



An anthropology of contemporary political parties: Reflexions on methods and theory

Florence Faucher

abstract

Adopting an anthropological approach to analyse contemporary political parties is fairly unusual and has tended to be limited to the margins of the political system (greens, extreme left and right), yet it provides a useful lens to explain how these organisations are changing. By focusing on the meanings that are constructed by partisans through their interactions within the party, it draws attention to the ways in which their social representations (on what society is/ought to be) and their symbolic practices (what they think is the appropriate way to act) are negotiated, taken for granted or disputed. It allows us to understand the processes through which policies, teams, rules and behaviours change or are “reformed” and how these evolutions affect members. The article builds from several such studies conducted in the UK and in France in the 1990s and 2000s. It highlights several specific contributions of anthropology to our analysis of political parties: the role of symbolic practices, the construction of group styles (in interaction with national political institutions and culture), the public performance of leadership, policy-making and democracy.

Introduction

Political parties are essential organisations in contemporary liberal representative regimes but have been in ‘crisis’ for several decades, as evidenced in declining membership, electoral volatility, the growth of

alternative and competing movements. In response to these concerns, political parties have changed how they recruit and relate to members including the influence they grant them in the selection of their representatives and in the deliberation on, and choice of, policy. At the same time, the ways in which political scientists approach political parties have changed profoundly. In the early 1990s, Katz and Mair sparked a renewed interest in parties as organisations, including a focus on their resources and strategies. They coordinated teams of researchers, published comparative volumes (Katz and Mair, 1995b), and launched a new journal dedicated to the field, *Party Politics*. Around the same time, other scholars turned their attention to members and supporters: they obtained access to conduct membership surveys that also contributed to open a field of comparative analysis (Van Haute and Gauja, 2015). The construction of international databases (on members, constitutions and rules, manifestos, electoral results) and the sophistication of quantitative tools and analyses allows us to develop impressive comparative work across countries and across time, to test hypothesis about how responsive parties are to shifts in public opinion and/or electoral competition. Unfortunately, such approaches leave much in the dark and are thus complementary to analyses that come from different epistemological and disciplinary perspectives. Amongst these approaches, an anthropology of contemporary political parties has a lot to offer as it helps us focus on the processes through which partisans construct meanings and traditions, how they act and how these change, or not.

Adopting an anthropological approach to consider political parties is fairly unusual and has tended to be limited to the margins of the political system, in other words to the greens, the extremes or more generally to organisations that could be considered as movements (Kertzer, 1996; Mische, 2009). This is partly due to anthropology's historical affinity with the exotic and with studying 'down' rather than 'up' (Nader, 1969). However, it is particularly stimulating in that it invites us to interrogate what is familiar in our everyday political world and to move beyond the taken-for-granted. It encourages us to take seriously how the people involved (whether they are grassroots members or belong to parliamentary elites) think about what they are doing and how they interpret the political world in which they act. It challenges the taken-

for-granted use of theories that postulate instrumental rationality of individual actors and seeks to make sense of parties and movements through such lenses. It underlines dynamic relationships within complex and layered political organisations and sheds light directly upon actors and processes: how and by whom decisions are taken, how do ideological positions shift, why some practices, deemed acceptable in one party at a given time, are rejected in another or by the same party at a different point in time.

In this article, I argue that an anthropological approach allows us to understand better contemporary political organisations and the evolutions we are witnessing. I base such a claim not only on the ethnographic method for gathering data but also on the theoretical insights and analytic tools it offers comparativists. Indeed, I contend that it challenges us to identify and explain differences and to turn our gaze back to the familiar, whatever this familiar is. I am certainly not alone in underlying the benefits of ethnography in political science more generally (Boswell et al., 2019; Rhodes et al., 2007). My argument draws from the extensive work on political parties that I have conducted in France and in the UK (Faucher, 1999a; Faucher-King, 2005; Faucher-King and Treille, 2003; Faucher, 2015). In the first section, I highlight how an anthropological outlook makes it possible to explore three dimensions that are otherwise usually overlooked. In the second, I reflect on the challenges of data collection and analysis. Finally, I set out some of the findings from the anthropology of British party conferences and from the comparison of green parties. They highlight how symbolic practices form the fabric of group styles of interactions, construct bonds and hierarchies as well as legitimate modes of decision-making.

