Welcome to the party

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Introduction

As an organizational species, political parties seem to face impending extinction. No matter what yardstick we use to measure their vitality, political parties currently display an undeniable image of terminal crisis. Party membership is approaching rock bottom in most corners of the world, particularly in countries like France and the UK where less than two percent of the population are registered as rank and file (van Biezen et al., 2012). Similarly, voter turnout has plummeted worldwide since the middle of the twentieth century, currently reaching a level well below 70 percent (Solijonov, 2016). Voters' tendency to identify with specific parties is likewise declining due to the reconfiguration of class-consciousness and the emergence of more 'liquid loyalties' in the electorate (Ignazi, 2017: 201). Finally, people's trust in political parties is at an all-time low, with politicians deemed less trustworthy than complete strangers and more dishonest than second-hand car dealers (Newton et al., 2017). As such, it seems fair to conclude, as many have recently done, that the party is over (e.g. Holloway, 2002; Day, 2005; Rosanvallon, 2008; Castells, 2012; della Porta, 2013; Tormey, 2015; Hardt and Negri, 2017).

However, to paraphrase Mark Twain, the reports of the party's pending death are greatly exaggerated. Financially at least, political parties have never been stronger. Owing particularly to a significant increase in public funding since the 1980s, parties are today more resourceful than ever before. In fact, most

European parties receive more than two-thirds of their income from state subsidies alone (Falguera et al., 2014). This tendency has given rise to the much-debated 'cartel party thesis', which extends the seminal work of Robert Michels (1915) by suggesting that party organizations are increasingly becoming dependent on the state – and not members – for their survival (Katz and Mair, 1995; Katz and Mair, 2009). On top of this, a range of countries are currently going through a process of 'constitutionalizing' political parties, thereby acknowledging them legally as 'desirable and procedurally necessary for the effective functioning of democracy' (van Biezen, 2011: 187). The combination of growing public discontent and state consolidation have thus created a paradoxical situation in which political parties are powerful as ever yet increasingly seen as illegitimate representatives of common interests (Ignazi, 2017).

Within the past decade, however, a wave of young radical contenders has sparked a sense of party revitalization. *Podemos* in Spain, *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italy, *SYRIZA* in Greece, *The International Pirate Party*, *En Marche* and *France Insoumise*, the *MAS* in Bolivia, the *Feminist Initiative* in Sweden, *The Alternative* in Denmark, and the pan-European *DIEM25* figure here as prominent examples. Inspired by 'new global revolutions' like the Occupy movement and Los Indignados (Mason, 2013), these parties have sought to restore the legitimacy of party politics by introducing a number of organizational innovations meant to increase membership participation. For instance, *Podemos* has redefined intra-party democracy by structuring its organization around local 'Circles' where members and non-members can deliberate about various policy issues in the absence of formal hierarchies (Pavía et al., 2016). Similarly, *The Alternative* has constructed its entire political program through a bottom-up process inspired by the open-source community (Husted and Plesner, 2017), while Jeremy Corbyn and the Momentum movement have managed to turn Britain's *Labour Party* into one of the biggest membership parties in Europe (Seymour, 2017). Toward the other end of the political spectrum, parties like the extreme-right *Alternative für Deutschland* and the arch-populist *Movimento 5 Stelle* have reconfigured national politics by relying heavily on Internet technology for mobilizing support and coordinating events (see Gerbaudo, 2019), whereas the Dutch

anti-Islam *PVV* has gone the opposite direction by creating a party with only one member (Mazzoleni and Voerman, 2017).

Such organizational innovations point to the need for a deeper understanding of how political parties have traditionally organized, and how this new wave of contenders challenges the dominant mode of coordination within institutionalized party politics. However, despite the abundance of research on political parties, we still know remarkably little about the inner-life of parties, as the scope of research is often limited to questions of formal structure, candidate selection, financing, and membership modalities. This means that classical organizational themes like culture, collaboration, identity, learning, strategy, decision-making, and management have been surprisingly underprioritized if not entirely neglected by the literature on party organization (see Barrling, 2013; Heidar and Koole, 2000; Lawson, 1994). In the mid-1990s, the renowned party scholar Peter Mair argued that, while there is a number of 'surprisingly evident lacunae' within the 'ever-growing cumulation of knowledge' relating to political parties, the 'empirically grounded study of parties as organizations (…) has long constituted one of the most obvious of these lacunae' (Mair, 1994: 1-2). Today, 27 years later, this lacuna persists as our knowledge of how party organizations work, change, and adapt remains frustratingly limited.

