1960s and instances of digital activism in the early 2000s (see Gerbaudo, 2019).

While many intellectuals and activists today dismiss the party as a dated organization,

incapable of addressing the needs and desires of ordinary people (e.g. Tormey, 2015),

Europe has recently seen an upsurge of new and alternative party formations (see

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Heath, 2019). These include not only new left-wing parties like Podemos and SYRIZA,

or nationalist single-issue parties like the Brexit Party, but also wider initiatives like

DIEM25 and the International Pirate Party. These new party formations indicate that

the very organization of parties is becoming an explicit manifestation of ideological

positions: that the forms of interaction within the party 'prefigure' a vision of how society

should be organized. Hence, while organization is always a product of power and thus

implicitly political (Clegg et al., 2006), we maintain that the politics of organization are

uniquely present in political parties, as their ideological content and political form are

indistinguishable and have an *immediate* bearing on the governing of the state.

Consequently, we believe that parties are far too important to be left to political

scientists. We thus urge organization scholars to study parties as a way of contributing

to understanding the internal mechanisms of representative democracy. Before we

unfold this argument, however, we highlight some classical contributions to the party

organization literature that can help us comprehend the value of political parties for

OMS.

Classical contributions to the study of party organizations

The acceptance of parties as integral to representative democracy around the turn of

the twentieth century coincides with the birth of political sociology as a hybrid-

discipline, concerned with 'variables' previously taken for granted by political scientists

(e.g. organizational dynamics) and topics neglected by sociologists (e.g. party

organizations). Michels' (1915) canonical exposé of oligarchic tendencies in European

socialist parties is one example. Having personally experienced how these otherwise

democratic organizations slowly grew into bureaucratic machines and eventually

succumbed to elite-rule, Michels (1915: 365) formulated his 'iron law of oligarchy',

which would come to dominate party research for more than a century (see

Diefenbach, 2019). As he famously put it:

> The fundamental sociological law of political parties (…) may be formulated
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> in the following terms: 'It is organization which gives birth to the domination
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> of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of
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> the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization says oligarchy'.

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Michels' explanation for this seemingly inevitable drift toward elite-rule is that whenever

a party gains maturity and influence, it becomes dependent on the state. Its leaders

then seek to preserve their own position in the system and defend their privileges, even

if this requires the party to react 'with all the authority at its disposal against the

revolutionary currents which exist within its own organization' (Michels, 1915: 337).

Hence, instead of trying to overthrow the established system and realize its own radical

ideals, the party prioritizes the aggregation of members and the consolidation of power

within the system. According to Michels, there is thus a certain conservatism

embedded in the 'nature of organization', meaning that oligarchy can be found in any

political organization that pursues 'definite ends'. This assumption, that 'democratic

aristocracy' (ibid: 43) is inherent to formal political organizations, is likewise reflected

in other founding texts within political sociology such as Follett's (1918) work on group

organizations and Weber's (1919) writings on the 'politics as a vocation'.

Drawing on the work of Michels, Duverger (1954) introduces a completely new level of

systematism to the study of party organizations. Instead of merely pointing to certain

tendencies in electoral politics, he aims to develop a 'general theory of parties' to show

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how 'present-day parties are distinguished far less by their programme or the class of

their members than by the nature of their organization' (ibid: xiii-xv). Duverger's main

argument is that all parties consist of a number of 'basic elements', four of which are

prevalent: caucuses, branches, cells, and militias. Whereas caucuses (small elite

units) are the basic elements of conservative parties as well as American parties,

branches (large mass units) function as building blocks in labor parties and Catholic

parties, while cells (clandestine occupational groups) are the *sine qua non* of

communist parties, and militias (highly disciplined private armies) constitute the

backbone of fascist parties. Duverger uses this typology to describe how organizational

structures distinguish parties. For instance, caucus-based parties (also called 'cadre

parties') are characterized as having a very small but active membership base, while

branch-based parties (also called 'mass parties') operate with a large but more passive

membership pool. Similarly, although most parties are said to exhibit some degree of

oligarchy, the means for legitimizing elite-rule varies, with militia-based parties openly

embracing it due to the 'divinity' of their leaders and cell-based parties disguising it

through an elaborate system of 'indirect representation' (ibid: 138).