Why an anthropological approach?

There are at least three types of questions that can be explored with an anthropological lens that can usefully complement more conventional political science approaches. How do parties develop as mini societies? How do they change? How do party members think about the role of their own organisation in the democratic whole?

Parties as mini societies

In liberal representative systems, parties are voluntary organisations made up of individuals who have chosen to contribute financially and, in many cases, through their work and participation. They attract members who identify, to various degrees, with the collective and work together for its electoral success. They usually profess to share a vision of the collective good, which they endeavour to promote through standing candidates in electoral competition in order to form a legitimate government. They follow largely self-imposed rules and produce narratives. In fact, each party within a polity functions as a mini society, with its distinctive rules, ideas and practices and that these persist through time as institutions. Observers sometimes talk derogatorily about parties as 'tribes' but why not take this quip seriously? Some parties have institutionalized factions and others contend with their *de facto* existence, whether they are structured around ideological divergences, around charismatic personalities or around the attribution of posts.

Political scientists interested in these organisations consider their formal rules, their decision-making structure, their resources and professional capabilities, internal competition for leadership and intermediary positions, the existence and interactions of factions, and the policies that are debated, adopted and promoted as campaign manifestos or the interactions between parties and their social and political environment. This is all very well but the analysis of formal rules tells us little about how these are pragmatically implemented (Bailey, 2001). Since the 1990s, accumulation of data has allowed the development of theories and models about the adaptation of these organisations to their changing environment (Katz and Mair, 1995a). We know much more about the social characteristics of their members and supporters, and their political values and policy preferences. We have theories about their strategies and behaviours. Unfortunately, rational choice models, and their refinements through the adjunction of collective and social incentives (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002) ignore the worlds members make and inhabit. Moreover, it remains difficult to answer a number of challenging questions. Why do individuals join and remain members of social groups that are increasingly considered with suspicion by the wider public? What do members do and how do they ascribe meaning to their activities and their

interactions with others? What narratives do they construct and share about themselves as a collective?

If we want to understand the meanings that members construct to justify their belonging to themselves and to others, we need to pay attention to the ways in which they talk and how they talk about what they do or ought to do. We can observe the ways in which they interact, take decisions and act upon such decisions. We can listen to the narratives about the party history and mission, which are transmitted through socialization to new members who arrive with a background that contributes to shaping their reactions to such narratives, their appropriation and their enacting of them. Each party is keenly defending a vision of the good society that distinguishes it from its political rivals. The image of itself that the party promotes to potential recruits, and to its members, includes legitimate means of winning power within the organisation as well as in society, of deliberating, of choosing policy proposals and the politicians entrusted to turn them into legislation and governmental policies. Members understand or come to understand that politics is about conflict, disagreements and competition and therefore about finding ways to negotiate and resolve such tensions whether through compromise, ruse or appeal to norms and accepted practices. What can we learn about making society?

Continuity and change

The idea that parties constitute subcultures is readily accepted and scholars have tended to focus on party families, which are seen as broadly sharing values, policy orientations, legitimizing stories and rules of organising (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Often though, the notion of culture is taken as synonymous with stability and durability, which prevents a reflection about change. Yet, as Tony Blair famously said in 1994, ‘parties that do not change die and this party is a living movement, not a historical monument’ (Faucher-King, 2005: 20).