The absence of empirical studies of 'parties as organizations' is particularly surprising given the fact that classical texts on political parties emphasize precisely the question of organization as crucial to understanding party politics. For instance, Robert Michels (1915) famously characterized his iron law of oligarchy as a problem of *organization*, rather than of ideological dispositions. Similarly, Maurice Duverger (1954: xv) argued that modern parties are distinguished not by their actual policies or by the composition of their membership base, but by the 'nature of their organization'. Of course, such arguments have not gone unheard (see Dalton et al., 2011; Katz and Mair, 1994; Scarrow et al., 2017), but most contemporary studies of party organization approach the topic through quantitative methods and by relying almost exclusively on official sources of data like organizational charts, statutes, budgets, or membership statistics (Bolleyer, 2016; Gauja and Kosiara-Pedersen, this issue). Hence, within political science at least,

qualitative and 'immersive' accounts of party organization seem close to non-existent (for important exceptions, see Aronoff, 1993; Kertzer, 1996; Faucher-King, 2005; Anria, 2019).

The same is true for research on parties within organization studies. Here, however, the problem is not methodological or analytical but empirical: while political scientists have deployed a somewhat restricted understanding of what it means to study party organizations, organization scholars have generally overlooked political parties as interesting study objects (Husted et al., 2021). Save for a handful of recent examples (Husted and Plesner, 2017; Karthikeyan et al., 2016; Moufahim et al., 2015; Ringel, 2019; Sinha et al., 2021), parties largely escape the analytical gaze of organization scholars. Even a journal like *ephemera*, which prides itself on promoting unconventional and critical work at the intersection of 'theory and politics', has hitherto only published three papers that focus on political parties (Fredriksson Almqvist, 2016; Husted, 2018; Ince, 2011).

The purpose of this special issue is to remedy both shortcomings by allowing curious and creative scholars to push the boundaries for what party organization research might entail and, in doing so, to illustrate why parties are important study objects for organization scholars and social scientists more broadly. Relatedly, we also hope this issue will inspire activists around the world to abandon the belief that parties necessarily represent a dated organizational form that is incapable of responding to ordinary people's demands for a better life, but that it can be used actively to instigate social change and to 'prefigure' a more promising future (see Törnberg, 2021).

Studying party organizations: A research agenda

In a recent article published in *Organization Studies* (Husted et al., 2021), we argue that there are at least five reasons why organization scholars should engage more actively with political parties. Based on these five reasons, we maintain that organization scholars can use parties as 'critical cases' (Flyvbjerg, 2006) that allow us to zoom in on dynamics that may be concealed or even suppressed in seemingly non-political organizations such as traditional business firms. This does not mean that these characteristics are

unique to parties. It merely means that they are more visible and therefore potentially more rewarding to study in party organizations. What follows is an overview of these main points.

First, political parties are interesting study objects for organization scholars because they, more than most other organizations, have to engage actively with strategies of *exclusion and inclusion*. While in-group and out-group dynamics clearly exist in all organizations (Luhmann, 2018), and perhaps particularly so in membership associations (Solebello et al., 2016), political parties rely much more explicitly on the exclusion of ideological dissidents to define and demarcate themselves from competing actors in the political landscape (Karthikeyan et al., 2016). For instance, while few business firms would admit to discriminating against certain groups in terms of recruitment or promotion, several parties on the far-right openly commit to such exclusionary practices. As such, studying political parties could exemplify how constructions of organizational identities are never ethically or politically neutral, since they always rely on the exclusion of certain interests and identities. Even parties that might be considered inclusive or progressive rely on exclusions to bolster their own organizational identity (Husted, 2018). Although this is perhaps not an entirely novel observation, the detailed examination of exclusion and inclusion processes within political parties could help organization scholars illustrate more vividly the political constitution of any given organization (see Moufahim et al., 2015).