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Several of Duverger's contemporaries shared his focus on structure as the primary unit

of analysis. Many also continued to develop ideal types and categorize parties

accordingly. One example is Kirchheimer's (1966) famous account of the

transformation of Western European party systems, caused by the emergence of what

he dubbed 'catch-all parties'. To some extent, catch-all parties resemble mass parties

organizationally, in the sense that enrolling members is a key ambition. Unlike mass

parties, however, catch-all parties are characterized by a weak ideological position that

allows parties to cater for the 'median voter' (Downs, 1957) and secure political power

by 'catching all'.

The final contribution that we wish to highlight here is Panebianco's (1988) contingency

theory of party organization, which distinguishes political parties based on two factors:

history and environment. In terms of history, parties tend to uphold decisions made by

their founders, even when proven unwise or outdated. In terms of the environment,

parties are influenced by a variety of contingencies such as changing laws, sources of

finance, technological developments, as well as electoral results. This theorization

introduces a new kind of dynamism to the static models developed by previous studies,

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because it acknowledges the often neglected point that a party is 'a structure in motion',

reacting to contextual changes (ibid: 49). Based on this premise, Panebianco develops

a framework for measuring the level of institutionalization achieved by parties at certain

points in time. The more institutionalized a party is, the more autonomous it is *vis-à-vis*

its environment, and the less likely it is to change its organizational structure.

Consequently, Panebianco argues that if we want to explain political changes, we must

attend to structural dislocations within the organizational core of parties and to the

external pressures exercised upon this core.

Building upon these classical contributions, we now move to a discussion of what

organization scholars could learn from studying political parties, focusing on the

characteristics that make political parties a particular type of organization.

The value of parties for organization studies

Political parties provide an interesting study object for organization scholars, since their

ideological content and organizational form are more explicitly intertwined than in most

other organizations. The organizational form of a political party needs to reflect and

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express the values it seeks to promote. Duverger (1954), for example, maintains that

the organizational configuration of parties has a direct bearing on the structure and

composition of democratic systems. Many of the failures of political parties that we

addressed in the previous section such as the party oligarchy that Michels (1915)

described or the cartel party thesis discussed by Katz and Mair (1995) reflect a failure

to reconcile the organizational structure of the party with its ideological content and

democratic aspirations. The inherently ideological nature of parties therefore

represents a number of specific characteristics that make them particularly interesting

for organization scholars.

In this section, we identify and focus on five of these characteristics and specify how

organization scholars might begin to explore them. Our main argument is that parties

should be seen as 'critical cases' in relation to all five characteristics, in the sense that

they contain more information about otherwise commonplace phenomena (Flyvbjerg,

2006). This does not mean that the themes discussed below are necessarily unique to

parties, but it means that parties can be used as magnifying glasses that allow us to

better understand organizational dynamics that may be concealed or suppressed in

other organizations.

Between inclusion and exclusion

All organizations rely on exclusions to demarcate themselves from their environment

and to maintain a sense of distinctiveness (Luhmann, 2018). Even the most inclusive

and permeable associations draw a distinction between inside and outside, if only to

exclude from the collective those who are not deemed inclusive enough. While all

membership organizations struggle with this 'paradox of inclusion and exclusion'

(Solebello et al., 2016), many attempt to conceal the limits of the collective by

appearing fully inclusive. This not only applies to social movements that champion

values of inclusivity and open-mindedness (e.g. Reinecke, 2018), but also to

corporations that seek to project an image of themselves as catering to all interests

and as working for the common good (see Rhodes and Fleming, 2020). As such, the

seemingly apolitical façade of many contemporary organizations makes it difficult to

see that organization requires exclusion and how exactly exclusionary dynamics unfold

in practice.