Since the 1990s, many European parties have changed their rules, their organisations, their policies, their leaders. Scholars have searched for factors that trigger such changes and sometimes their effects and outcome of the

selection of candidates, leaders and policies and on electoral outcome or voter support (Cross and Katz, 2013; Rihoux, 2001; Cain et al., 2006). They also proposed genetic models (Panebianco, 1988). Yet, there are (at least) three dimensions of change, about which we know too little. How are party members affected by organisational and policy changes? How do these changes become acceptable? How are they experienced? This is important because if we consider that members identify with a set of policies and practices, they may resist and protest such change. But if so, how does it happen? The British Labour party has a long history but the recent decades have been tumultuous and the party of 2020 is very different from the organisation of 1980. The party constitution has been altered several times, aligning the procedures with conceptions of intra-party democracy that privilege the individual member in decision-making at the expense of the historical collective members (unions, socialist societies).

What are the social processes involved here? Some we might see as having brought about new ways of interacting, deciding and deliberating; others may have contributed to transforming the meanings constructed by party members for themselves. Analysts may have considered endogenous (such as change in a dominant coalition of internal factions) and exogenous catalysts (such as electoral defeat), but they tell us little about how individual party actors react and play with the rules, formal and informal. Forensic monographies can explore the embeddedness and inertia of parties within a social and territorial fabric (Hastings, 1991; Sawicki, 1997) or reveal the strategies deployed by leaders, teams and coalitions and the role of contingency (Russell, 2005; Bale, 2010). But they are sometimes criticized for not being “generalizable”: they offer a complete and detailed picture of an idiosyncrasy but it is difficult to extrapolate from an example in order to propose general rules. Small n comparisons, on the other hand, make it possible to reflect on parallel changes and to analyse the processes through which organisations influence each or respond to their institutional and political environment. Indeed, they make it possible to interrogate the decision-making process and to take into account the strategies of actors as well as their circumstances (Faucher-King and Treille, 2003; Faucher, 2015).

Parties in their context

Identifying a degree of organisational isomorphism does not explain how practices are imported or developed *sui generis* or in reaction to competition, to institutions, to social change. Political scientists tend to focus on their own polity or may develop a high degree of specialization: they are national experts (without whom expert surveys would struggle!) or develop expertise on the SPD or on the Swedish Democrats, possibly of a party family such as the social-democrats or right-wing populists. Comparativists who have become experts of other countries than their own often do not explicitly turn their gaze back to their own society to raise questions about practices they take-for-granted. Our increased capacity to conduct large N comparisons drowns fine-grained differences but also reflexivity on our analytic categories. We know how electoral institutions tend to correlate with a certain type of electoral competition and party system but miss the beliefs and practices about the political system that are shared, yet nuanced, by citizens (Faucher and Hay, 2015) and members of different parties.

Since the 1990s, many books have brought together scholars of political parties. They offer the juxtaposition of informative case studies on party organisations, party reforms, party families, etc. (Lawson, 1994; Van Haute and Gauja, 2011; Van Haute, 2016; Waele et al., 2016) but little in the way of in depth explanations of country variations. Indeed, detailed comparisons between a small number of cases require a good understanding of several political cultures and systems in order to interpret qualitative data sensitively. They are therefore time consuming for the individual researcher or for the team of researchers who need to invest in the shifting of their analytic gaze.

If political parties can be considered as distinctive tribes, with their own norms and their rituals, how different from each other are they within a polity? Can we learn about the national political culture by looking at party subcultures, and reciprocally? Within a political system, parties submit to similar rules and constraints. For instance, they compete for votes within the same electorate and under comparable media scrutiny; they respond to victories (and defeats) but also to the ways in which these electoral outcomes are interpreted internally as well as in the public sphere. Besides, they may

anticipate some of the changes within the system (after all parties that win elections win the possibility of shaping legislation) even if to a large extent, sociodemographic and cultural changes are slow to take place. Comparison therefore sheds light on the national political culture and on the polity, including, for instance, the shift in the UK from two dominant political parties as essential Westminster cogs (McKenzie, 1964), sharing a number of beliefs and practices about the role of the party leader or the limited contribution of party members to policy-making to contested organisations that have reformed their procedures and embraced the idea of the individualization of membership (Faucher-King, 2005).

