



# **The comparative study of political party organization: Changing perspectives and prospects**

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## **abstract**

Political parties have been studied as organizations for more than a century. Over time the focus of party research has shifted, from normative concerns with organizational democracy to the comparative analysis of organizational evolution and party functions. In this article we document the trajectory of party organization research, analyzing the value of the comparative method and evaluating the predictive power of research in our field to consider how it may add value to the study of other types of organizations. We focus on four established fields: party leadership, candidate selection, party membership and party regulation, but also present some of the newest and most promising research themes in the field, including personalization, evolving forms of participation and affiliation, and the relationship between political parties as organizations and social movements.

## **Introduction**

Political parties are central actors in representative democracies. This centrality stems from their role as entities that nominate candidates for public elections and is a common theme of accepted definitions of what constitutes a political party – distinguishing them from other political organizations, such as interest groups. While parties have been assigned various functions

over time, which to different degrees follow from their nominating role (King, 1969; Pedersen, 1989), most definitions of political parties do not explicitly require that they have organizations. A minimalist account of democracy, for example, requires that parties compete at elections, not that each party is internally democratic (Allern and Kosiara-Pedersen, 2007).

Rather, the presence of an organizational form is a consequence of parties' character as collective actors – as entities designed to bring together groups of individuals to achieve common and coordinated political outcomes. Particularly since the 'heyday' of mass parties in the 1950s and 1960s (Scarrow, 2015), strong normative claims that political parties should be membership organizations have prevailed. This has shaped the character of party organization research, which has traditionally focused on political parties as membership organizations. In recent times this normative expectation has been challenged as member-less political parties have emerged (Mazzoleni and Voerman, 2017), but with or without members, political parties still organize.

The purpose of this article is to present how party organizations are studied within the field of comparative politics, and how this may add value to studies of other types of organizations. We assess the value of the comparative methodology, and critically analyze the predictive power of research in our field. We note, in particular, the shift from more 'big picture', normative accounts of the place of political parties in representative democracies and how they ought to be organized, to more specific accounts of the functions that parties perform in modern societies.

The first section of our article presents a broad snapshot of the tradition of party organization research, highlighting its normative origins. We follow this with a discussion of an important debate within comparative party studies around organizational change or decline. We then shift to outlining the main themes and research methodologies of a series of key projects on comparative party organizations. We focus, in particular, on four established subfields: party leadership, candidate selection, party membership and party regulation. The final section of the article presents some of the newest and most relevant research themes that are emerging in the field.

## The tradition

In the sub-field of comparative party politics, the term ‘party organization’ can be used to describe different phenomena. It is often used to denote that specific part of a political party that exists to support elected representatives and implies an administrative structure that may or may not be situated within a network of supporters and individual members. However, the phrase ‘party organization’ may also be used to describe more generally how a political party is structured – its form and governance arrangements. Organization can refer to the structure of a party and the relationships between its constituent actors in a formal sense – what appears in its constitution and is advertised on a party’s website, for example – or it can refer to how a political party operates in practice. Party organization invokes the concepts of structure and agency and may be either a constraining or enabling force depending on how power is distributed within the association. It is the complex relationship between organization and control – how power is exercised and distributed – that has been of fundamental interest to comparative party scholars.

These broad questions of power share much common ground with studies of the internal dynamics of other collective political organizations, such as interest groups and social movements, which possess similar characteristics. As Allern and Bale (2012: 9-10) argue, all of these groups ‘aggregate individual interests and preferences into collective demands and seek to influence and form the content of public policy’. They also face similar organizational pressures in mobilizing supporters and/or members and ensuring their organizational survival (Fraussen and Halpin, 2018). Understanding the key concerns of party scholars, and how these have changed over time, can reveal important parallels with other disciplines and subfields of political science.

It is now more than 100 years since the first (comparative) studies of party organizations saw the light of day, in particular Ostrogorski’s (1903) study of parties in Britain and the United States (US) and Michels’ analysis of the German Social Democrats, which formed the basis of his iron law of oligarchy (Michels, 1911). However, it was not until after World War II that political

party scholarship developed into a coherent field of research, in both Europe and the United States.