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Political parties, on the other hand, generally reveal the exclusions that constitute them

as collectives. There are several reasons for this. One is that negative campaigning is

frequently seen as an effective tool for mobilizing risk-averse voters. Another is that

parties are exposed to the constant threat of elections, meaning that they must attempt

to maintain their distinctiveness at all times (Karthikeyan et al., 2015). Finally, since

parties are tasked with translating universal values into particular bills and proposals,

they have to add positive content to otherwise empty signifiers, thereby narrowing-

down the scope of political representation (Husted and Plesner, 2017). This makes

parties critical cases of organizational in- and exclusion, which is a point that has been

raised by a number of organization scholars working with parties, although it obviously

applies more to fringe parties that to centrist catch-all parties. One example of the

former is Moufahim et al.'s (2015) study of Vlaams Belang, a Flemish extreme-right

party. Based on an analysis of party propaganda, they show how organizational

identities can be manufactured almost exclusively through the 'othering' of certain

people (Muslim immigrants in this case), and how such identity constructions can serve

as objects of identification for supporters longing for ethnic and religious homogeneity.

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Such studies show how constructions of organizational identities are never ethically or

politically neutral. Although this is not a novel observation, the detailed examination of

party propaganda could help organization scholars illustrate more vividly the political

constitution of any given organization. For instance, few business firms would readily

admit to discriminating against certain groups in terms of recruitment or promotion (e.g.

immigrants), although this is the unfortunate reality of many contemporary workplaces.

However, studying a xenophobic party such as Vlaams Belang that deliberately moves

discriminatory dynamics to center stage allows for a deeper understanding of how

exclusionary processes unfold in practice, and how they can help constitute

organizational identities. To develop this line of thinking, and to curb the tendency to

view organizational exclusions as inherently negative, future research might inquire

into exclusionary practices in parties that discriminate progressively (e.g. *against*

racists, nationalists, or misogynists). This would allow scholars to theorize how

'inclusive exclusions' operate in practice, and how such boundaries may be drawn in

the service of democratic ends.

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Fighting in the open

Because organizations require exclusions, they also host internal struggles to decide

how and where to draw the boundaries (Fleming and Spicer, 2007). Such struggles

are often represented by the notion of 'organizational politics', understood as a

perpetual scramble to influence sanctioned and non-sanctioned means and ends

(Mayes and Allen, 1977). However, while this makes conflict 'endemic to

organizations', most contemporary enterprises go to great lengths to silence internal

struggles in order to appear harmonious (Contu, 2019: 1446). This is arguably why the

public rarely hears about political struggles in business firms, NGOs, or public agencies

until after the conflicts have been resolved.

In political parties, however, internal struggles about programs and procedures are

often fought in plain sight and passionately covered by various media outlets. History

is replete with examples of members who have aired the party's dirty laundry in public

and used the press as a lever for influencing the organization. This obviously makes it

much easier for observers to study how such conflicts unfolds in practice, and this is

precisely why it makes sense to view parties as critical cases of organizational politics.

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Additionally, since parties typically represent a highly formalized mode of organization

(cf. Chambers, 1967), their structural configuration is often geared to address internal

conflicts, providing spaces such as annual conferences where political struggles can

unfold and be observed (Faucher-King, 2005).

The easy access to internal struggles has not gone unnoticed by the few organization

scholars that study party organizations. One example is Kelly's (1990) study of

intergroup relations during the 1988 leadership contest in Britain's Labour Party

between Neil Kinnock and Tony Benn. Kelly explores how the minority group (left-

wingers supporting Benn) and the majority group (right-wingers supporting Kinnock)

stereotypically perceive each other and how the minority group is particularly

committed to accentuating intergroup differences in an attempt to win the contest.

Similarly, in a more recent study, Sinha et al. (2021) study what they term the

'dramaturgical resistance leadership' of Jeremy Corbyn in relation to his successful

2015 leadership campaign. They identify three core elements in Corbyn's strategy.

One of these involves a rethinking of the organizational structure of the party,

predicated on a blurring of the otherwise stable boundary between registered party

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members and non-registered supporters. This reconfiguration of the organization

afforded a type of distributed leadership that gave Corbyn's campaign a more

democratic structure and an almost movement-like identity that clearly contributed to

its success.

Both studies rely on the premise that political dynamics, which may exist in all

organizations, are more intense and visible in party organizations. As Kelly points out,

the link between ingroup identification and intergroup differentiation appears much

more clearly in her study of party factions than in studies of occupational groups

because 'in a political context, intergroup relations are inherently competitive and there

is no consensual status hierarchy' (Kelly, 1990: 597). This does not mean that the link

is non-existent in other organizations; it is simply less visible. The point is thus that

'politically-led organizations can provide useful insights into generic processes in

organizational behaviour' because they 'expose fundamental problems connected with

rationality and action and can teach us a great deal about problems and solutions in

organizations' (Morrell and Hartley, 2006: 486). Future research might thus explore

organizational conflicts within and between parties, in an attempt to understand and

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theorize how such struggles unfold, who they involve, and what they achieve in terms

of improving or deteriorating democratic institutions.