How does one conduct such research?

It can be difficult to get access to political parties (Aït-Aoudia et al., 2010). Quite often, social scientists are viewed with suspicion, as outsiders who may reveal something about the party that will provide an advantage to its political rivals and opponents. Moreover, parties are complex and national organisations with different arenas and scales that rarely intersect and can be difficult to bridge (Sawicki, 1997; Bolleyer, 2012). It is thus practical to identify a point of entry or a milieu in which one can start the exploration, as an ethnographer would select a society and village in which to settle (Descola, 1998; Barley, 2011). Anthropologists are no longer so tightly bound to a local community (Boswell et al., 2019): fieldwork now routinely encompasses several sites, visited repeatedly for shorter periods of time; it can focus on a process and, for instance, follow decision-making through various stages. Political ethnographers interested in political parties thus follow electoral campaigns, a politician or a local party organisation (Fenno, 1978). Data collection is linked to the research questions and evolves as these very questions change inductively as the research progresses.

For instance, at the beginning of my PhD, the puzzles I wanted to solve related to the motivations of green party activists in hostile institutional environments. In the early 1990s, green parties in the UK and in France operated under electoral rules and party systems that offered very little prospects of success. Yet, dedicated activists campaigned tirelessly to

promote what were then marginal political views. I contacted a few local party secretaries, met a few members and chose two local groups that were relatively successful in their respective contexts, were fairly active on the ground and campaigned in comparable university cities. Over several months, I attended many meetings, observed electoral activities and followed a number of activists, some of whom were also involved at the national level; I also interviewed dozens of members about their involvement in the (environmental) movement and the party more specifically. Both parties (Les Verts and the Green party) were naturally open and happy to get attention, so it was relatively easy to get access, observe and ask questions as an “innocent anthropologist”. Nevertheless, I got to the field with fairly typical research questions for a political scientist interested in party membership: I sought to reconcile generalisations about how social actors are expected to behave ‘universally’ as instrumental and rational actors with the diversity of practices.

Through this study, I learnt about politics on the ground and found out what being a party member meant to those who were dedicating much energy to it. But, my research also raised many more questions about politics, political parties and party membership and also about political culture and institutions, questions which I decided to explore further. In 1995, I set out to analyse the main British political parties. Working on the greens, I had become aware of, and intrigued by, the considerable expense of resources and energy that took place every autumn. For about one month, one after the other, British parties convened by the seaside for a week of political discussion and of partying. Most parties, in Continental Europe or beyond, contend themselves with a convention or congress every few years to select leadership, policies and strategies. I wanted to find out about why what made sense for partisans on one side of the Channel did not on the other. My British colleagues had few answers: the conference season was as obvious as the colour of swans. Yet, the questions I had were not only related to the idiosyncratic aspects of any of the four parties, nor in a way to Britain, but rather to my puzzlement with aspects of British political rules and customs and as to my interest in the meaning-making activities of individuals engaged in the promotion of distinct visions of public good. My initial plan was to

conduct a thorough comparison of UK party conferences and French party congresses and conventions but it became quite clear that the project was overly ambitious. As a consequence, I contended myself with Britain.

Conferences (but also conventions and congresses) are occasions to bring different sections of the organisation together. In the UK, conferences present other advantages to the analyst: they are organised every autumn; they follow unscripted rules about what should happen there; they combine a spectacle designed for outside audiences and the enactment of deliberative practices; they promote policies and politicians but also educate party members; they construct social bonds and create distinctive collective identities; they demonstrate that parties are playing by the rules of British parliamentary democracy. Once inside, my questions evolved inductively and I benefited from the fact that the period was transformative for British parties. Indeed, I was able to witness striking evolutions in rules, personnel, policies and practices. I could talk to party members about how they processed the fact that the organisations they had joined differed from the one they were members of today, how they felt they were contributing to these changes, how they made sense of their commitment to a collective project.