In 1950, the American Political Science Association's Committee (APSA) on Political Parties issued a report in defence of the role of political parties in modern American democracy, and argued the need for a stronger, responsible two-party system:

Popular government in a nation of more than 150 million people requires political parties which provide the electorate with a proper range of choice between alternatives of action. The party system thus serves as the main device for bringing into continuing relationship those ideas about liberty, majority rule and leadership which Americans are largely taking for granted. (APSA, 1950: 22)

The APSA Report articulated a very clear normative role for parties, and their place in representative democracy. It was illustrative of the view that parties perform several crucial functions in modern systems of representative governance, which have informed and charted the direction for decades of party organization research. Put simply, political parties and the organizations that constitute them, create a chain of linkage between citizens and the state (see for example, Lawson and Merkl, 1988). In doing so, they reconcile and aggregate diverse and often conflicting interests in society, provide arenas for participation in politics, serve as vehicles for political communication, recruit political elites through processes of candidate selection and once elected to the legislature, perform a governance function. They represent diverse and partisan interests in society, and through the mechanism of regular general elections, act as a conduit through which the government can be held accountable.

To enable parties to effectively perform these functions, the APSA report recommended nothing less than a 'full scale transformation of American political parties' that centred on developing organizations – adopting more tightly controlled structures, party discipline in the Congress and a well-defined role for their grassroots members (Wickham-Jones, 2018: 2). The intention of the Report was to shape public debate, and though that never really occurred, the exercise represents an early example of party researchers

attempting to prescribe organizational forms, engage with political practitioners and influence public policy.

In Western Europe, party organizations attracted renewed attention after WWII. The original empirical studies of Ostrogorski (1903) and Michels (1911) were supplemented with what turned out to become ‘classics’ in the field, with further theoretical reflections on the differences in how parties organize. Unlike the APSA Report, which was concerned with delivering a prescriptive model of organization, these European studies sought to document the diversity of organizational forms. Duverger (1951) established two party ‘types’, namely the cadre party (dominated by elites) and the mass party (characterized by its membership structure). Kirchheimer (1966) contributed with the catch-all party type (sacrificing narrow ideology to appeal to as many voters as possible) and Panebianco (1988) with the electoral-professional party (prioritizing the instrumental goal of electoral success). These various party types, coherently presented together for the first time with Katz and Mair’s own contribution, the cartel party (Katz and Mair, 1995) – which emphasized the collusive nature of party politics and the increasing embeddedness of these organizations within the state – provided a theoretical framework for understanding organizational structures in different social, technological and temporal contexts. Each party type was based upon the empirical world that the party researchers knew about. Theories developed on the basis of in-depth case studies and comprised a general overview of the state of parties at different points in time.

### **Party decline or party change?**

How political parties, as organizations, change over time has concerned party scholars working across many different subfields of political science (for example, comparative politics, political institutions, political and organizational sociology) for more than a century. However, real-world developments such as technological advances and the changing nature of social relations have been crucially important in driving the need for theoretical and explanatory advances. One of the key debates in current party

organization scholarship is the extent to which political parties as organizations are in decline, or whether they simply change over time.

In 1997, the organisers of a workshop at the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) Joint Sessions and a resulting special issue of the journal, *Party Politics*, cited the fact that ‘after a few decades observing parties “decline” and then “renew”, it was perhaps natural that more attention would be focused on how they got from there to here’ (Harmel and Svåsand, 1997: 291). The questions these scholars identified in this research agenda were: What role do internal and environmental factors play in party change? How likely is change to occur? Is it reactive or proactive? Is it gradual or abrupt? And who are the relevant actors in the process of party change? In acknowledging that party change ‘does not just happen’, Harmel and Janda’s (1994) integrated theory of party goals and party change incorporated three important explanatory and predictive elements, representing a significant advance in the field. The first was the recognition that change arises from both internal and external drivers. The second was the importance of ‘party operatives’, or key decision makers, in advocating for change. The third was the necessity of building a coalition of support to overcome the organizational resistance that is common to large organizations such as political parties. This scholarship represented a shift from asking *how* parties organize, to *why* organizations change over time and predicting their propensity to do so.

More than two decades on from the publication of the special issue, the context within which parties exist has altered quite significantly. Perhaps the greatest concern that overshadows studies of party organization is the collapse of formal party membership (van Biezen et al., 2012) and how this, in turn, impacts key party functions. With fewer members, political parties struggle to recruit candidates for public office, to develop policy proposals and to find campaigners to create links to voters and supporters through canvassing. The composition of parties looks less like the population. Recent research has confirmed that political party members are typically unrepresentative of the population: they are more likely to be older, male, and have a higher socio-economic status (Heidar and Wauters, 2019). Insofar as dwindling party memberships affect the performance of parties’ participatory and representative functions, they also raise broader questions about the

continued capacity of parties to enhance the quality of democracy (van Biezen, 2014) – known broadly as the ‘party decline’ thesis. Although many are now questioning the ‘golden age’ of the mass party and regard it as a historical episode (see, for example, van Biezen and Poguntke, 2014), it still carries significant weight as a normative model of how parties should be organised (Gauja, 2015).