Second, political parties tend to conduct their *infighting in the open*. While most organizations go to great lengths to hide internal conflicts (Contu, 2019), parties are often inclined – perhaps even forced – to display and act out their internal conflicts in public. Sometimes, this reflects a commitment to transparency and democracy (Ringel, 2019), in other cases competing fractions use public attention for strategic purposes (Kelly, 1990). Additionally, since parties typically represent a highly formalized mode of organization, their structural configuration is often geared to address internal conflicts, providing spaces such as annual conferences and political rallies where internal struggles can unfold and be observed in real-time (Faucher-King, 2005; Faucher, this issue). This habit of openly displaying internal conflicts makes political parties particularly suited to study how such

struggles unfold in practice, and how they produce certain organizational effects that would otherwise be hidden from public view (see Sinha et al., 2021).

Third, political parties rely heavily on active members who are *committed without being contracted* in any meaningful sense. Since the vast majority of party workers are not employed or salaried, their willingness to sacrifice time and money to work voluntarily for a political party reflects a strong normative and affective commitment to the organisation (Husted, 2020). In fact, unlike social movements and activist networks, political parties usually charge members with subscription fees, thereby rendering the entry barriers extremely high and the exit barriers equally low. Recalling the perhaps most recognized definition of organizational commitment as a 'partisan' and 'affective' attachment to the goals and values of an organization beyond its 'purely instrumental worth' (Buchanan, 1974: 533), political parties thus provide good case studies for investigating more closely how such commitment is forged and maintained in voluntary associations. They also allow scholars to theorize what technologies are conducive in terms of building strong commitment to certain progressive values such as democracy and democratic participation.

Fourth, as they are created and maintained by committed volunteers, political parties have to rely on *other modes of discipline* compared to most conventional organizations. The fact that very few active members are employed or contracted also means that parties have weaker formal means to control its members than employee-based organizations have (e.g. legal sanctions or material incentives). Political parties are thus forced to rely primarily on normative control mechanisms to ensure that members stay 'on board' and 'in line' (Rye, 2015). As such, what is sometimes described as 'party discipline' may be seen as an intensified version of traditional normative control, as observed in other kinds of organizations (Willmott, 1993), which is why it makes sense to think of parties more generally as critical cases of normative control regimes that can help us understand such mechanisms in general and the political dimension of normative control in particular.

Finally, political parties are currently involved in a transition *from bureaucracies to platforms* that is fundamentally reshaping many parts of society and its organizations. Hence, the present represents a particularly interesting time to engage more closely with parties as organizations, since contemporary parties have been forced to reconsider their modus operandi in light of recent technological developments (Ignazi, 2017). The rise of social media platforms as a dominant means of interaction reshapes not only how political parties communicate with followers and foes, but is also beginning to affect their very organizational structures (Fredriksson Almqvist, 2016). A new generation of 'digital parties' are increasingly employing platform technologies and logics to enhance internal communication and democracy (Gerbaudo 2019). Such 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.

These unique characteristics of political parties, along with the recent developments in the formation and organization of parties, makes it more relevant than ever to take a scholarly and activist interest in their organizational dimensions. In our view, such an approach needs to be alternative in two senses. It needs to be alternative in its approach and methods, involving not just quantitative methods and 'official' data, but also engagement with the inner-life of the party to understand the actual organization taking place 'on the ground' and not just 'on paper'. Relatedly, future research also needs to be open to alternative political organizations (Parker et al., 2014), not focusing exclusively on the bureaucratic machinery of the political parties of the past century, but also looking to the fringes to understand how new organizational ideas are emerging in marginal, and sometimes short lived, political parties.

In what follows, we will explain how the contributions to this special issue serves the purpose of promoting alternative party research – either by relying on unconventional methods or analytical strategies, by focusing on topics that usually escape the mainstream gaze, or by actively advancing the political interests of parties that may be deemed alternative in the normative sense.

The contributions

We are proud to introduce the articles and research notes of this special issue, which will undoubtedly generate fruitful discussions and inspire future research about the organisation of political parties. All the papers make valuable contributions to the study of party organizations and address the topics and questions we have discussed above.

Anika Gauja and Karina Kosiara-Pedersen's article provides a useful start to this special issue, with their review of existing research on political party organization, and with their particular focus on the field of comparative politics. They discuss key areas of inquiry (namely party leadership, candidate selection, party membership, and regulation) and go on to discuss promising developments that hold important implications for party organizational research: the personalization of politics, the new forms of party affiliations, and the blurring of boundaries and/or the transition of social movements into political parties. Relatedly, and proving to be a popular area of research, the following papers study the so-called digital parties and their particular modes of organizing, their activist and entrepreneurial nature, and the specific challenges these 'new' parties grapple with.