Access to each party was gained differently in each case but it helped that I first approached them as a curious, foreign and young scholar. The first thing I had to learn was to 'navigate' the idiosyncratic procedures and make sense of the committees and groups that also convened there. By the time I had decided to take them as an object of study, I had established contact with gatekeepers in central offices. I obtained my pass through them and they recommended me to other officials and members. It would have been easier to concentrate on one organisation, as others have (Minkin, 1978; Kelly, 1989) rather than hold together the threads of distinct political cultures and organisations but my interest focused on understanding political activists and my curiosity in British institutions. Having previously worked my way up from party branches to national parties (Faucher, 1999a), I considered that national conferences could be taken as melting-pots that would allow me to observe the creation of distinct alloys.

I attended the annual conference of the four national parties between 1995 and 2002. Every autumn I spent about 3 weeks in quaint sea-side resorts. I was not alone: there were thousands of other people: activists (with different names and roles each time), politicians, unionists, collaborators and officers, lobbyists, journalists, fringe-event organisers and hangers-on. During the period of my field work, party rules changed, conferences grew in size as they became fundraising opportunities, media attention waned and the staging became more professional, elections were planned and results discussed.

The weeks by the sea-side were intensive and immersive. During plenary sessions, I sat amongst party members (whether representatives, delegates, constituency members) or in the visitors' gallery. I noted carefully staging arrangements, choreographies, successions of speakers, reactions of the audience around me, interactions between people, what people were discussing, who was involved in the discussion, how the discussion proceeded and its outcome. I attended fringe events. I went to training sessions with delegates and candidates. I drank a variety of alcoholic beverages on the fringe, ate poorly on sandwiches, I mingled. I observed front stage what parties were trying to say about themselves but I also went backstage. I talked to people who chaired plenary sessions, members of party committees, party officers. I interviewed activists and politicians, and I made contact for follow-up interviews. I collected leaflets, newsletters and booklets of policy proposals and amendments. I sifted the press coverage and noted the framing adopted by different outlets. I observed press officers briefing journalists about the speeches of the day, trying to spin the news in the most favourable way. Every evening, I reviewed and complemented my field notes, I thought about what I had learnt and what new questions arose. I decided what to observe or do the following day. Between conferences, I immersed myself in party history, internal documents, followed policy debates, occasionally attended local meetings, interviewed partisans from different arenas. I developed closer relationships with a few informants who kindly opened doors or helped me decipher procedures, political games, teams and tactics. I also talked to party officials and former officials, with journalists and with lobbyists.

The method of data collection, and the analytic concepts and tools I mobilized were drawn from several social scientific disciplines. Ethnography is useful to

describe live events, to interpret what participants are doing and how they view their role in the political competition at large and within their party. I tried to disentangle the practices and the narratives that drew from a party's tradition and those that seemed to be linked to taken-for-granted conceptions of what being engaged in politics in the UK involves. I learnt to discern what was a twitch and what was a wink (Geertz, 1993: 6). Indeed, one of my objectives was to provide a thick description of each organisations, one that allowed my readers to understand whether the meanings of a wink could be understood by members of one party only or by the general British public, or by anyone with an interest in the political parties of liberal representative regimes.

Over the years, I accumulated boxes and tapes of primary qualitative data, which I analysed and interpreted along the way to articulate inductively new and more precise questions about what goes on in and for British parties when they meet annually. I followed a number of leads and themes that allowed me to compare the four parties and place them within their institutional context. I tracked which processes and practices belonged to a national repertoire, which responded to functional needs and whether these were shared across nations and parties. I also worked to distinguish what participants thought they were doing. Were they following routines, norms of appropriate behaviours, or formal rules? If they strayed from the norm, how did they do it and why? To what extent did they reflect on their innovations?