Despite public acceptance of parties as indispensable political actors, perceptions of parties are generally negative (Webb, 2009) and few believe they actually care what people think (Dalton and Weldon, 2005). In addition to declining membership, consistent empirical evidence across the board in advanced industrial democracies suggests that party activism, electoral turnout and campaign participation is dropping (Whiteley, 2011; Siaroff, 2009; Franklin, 2004) and that partisan attachments have significantly weakened (Dalton, 2000). This is, in turn, related to the argument that political parties have shifted from voluntary organizations, firmly anchored in civil society, to agents of the state – indistinguishable from one another in policy terms, and offering few genuine opportunities for political participation (Katz and Mair, 2018).

Many of the debates over decline in party scholarship parallel those in social movement and interest group studies. As early as the late 1970s McCarthy and Zald (1977) documented the transformation of classical social movement organizations to professional organizations, characterized by paid staff and supporters who preferred to donate money rather than volunteer their time to the cause. As Fraussen and Halpin (2018) note, similar arguments around the trend to professionalization in organizations have been made with respect to interest groups, not-for-profits and other civil society organizations (see, for example, Skocpol, 1999; Jordan and Maloney, 1997).

Returning to parties, there is, however, a certain scepticism of the party decline thesis (see, for example Reiter, 1989). While membership crises might seem acute at the time of research/writing, Harmel and Janda (1994) note that much of the literature on the decline of party systems in the 1980s was temporally specific: stimulated by the ‘real or perceived “decline” of political parties in industrialised societies’ (Lawson and Merkl, 1988). When assessing

party decline, it is important to distinguish between parties' relationships with the electorate (trust, turnout etc.) and parties as organizations (Webb, 2009). While the jury is still out in regard to the former, with the latter understanding, the conclusion seems to be change rather than decline. In light of declining membership figures, parties have replaced dues with public financing, members' policy input with focus groups and staff, and members' labour with professional campaigning techniques etc. As organizations, it could be argued, parties are thriving with more resources (financing and staff) available. This is a debate that transcends political parties and suggests that the main issue at stake is not necessarily a particular organizational form, but how organizations perform their linkage functions.

### **Party organization research**

Party organization research has yielded the empirical basis for the perspective that political parties are changing rather than declining. From the 1980s onwards, European party research moved forward on the basis of extensive comparative data collection to investigate patterns of organization and change over time. Kenneth Janda contributed more than two decades of work in 1980 by publishing a database on parties' organizations that drew on both primary and secondary sources (Janda, 1980), and in the last half of the 1980s, Richard Katz and Peter Mair (1992; 1994; 1995) launched the project that would become decisive for the renewed interest in comparative party organization research. The purpose of the Katz and Mair project was to show how party organizations had changed over the 1960-1990 period. Twelve country experts provided data sourced from party rules, accounts and other official material as well as information provided by party central offices, e.g. on the number of staff, membership figures and the share of women in national committees.

The Katz and Mair project laid if not *the* then at least *a central* cornerstone for modern comparative party organization research. It shifted the scope of studies from in-depth party cases to a more general analysis of specific party functions, producing a wealth of data on the formal organizations of 79 parties from 1960-1990, e.g. on parties' formal structure, number of staff,



representation of women and income profiles (Katz and Mair, 1992), twelve country studies (Katz and Mair, 1994; Bille, 1997), and some comparative analyses on candidate nomination (Bille, 2001) and party financing (Pierre et al., 2000). In addition, they, together with Janda (1980), pointed to the importance of placing party research within a comparative approach, and furthermore, established a collective of country expert party scholars, which could be replicated by scholars in other areas of organizational studies. This data enabled an examination of the differences and similarities in organizational approaches between parties and countries, as well as over time.

Theoretically, Katz and Mair also made a substantive impact on the field of party organization research. The journal 'Party Politics' was established in the wake of the renewed interest in party research, and the first article in the journal was Katz and Mair's (1995) 'cartel party thesis'. In many ways, this article is central for party organization research today. Moving on from elite, mass and catch-all party types, they present the cartel party model as characterized by the individualization of party member rights, the blurring of the distinction between members and supporters, public financing of parties, and privileged access to state media. The model was formulated on the basis of the collection of comparative data across a large number of parties and countries and highlights the importance of comparative research methods in generating theories and models of organization, that can be tested by scholars in future research.