Jasper Finkeldey discusses their personal experience as a member and candidate for the *Democracy in Europe Movement 2025* (DiEM25), running for the 2019 European elections in Germany. Beyond the value of the ethnographic insights illuminating the 'inner life' of this party, Finkeldey candidly addresses the many thorny challenges that the DiEM25 campaign faced due to its very nature as a social movement party in the competitive German political landscape. Finkeldey illustrates how the lack of resources coupled with the organizational complexity of the party, and an internal resistance by the 'movement' faction within the organization to embrace electoral politics, limited the ability of DiEM25 to perform well at the polls. As such, the text adds valuable nuance to the dominant portrait of digitalized 'movement parties' as political formations that successfully navigates the complexities that follow from the attempt to introduce movement tactics to the parliamentary arena (della Porta et al., 2017), while also supplying an

admirable example for how to engage actively and meaningfully with alternative parties.

Turning our attention to France, the issue also includes an article by Charles Barthold and Martin Fougère about the party *La Republique en Marche* (LaREM) and its strategic instrumentalization by Emmanuel Macron to secure power. The authors develop their discussion of this case of 'critical leadership' through an analysis inspired by Niccolò Machiavelli and Ernesto Laclau. They combine these vocabularies to explain how Macron, a quasi newcomer in French politics, seized opportunities in a political space saturated by contingency and achieved success for his hegemonic project. What is particularly interesting about this study is how a new (digitalized) party can be used by an individual to both renew and reinforce the political establishment. Hence, the paper goes beyond the theme of personalization, identified by Gauja and Kosiara-Pedersen among others, by illustrating how party organizations can become strategic tools in the hands of political strategists who know how to play the game of electoral politics. It also serves to introduce a sophisticated conceptualization of populism to the literature of party organization.

The next two contributions focus on the *Pirate Party*, which currently exists in no less than 36 countries around the world. Hallur Sigurdarson's article focuses on the *Icelandic Pirate Party's* organizational setup and the way the party operates and transforms by embracing complexity, as well as how it creatively engages with the ongoing construction of its so-called Core Policy. Basing their insights on a Deleuzian reading of the case and ethnographic interviews conducted with party members, Sigurdarson highlights the political entrepreneurial nature of the party in exploiting instability, ambiguity, and uncertainty by generating creative ideas and alternative solutions. As such, their study provides valuable insights for (political) entrepreneurship and management scholarships, but it also provides an inspiring example of how party organizations may be used by activists to instigate fundamental changes in otherwise stable societies.

In their study of the *German Pirate Party,* Leopold Ringel and Jenni Brichzin show how newly elected members of parliament had to promptly socialize

into 'professional politics' and accordingly adjust their identity and behaviour to fit unspoken rules and expectations. Ringel and Brichzin show how this transformation forces the Pirate Party members to reconsider some of the ideals regarding inclusive and participatory processes for decision-making, flat hierarchies, and comprehensive transparency that are central to the pirate ideology. Ringel and Brichzin's study highlights the tensions and conflicts that arise in the meeting between political bureaucracies and digital parties, and shows that while platforms might be an emerging organizational principle among new parties, the old political bureaucracies are still very much the dominant practice in professional politics. This insight is clearly worth keeping in mind for scholars and activists wanting to research and promote alternative party organization.

As a synthesis of the contributions that focus on digital parties, and based on his own extensive research on that very phenomenon (e.g. Gerbaudo, 2019), Paolo Gerbaudo offers an insightful discussion of the organizational transformation of political parties, and the shortcomings and challenges facing digital parties such as the Movimento 5 Stelle, Podemos, and the Pirate Party. Just like Ringel and Brichzin's study of the German Pirate Party, Gerbaudo's note scrutinizes the emergence of platform parties and ponders if and how organizational principles borrowed from the digital economy can be implemented in parliamentary politics. In the end, Gerbaudo concludes that while digital parties often envision more radical forms of democratic participation, their organizational structures tend to promote a more top down model of governance. In fact, rather than providing the infrastructure for proper political deliberations, the introduction of digital technology to political parties predominantly supports a bleak version of internal democracy that Gerbaudo refers to as 'plebiscitarianism 2.0' (see Husted, 2019).