Commitment without contract

One of the most vital resource for present-day organizations is committed members.

Without dedicated staff or devoted volunteers, no organization will be able to fulfill its

purpose, especially not collectives that rely on more than simple remuneration to attract

members. Although definitions vary, commitment is usually conceptualized as 'a

partisan, affective attachment to the goals and values of an organization, to one's role

in relation to goals and values, and to the organization for its own sake, *apart from its*

purely instrumental worth' (Buchanan, 1974: 533, our emphasis). The italicized parts

of this definition are particularly important, as they emphasize how commitment has

little to do with material rewards. This, however, also makes commitment a difficult

phenomenon to study. Because, how can the 'partisan' and 'affective' aspect of a

person's involvement with an organization be isolated from attachment based on

wages and benefits? This might be one reason why the literature on commitment is

often described as confusing and contradictory (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001).

In contemporary political parties, there are few instrumental benefits associated with

being a member, which is perhaps why so few people are today registered as rank and

file (van Biezen et al., 2011). In most cases, all one gets from a party membership is

access to events such as annual conferences and the right to call oneself a member.

Furthermore, *unlike* social movements and activist networks, parties usually charge

membership fees. Taken together, these two factors make the entry barriers in political

parties incredibly high and the exit barriers equally low. Fortunately for organization

scholars, however, this means that those 3-4% of the population that remain members

do so precisely because they are committed to the goals and values of the

organization, to their own role in relation to these, and/or to the organization for its own

sake. As such, parties could be seen as critical cases of what Meyer and Allen (1991)

call 'affective' and 'normative' commitment.

Within organization studies, Husted (2020) has illustrated this point through a study of

the relationship between organizational values and commitment in a Danish green

party. Husted explores how the party's claim to be guided by six core values has

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profound consequences for how commitment is created and maintained within the

organization. While some of the values encourage members to pursue their own

political objectives, other incentivize them to remain morally inclusive toward fellow

members that hold different views. These two types of values produce a strong

combination of normative and affective commitment that motivate party members to

stay with the organization and realize their personal aspirations through the collective.

The party thereby allows its members to be 'different together', which is a finding that

has implications for scholars interested in alternative organization and diversity

management. Future research might thus use parties to investigate more closely how

organizational commitment is forged and maintained in voluntary associations such as

parties, and to theorize what (managerial) technologies that are conducive in terms of

building strong commitment to democracy and democratic participation.

Modes of party discipline

Although commitment is generally seen as something positive, there is also a darker

side to the affective dimension of organizational attachment. Commitment comes at a

price, since being attached to certain goals and values, as well as to certain

organizations, can be both liberating and constraining. Wiener (1982: 419) describes

it like this: 'the central element in most definitions of commitment – the acceptance of

organizational expectations and values as guides to an individual's behavior, i.e.,

identification – represents a form of normative control over a person's actions'. In other

words, the values that attract people to organizations may equally tie them to a

particular mode of being. While normative control has been studied in occupational

settings (e.g. Kunda, 1992), workplace organizations also have traditional controls

such as contracts and material incentives at their disposal. This is arguably why

normative control was initially conceived as most prevalent in religious and political

communities (Etzioni, 1964), and why it can be hard to separate normative control from

other modes of control when studying organizations in general (Kärreman and

Alvesson, 2004).

However, just like political parties lack formal tools for *attracting* members such as

paychecks or benefits, they also lack formal mechanisms for *controlling* their members.

Faced with declining membership rates and a general dissolution of party loyalty

(Ignazi, 2017), parties are today forced to rely primarily on normative control to ensure

that members stay 'on board' and 'in line'. As Rye (2015: 1053) puts it: '[c]oercion may

not be entirely redundant, but in modern consumer-oriented societies, voluntary

organizations such as parties need more subtle methods to bring their members into

line in terms of conduct, style and message'. This is perhaps why organization scholars

like Willmott (1993) have emphasized the close link between normative control and the

notion of 'party discipline', understood as social and political cohesion sustained by

party members through the culture of the organization. As such, party discipline may

be seen as an intensified version of traditional normative control, as observed in other

kinds of organizations, which is why it makes sense to think of parties more generally

as critical cases of normative control regimes.