Indeed, the cartel party thesis has sparked continuing research and robust discussion within the discipline (Katz and Mair, 2009; 2018). Not all scholars agree that it is the dominant model of party organization (see for example, Koole, 1996), and debates exist around the applicability of the model to specific parties and national contexts. While several studies have shown that parties have the attributes of the cartel party type at the organizational level (Pedersen, 2004), whether or not entire party systems operate as cartels in limiting political competition through the selective provision of public funding and privileged access to state media is not so clear. The model also potentially resonates with the evolutionary trajectory of other organizations, such as interest groups, which have traditionally had strong roots in civil

society but now comprise 'checkbox members' and are highly dependent on state resources (see, for example, Bolleyer, 2018).

Two of the country experts in the Katz and Mair project, Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb, along with renowned party scholar Susan Scarrow, initiated a continuation and renewal of the data collection on party organizations in the 'Political Parties Database Project' project (PPDB, see [www.politicalpartydb.org](http://www.politicalpartydb.org)). As in the case of the Katz and Mair project, material and data is collected and coded by country experts. The PPDB updates data on party organization variables previously collected in the Katz and Mair project, but also includes additional variables that allow for the analysis of new aspects of party organization, for example, parties' use of the internet. The range of countries has been expanded from twelve West European countries and the US to all of Europe as well as countries and parties across the rest of the democratic world. The first round (2011-2012) included data from 140 parties in 25 countries, while the second round (2017) includes more than 250 parties in 42 countries and is continuously expanded. The PPDB dataset enables global comparative studies and a comparison across both parties and countries.

The PPDB project leaders chose not to collaborate on single country or party studies but focused upon data collection, providing public access to the data, and thematic comparative analyses (Poguntke et al., 2016; Scarrow et al., 2017). Key analytical themes include how party organizations are financed (van Biezen and Kopecký, 2017), how parties collaborate with interest organizations (Allern and Verge, 2017), and whether or not they are internally democratic (von dem Berge and Poguntke, 2017; Bolin et al., 2017). But the focus is also on the implications of party organization, e.g. party financing and responsiveness (Lobo and Razzuoli, 2017), candidate nomination and gender representativeness (Pruysers et al., 2017), and rules of enrollment and party member activism (Kosiara-Pedersen et al., 2017).

Both the Katz and Mair and the PPDB projects rely on party statutes as the primary source of empirical data on the nature of party organizations. Katz and Mair (1992) made a major argument for the relevance and importance of statutes as the 'official version' of party organization, because the rules set

out in party statutes provide the framework within which the party organizes. While not all procedures might 'follow the book', if disagreement occurs, the entitled actors will make use of the statutes. These documents enable party structures and processes to be objectively known, traced over time and therefore provide a foundation from which further studies might be conducted. While not all parties publish their statutes, this is increasingly common in established democracies, and sets political parties apart from many other civil society and business organizations, whose constituting documents remain private. Hence, the availability of party statutes enables the collection and analysis of comparative data that is simply not feasible if these documents are not in the public domain.

Of course, the statutes – and the official story of a political party – do not always prove to be the real story of how these organizations operate. While party research has not studied all the ways in which parties in their praxis deviate from the official story, it has at least to some extent studied this deviation with respect to some of the most important decisions within the party – namely party leader and candidate selection, to which we now turn.

### **Subfields of party organization research**

We now present the central, specialized subfields within party organization research, which go to three main questions: who constitutes the organization, how is it resourced and how are its key personnel selected? We focus on party leadership selection, candidate nomination, party membership and party regulation, since these are – and have always been – the central aspects of concern for party organization scholars, as depicted in the various party types presented above. Party leadership and candidate selection are two of the three most important indicators of intra-party democracy (Cross and Katz, 2013; Bolin et al., 2017), while party membership and legal regulation (especially the intersection between regulation and party financing) are two important indicators of party resources and legitimacy (Poguntke et al., 2016; Scarrow et al., 2017).