Next, engaging with our thematization of *exclusion and inclusion* within political parties, Fabio Wolkenstein discusses the key integrative function traditionally performed by political parties, and explores the challenges facing contemporary parties that seek to integrate and make diverse constituencies feel part of a shared political endeavour. The text asks if and how political parties can integrate a multitude of supporters in a time when

the mass party and the dominant ideologies of the 20th century are giving way to new party formations and increasing social, cultural, and geographic fragmentation. As many of the new parties are nationalist or otherwise identity-based, and while not all contemporary parties necessarily aim to integrate all segments of citizens, this note cuts right to the heart of our first reason to study political parties, in the sense that it provides an illuminating discussion of parties as critical cases of organizational inclusion and exclusion. In conclusion, Wolkenstein calls for more sociological (and less 'asociological') research on the complexities that parties face when trying to integrate diverse and fragmented constituencies. This certainly seems like a call that could be heeded by *ephemera* readers.

Emma Crewe offers a comprehensive narrative in their research note, which engages with several topics highlighted in our research agenda section above. Arguing in favour of an immersive anthropological approach to the study of political parties, they provide a useful research agenda that aims to make sense of the relationships, the entanglements, the shapeshifting, the contradictions, and the dynamic complexities that emerge from studying parties from an anthropological perspective. Their methodological approach involves analyzing how the creation of temporalities, meanings, and symbols are used to set political agendas. In that regard, Crewe's note represents a good example of how political parties are excellent cases for analyzing the construction of alternative *modes of discipline* in ideological organizations, as well as for making sense of conflicts in organizations that conduct much of their *infighting in the open*. As such, this research note could be viewed as a substantiation of our call for more immersive accounts of the inner-life of party organizations.

Like Crewe, Florence Faucher provides a strong argument for an anthropological approach to the study of political parties. The author shows that political parties are, perhaps more so than traditional business firms, constituted by written rules and policy documents. Parties can also be seen as communities, or 'mini societies', shaped by their own political cultures, infused with norms and symbolic dimensions that are difficult to grasp. It is these norms and symbols that motivate the participants to get involved and stay involved, and they set the standards for action and interaction within the

organization. This immersive approach to political party research offers a nuanced and detailed account of motives and driving forces among the vast body of dedicated and unsalaried party functionaries. As such, it speaks to an additional reason we have highlighted to study political parties, as it uncovers the mechanisms and logics that motivate participants to be *committed without being contracted* in voluntary, ideological organizations.

Finally, we end this overview of contributions on a hopeful note (in a very literal sense). In a piece entitled 'Resources of history and hope', Owain Smolović Jones, Brigid Carroll, and Paresha Sinha reflect on their experience of loss and hope in relation to the British Labour Party's defeat in the 2019 elections. More generally, their note explores loss as a framework for the examination of political parties as repositories of care and hope in insider-studies of left-wing party formations. The authors conclude by making the case that insider research in political parties can engage with the contingencies of history through recovering and recomposing potent narratives that can act as guides for future research and practice. By focusing on the tensions, but also the interdependence, between hope and loss, this final note speaks to the resilience of participatory-based political organizations, as it helps us understand the motivation and relentless commitment of non-salaried party volunteers. Like all other texts included in this special issue, this contribution thereby addresses and extends our own reasons for studying political parties, as outlined above.

Looking back at the process of editing this issue, which began almost three years ago, we are once again confirmed in our belief that political parties represent a rich and unexplored fountain of opportunities for organization scholars and activists alike. It may be that the organizational species that we call political parties currently displays an undeniable image of terminal crisis, and that party organizations are among the most 'detested and hated' formations in representative politics (as David Hume (1742: 33) once remarked), but this should clearly not deter us from utilizing their scholarly and political value for progressive ends. Critical organization scholars have, for too long, preoccupied themselves with radical social movements and edgy activist networks, while leaving the study of parties entirely to political scientists and 'asociological' researchers. We hope that this issue will

illustrate the value of studying parties as organizations, and that organization scholars will use the present juncture to (re)discover political parties as interesting study objects. We also hope that both scholars and activists will direct their energy toward the advancement of alternative party research, and that they will employ new and creative methods to unpack the black box of party organization. Now is not the time to disengage from conventional politics. Now is the time for immersion. Welcome to the party.

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