Organization scholars have recently realized that studies of party discipline can tell us

something interesting about normative control. For instance, in a study of the German

Pirate Party, Ringel (2019) analyzes how normative ideals of full transparency have

caused problems for the party's elected politicians whose parliamentary work often

require a certain degree of secrecy. This leads the politicians to oscillate strategically

between 'open' frontstage behavior and 'secret' backstage behavior, thereby carving

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out a pocket of autonomy within an otherwise disciplining culture of panopticism.

Husted (2021) takes a similar approach in a study of a local party organization in South-

West England, which has won all town council seats for two consecutive terms on a

supposedly non-ideological platform. Inspired by the concept of 'neo-normative' control

(Fleming and Sturdy, 2009), the author investigates how an exhortation to 'just be

yourself' creates a culture that thrives on heterogeneity rather than conformity, and

how this unconventional type of party discipline allows confident councilors (often

males) to dominate and marginalize less assertive councilors (often females).

The main contribution of these studies is that they illuminate the political dimension of

normative control and commitment. When employees are subjected to particular

norms, their personal space of action is clearly restricted, but it is often difficult to

appreciate the political implications of such management techniques. However, when

representatives of the Pirate Party fail to enter coalitions because members expect

them to disclose all information, or when female councilors are barred from influence

in a town council, we see much clearer how (neo)normative control regimes underwrite

certain ideological agendas and suppress others. This insight might reinvigorate an

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area of research sometimes accused of having reached a 'theoretical stalemate'

(Cushen, 2009: 102). Future research should therefore explore how parties develop

new modes of party discipline that exceed the limits of our current understanding of

normative control and examine how this development is tied to the ongoing evolution

in party models that we describe below.

From bureaucracies to platforms

The four characteristics discussed above make political parties important research

objects that organization scholars, in our view, cannot afford to neglect. This was true

when Michels and Duverger authored their path-breaking accounts of European

parties, and it remains true today. However, our claim is that the present represents a

particularly interesting time to reignite the 'empirically grounded study of parties as

organizations' (Mair, 1994: 1), since many contemporary parties have been forced to

reconsider their organizational structure and modus operandi in light of recent events.

In this section, we will consider one aspects of the present that make party studies

even more relevant today.

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Like so many other organizations, parties have always adapted to their environment,

albeit at a much slower pace than what might be expected (Panebianco, 1988). For

instance, when environmentalism and second-wave feminism began to emerge in the

1960s, and when demands for more democratic decision-making processes were

voiced in the 1970s, most parties were slow to respond (Ignazi, 2017). However, with

the rise of digital technology and various web 2.0 platforms in the early 2000's, the old

party machines have gradually started to change, as these media seem to afford

unique opportunities for mobilizing voters and engaging members. Gerbaudo (2019)

chronicles this development in his work on 'the digital party', understood as a type of

party that resembles online corporations like Google or Facebook by following a 'logic

of platforms'. Examples of digital parties obviously include the Pirate Parties, but also

populist formations like Podemos in Spain, Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy, La France

Insoumise, the Momentum faction of the UK Labour Party, as well as certain alternative

parties at a regional level (see Barcelona En Comú et al, 2019).

What makes these parties interesting for organization scholars is that they employ

online platforms in an attempt to democratize their organization, and that they often

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redefine the meaning of party membership by involving the entire electorate in

policymaking (Husted and Plesner, 2017). The technology-based democratization of

'digital' parties has hitherto been most visible in decision-making processes. Such

processes have traditionally been characterized as oligarchic and opaque, but with the

advent of interactive online platforms, parties are beginning to experiment with

horizontal and consensus-based decision-making. For instance, based on interviews

with Pirate Party members, Fredriksson (2016) shows how the pirates' preoccupation

with membership participation has led them to develop digital tools for decision-making

that afford a direct mode of engagement but also privilege the most active users.