In the following section, I develop some of the key findings that are not specific to the 'very British' institutions that are annual party conferences. I show that a study that is empirically grounded in observations of a small number of organisations for short periods but over several years is an effective way of explaining how organisations change.

What do we find?

Change in political parties is often traced to the adoption of new rules, new leaders or new policies. It is more difficult and time consuming to assess the extent to which (new) rules are implemented, how a new dominant coalition may change norms of behaviour as well as formal rules and how these affect

the role played by the grassroots in policy change. Adopting an anthropological outlook invites us to pay closer attention to what people do within political parties beyond what the organisation is prepared to say about itself. It also tends to shift focus away from the discourse of politicians and officials who are mostly concerned with image and how it affects their position in the electoral competition. It allows us to interpret the stories party members tell to justify their actions to outsiders as well as to themselves, at different levels of the organisation.

Symbolic practices

When the notion of ritual is used in relation to contemporary politics, it often denotes a slight condescendence towards what is perceived as exotic and quaint or ineffectual because it is associated with irrational religious practices. However, I argue that the category is useful to understand how political parties exist, persist and evolve as voluntary organisations. I define ritual as

behaviour that is repeated, rule-bound, referring to on-going traditions or otherwise a reference point that transcends the narrow framework of a choosing acting individual. It is executed with a sense of itself as a performance. (Faucher-King, 2005: 6)

In relatively recent organisations, such as the greens in the 1990s, the elaboration of internal rules is a crucial moment. Both the British green party and Les Verts were characterized not only by their commitment to political ecology and the promotion of “sustainable society” but also by their members’ strong views on the need to rejuvenate politics and to create participatory processes. The practice of democracy was essential to their commitment to the organisation and inseparable from their green convictions: in fact, they devoted a good deal of time and energy to imagine better decision-making processes and uphold the rules and principles they had chosen. Their attentiveness to procedures could appear fastidious and “ritualistic” (Douglas, 2002: 61). They reflected the centrality of symbolic practice in the construction of their group identity as well as their intuitive understanding of the paradoxes of democracy and trust (Sztompka, 1998). If I had not been striving to understand how members gave meaning to their dedication to a

cause that looked electorally futile to most observers, I would have overlooked the importance of the very performance of deliberation, of their efforts to empower each other and promote participation.

British annual party conferences may be unique in many ways but they are only examples of the symbolic practices through which organisations construct collective identities and motivate individuals to devote time and resources to a common cause. They are essential to maintain traditions yet they make change possible. As rituals, they combine cognitive content with an affective power that is bound-up with a performance (Boussaguet and Faucher, 2020): they help us understand how attitudes, values and policy proposals are also experienced first-hand by participants in the plurality of social and political events that bring together members through the year. Participation – vicariously or in person - allows party members to act ‘as if’ they made policy and chose leaders, ‘as if’ they were essential actors in the democratic life of their society. Hence, rituals contribute to naturalise ways of behaving, leading participants to believe that the world around them is not of their ‘own (cultural) making, but rather an order that belongs to the external world itself’ (Kertzer, 1989: 85). As they link legitimacy to tradition, they discourage critical thinking but they are rarely repeated without adaptation. Henceforth, they produce change and they contribute to its legitimation. They can – and I showed that they were – used instrumentally for such a purpose.

Group style

The notion of group style (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003) captures how groups develop and maintain styles of interactions that contribute to define the boundaries of the group, what can be said within it and what are the appropriate modes of expression. For instance, research shows how the greens strive to be consistent in their public (political) and private lives (Lichterman, 1996), transforming their lifestyles and adopting everyday habits that may create tensions with their entourage (Faucher, 1998).

Conferences are important moments in the life of organisations: they bring together people who rarely interact otherwise: delegates or representatives from local groups, elected councillors and politicians, their advisers, etc. They

help construct physical and symbolic boundaries between categories of participants, between participants and audiences, those who identify with the group. They clearly have an important function as a means to integrate the party through sociability: they provide opportunities for many social encounters and meetings on the fringe of the main event. They establish and reproduce the norms of interactions that shape the social experience of party members and weave a tradition: socialization is another process that contributes to the constitution of a collective identity. Although it is not limited to them, socialization is particularly important for newcomers. They hear from experienced delegates what to expect, they learn how to interpret the complex procedures for debates, they witness how one is expected to behave in the hall or in the corridors. As they return to conference year after year, participants discover internal rules, formal and informal; they take part in gossip and in strategizing, whether they are plotting for their faction, their local association, their own career. At the same time, they progressively acquire a practical knowledge about deliberation and develop conceptions about appropriate decision-making processes.

Each party subculture is immediately recognizable to the observer as well as to the identifier thanks to an array of symbolic practices. These include procedural rules, ballots, songs, colours but also dress codes, phrases and myths. For instance, in the 1990s the British greens devoted great deal of attention to the conditions that would help maximize the participation of each participant at its national conferences: they started meetings with a minute of silence, broke up discussions in small groups around tables, sought consensus and avoided counting votes whenever possible (Faucher, 1999a ; 1999b). This contrasts with the focalization on votes as the expression of individual members' view and the epitome of intra-party democracy (Faucher-King, 2005).

The observation of conferences reveals the distinct group styles that shape how members interact as well as perform. In the late 1990s, I discovered how conservative party members were more likely to wear pin-striped suits than woolly jumpers. As I myself came back to the conference, I noticed how Labour delegates were encouraged to stop calling each other 'comrades' or 'brothers' and increasingly used phrases such as 'colleagues' and 'friends'. I found out

how the New Labour team understood very well that conferences offer important opportunities to introduce and institutionalise change. The ‘modernization’ of the party was thus implemented visually through the staging, the selection of speakers and the choreography of the conference schedule. They worked front stage to produce the image of ‘new’ Labour for the media and outside audiences. They worked backstage to coax participants into new ways of conducting political deliberation and business at conference. For instance, delegates wishing to address the conference from the rostrum were provided with help to prepare their speech and advice on how to dress to increase their chances of attracting the eye of the session chair. New (formal and informal) rules were routinized and naturalized, which helped Labour become New Labour. As history has shown, such changes are reversible or at least always amendable.

Public performance of leadership

Whilst conferences are important because they contribute to integrate members into the organisation and construct a shared culture based on narratives, rules and styles, they are also the most important occasion for British parties to attract free publicity in the form of news and specialized coverage. The parliamentary groups and their staff, the officials and the delegates or representatives are not the only people who converge to the seaside: all media outlets send teams. If coverage had already been reduced by the 1990s compared to the 1970s, conference proceedings remained the best means for parties to attract attention to their policies and to promote their front bench politicians.

The four British parties I studied held very different views about the role of the party leader. In the mid 1990s, the Greens elected two joint ‘Speakers’ (and they only relented to elect a party leader in 2008). They were the exception. All the others paid great attention to their leader, even when they belonged to traditions suspicious of such individualization of power. At the time, the leader of the Labour party was chosen by three colleges (parliamentarians, constituency parties and trade unions). ‘One member one vote’ ballots had been held in the constituency parties college for the first time in 1994. Tony Blair had been elected and used the conference to

announce a 'New' Labour party. The Liberal Democrats were the only ones to ballot their membership for the election of the leadership and granted the victor a firm grip on the electoral manifesto if not on the conference agenda. The Conservative gave most autonomy to their Leader, who until 1998 was selected by the parliamentary group and had in fact no formal link with the membership.