Gerbaudo (2019: 127) observes a similar tendency, arguing that many digital parties

have failed to deliver on the 'lofty promise' of bottom-up involvement, and that online

platforms work best in cases of plebiscites rather than in cases of substantial political

deliberation.

Contrary to 'digital' parties, other formations such as the Dutch Freedom Party or the

Brexit Party have gone in the opposite direction by creating organizations entirely

devoid of rank and file. What characterizes these party organizations is the

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uncontested power of the leader who is idealized by supporters as an entrepreneurial

superman. The 'memberless party' is therefore conceived as a radicalization of the so-

called 'business-firm party model', understood as parties that operate like profit-

seeking corporations and focus almost exclusively on vote maximization (Krouwel,

2006). However, while business-firm parties lack ideological consistency, memberless

parties often rely on a coherent vocabulary of populist tropes that serves to

compensate for their less professional mode of operation (Mazzoleni and Voerman,

2017).

All these new party models are relevant for organization scholars, not only because

they draw inspiration from the world of business and entrepreneurship, but because

their success represents profound institutional change. For more than a century, party

organizations have predominantly assumed bureaucratic forms and resisted

environmental pressures to change. Regardless of whether the most dominant model

in the field was called 'mass party' (Duverger, 1954), 'catch-all party' (Kirchheimer,

1966), 'professional-electoral party' (Panebianco, 1988), or 'cartel party' (Katz and

Mair, 1995), the party machine was always bureaucratic. The fact that this remarkable

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case of institutional isomorphism is beginning to fade therefore represents a watershed

moment in the history of Western democracy. Organizational changes that took

decades to materialize in the world of business are now unfolding at an unprecedented

speed in the world of party politics. Every year sees the rise of several innovative

formations, many of which never succeed, but some do – and when they do, they often

leave a lasting mark on entire democratic systems (Panebianco, 1988).

Consequently, OMS has an important role to play in helping us understand the

organizational dynamics of political parties and their role in governing contemporary

societies. In what follows, we close the paper by briefly discussing how organization

scholars might use this moment of institutional change to actively engage with

alternative parties that challenge un-democratic developments and promote

progressive change *within* the formal political system.

Conclusion: Engaging alternative parties

In this paper, we have advanced three related claims. First, we argued that parties are

intimately linked to mass democracy, but that they have failed historically in terms of

realizing hopes for democratic participation invested in them. Second, we maintained

that OMS has much to learn from studying parties, because they expose and intensify

dynamics that may be found but concealed in other kinds of organizations. Third, we

suggested that we are currently living through a moment of profound institutional

change, in which bureaucratic party models are giving way to new and unconventional

configurations (e.g. digital parties, business-firm parties, and memberless parties).

This moment of institutional change, we believe, furthermore constitutes an opportunity

for organization scholars to positively influence the course of history by engaging with

parties that actively seek to promote democratic ideals (internally as well as societally)

at the expense of simple voter maximization and oligarchy.

To this end, scholars might find inspiration in the bourgeoning literature on alternative

organizations, understood as collectives that 'prefigure' progressive ideals related to

notions of individual autonomy, collective solidarity, and responsibility for the future

(Parker et al., 2014). Within this literature, it is generally recognized that research and

politics cannot be separated, and that researchers have to forge political alliances with

case organizations deemed ideologically progressive (Parker and Parker, 2017).

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However, this literature has entirely overlooked the possibility that certain *parties* may

also be considered alternative, and that they too should be seen as potential allies

(Husted, 2021). These would be parties that curb the oligarchic tendencies that seem

inherent to the formal political system by softening the homogenizing force of party

discipline and by allowing members to participate in decision-making processes that

go beyond plebiscites.

Engaging with such alternative parties will undoubtedly allow organization scholars to

explore the five characteristics that we identified above, but it likewise offers a unique

opportunity for researchers to 'make a difference in the world' by rethinking their role

as 'intellectual activists' (Contu, 2020: 748) within the formal political system. This

venture entails various forms of 'building' work related to the construction of alternative

archives, agential capabilities, and accountability structures (ibid), and it is an

intellectual praxis that clearly requires a strong commitment to democratic ideals as

well as research ethics. Given the pivotal role that parties play in contemporary

society, however, it remains a venture that critical organization and management

scholars simply cannot afford to ignore.

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