Such attitudes were reflected in the role performed by the leaders at their respective conference. Whilst queues to attend the Leader's speech had been customary at the Conservative conference, Labour worked to draw larger crowds and opened up the conference to visitors. Labour and the Conservatives changed the scenography, the sets. Conference speeches have been a daunting task for leaders (Faucher-King, 2005: 81; Finlayson, 2021). They work for months with their teams and the performance is rehearsed to include jokes and dance moves. As television reduced its coverage, it became important to tailor oratory and to showcase the support of members as fervent fans. There is always a risk associated with the performance of a ritual (Dirks, 1992; Faucher-King, 2005: 85), particularly one designed to attract attention and be the apex of the conference and of the political year. Even when the audience in the hall is supportive, the performer may be poor (or poorly), bad luck may expose that the emperor has no clothes. In the hope of retaining control over such a fragile process, party organisers have stooges ready to stir a standing ovation: this was particularly obvious during the short leadership of Iain Duncan Smith but is not by any means an unusual technique. Other things can easily go wrong: protesters interrupt, pranksters jump on the stage, the background letters collapse or the delivery is blighted by a persistent cough. The stage performance is important (Balandier, 2006) because it must not detract from the policy content and the political objective: press officers thus sometimes offer debriefing to journalists looking for a way to frame the 'message' of the leader.

Staging democracy

Ethnographic observations allowed me to analyse how the "masters of ritual" avoid embarrassing situations, the strategies deployed to respond to systemic pressures and the symbolic work involved in public deliberation of policy

motions. Such descriptions help readers understand the relative importance of staging debates at conferences for each party, their structure and their agenda. These are moments when party members enact their commitment to the parliamentary democracy. Deliberations mirror the proceedings in the House of Commons but also highlight important differences relating to conceptions of intra-party democracy. The organisation of ballots on motions for instance is perfunctory in the Conservative party but can be showdowns in the three others. Whilst very distinctive traditions explain what is ultimately at stake in conference votes for each party, I was also able to demonstrate convergence to growing isomorphism and the adoption of outside norms seen as susceptible to legitimize internal procedures. Moreover, the enactment of internal democratic procedures is considered by many members as essential to their conceptions of party membership.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that, although it is fairly unusual, an anthropological approach provides answers to important questions about political parties that more conventional political science methods struggle to respond to satisfactorily: such as the processes through which individuals create bonds and meanings; the practices for which individuals are prepared to devote time and resources; the narratives and visions of a collective project that they want to be part of. It does so by focusing on the meanings that are constructed by partisans through their interactions within the party, it draws attention to the ways in which their social representations (on what society is/ought to be) and their symbolic practices (what they think is the appropriate way to act) are negotiated, taken for granted or disputed. It allows us to understand the processes through which policies, teams, rules and behaviours change or are “reformed” and how these evolutions affect members. The studies I revisit here involved extended periods of fieldwork conducted over relatively long periods of time. I started observing the greens in 1991 and I attended annual British party conferences between 1995 and 2002. Both projects demonstrate the benefits of comparing between countries and within a political system. They show the diversity of views about democratic party politics and the equally diverse practices these views give

rise to. They allow us to move beyond the idiosyncrasies of each organisation, which can be captured through other qualitative research designs, and allow us not only to draw the contours of a British political culture in order to reflect on social processes that are not exclusive to Britain, nor to parties. How do parties construct a collective identity? How do they compete and strategize? How do they maintain customs whilst innovating and changing – whether proactively or reactively? It is time to consider western liberal institutions as contingent and “exotic” in the sense that they are infused with symbolic dimensions that are difficult to grasp when one contends with variables that are predominantly measurable. An anthropological imagination can help us resolve some of the aporias set up by some of the methodological and analytic approaches that are, at present, more conventional in contemporary political science.

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the author

Florence Faucher is Professor of political science at Sciences Po (CEE) in Paris and Associate Fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford. Her research focuses on how forms of political participation and activism have changed over the last thirty years. She has analysed the blurring of boundaries between the public and the private spheres of action and how practices developed in new parties have driven a thrust for reform in well-established political parties. Currently, her main research project investigates the uses of the symbolic in public policy, particularly in response to critical situations (terrorist attacks in 2015, the Covid19 pandemic in 2020).

Email: florence.faucher@sciencespo.fr