### *Party leadership*

The comparative study of leadership selection has become a rapidly expanding field of inquiry, anchored in foundational studies undertaken, for example, by Cross and Blais (2012a; 2012b) and Pilet and Cross (2014). A growing literature considers both the factors leading to change in the processes of selecting party leaders and their implications (see, for example, Sandri et al., 2015; Schumacher and Giger, 2017; Gauja, 2017; Quinn, 2012; Kenig, 2009; Cross et al., 2016). These studies, many of which are ‘large n’ comparative works, examine the electoral and organizational contexts of parties adopting leadership selection reforms, the impact of a more inclusive electorate on the leadership contests – for example, the diversity of candidates and those selected, and the implications for parties’ subsequent electoral success.

Reflecting the approach taken with more general studies of party change, research has shown that reforms to the leadership selection process are more likely to occur when parties suffer electoral setbacks (Cross and Blais, 2012a) and should be linked with three pervasive trends, largely external to the organization: the personalization of politics, increasing social demands for direct democracy and declining party memberships (Wauters, 2010). Consequently, parties in many Western democracies have expanded their leadership selection processes from closed events involving party elites to enfranchise their members (Pilet and Cross, 2014). In some cases, such as open primaries, citizens who are not party members may also participate (Sandri et al., 2015). Yet, changes to party rules and processes have not necessarily led to substantive democratic outcomes. Kenig (2009), for example, shows that while more inclusive leadership selection contests produce more competitors, this does not necessarily lead to closer races. Furthermore, studies that have examined the characteristics of party leaders reveal that they are predominantly male, aged over 50 and have significant political experience (Pilet and Cross, 2016).

### *Candidate selection*

Candidate selection is the process by which a political party decides who its officially endorsed election candidates will be. As the defining characteristic

and one of the principal activities of political parties, it is well regulated (Bille, 2001) and crucial to understanding where power lies within parties and how it is exercised. It is a high-stakes activity, involving personal, professional and partisan ambitions, but it also offers 'the best opportunity for rank-and-file voters to exercise influence within their party and to have an (indirect) influence on public policy' (Cross, 2008: 598). In addition to managing potentially destructive contests, the rules that political parties adopt to select their candidates should also reflect the organizational culture of the party and its ideology, balancing these considerations against electoral imperatives such as finding popular candidates in a unified and efficient way. Candidate selection is equally important outside the party as it influences the choices before voters, the composition of parliaments, cohesion and discipline within parliamentary groups, the interests most likely to be heard in policy debates, and legislative outcomes. According to Hazan and Rahat (2010: 10) 'candidate selection affects the fundamental nature of modern democratic politics and governance'. Given the importance of the process, it is somewhat surprising that it was only in 1988 that the first cross-national study of candidate selection was published: Michael Gallagher and Michael Marsh's (1988) edited book, *Candidate selection in comparative perspective: The secret garden of politics*.

Like leadership selection, studies of candidate selection have documented and analysed how the process has changed over time, focusing in particular on who participates, in addition to evaluating the outcomes for representative democracy. Some two decades after Gallagher and Marsh (1988), Hazan and Rahat's (2010) landmark cross-national study of candidate selection processes has continued to set the agenda for candidate selection research, presenting a framework for understanding and classifying parties' processes based on four key dimensions: candidacy, the selectorate, decentralisation and voting versus appointment systems. However, the implementation of particular mechanisms for candidate selection carry both intended and unintended consequences that reflect different, and often conflicting, normative visions of representative democracy (Hazan and Rahat, 2010). The political consequences of these methods are evaluated according to four

democratic criteria: participation, representation, competition and responsiveness.

Using these parameters, studies have taken interest in the movement towards more inclusive selection contests, in particular the increasingly widespread use of both open and closed primaries (see for example, Cross et al., 2016; Kenig et al., 2015; Sandri et al., 2015). The list of political parties having now used open or semi-open primaries for the selection of candidates or party leaders is quite extensive, including: the French Socialists (Faucher, 2015: 804), the Israeli parties (Hazan and Rahat, 2010), the Italian Partito Democratico (Sandri et al., 2015) and the Canadian Liberals and UK Labour and Conservatives (Gauja, 2017). Party researchers have also examined who is typically selected as a candidate. Numerous studies of political recruitment have highlighted the persistent problem of the under-selection and hence under-representation of women, younger people and ethnic minorities (see for example, Caul, 1999; Norris, 2006; Childs, 2013).

### *Party membership*

Party members are essential in the mass party model, given that its primary characteristic is that it is built on a branch membership structure (Duverger, 1951). Hence, since the golden age of mass parties, party research has focused upon party members, however, mainly the number of members. This research has again and again shown that aggregate party membership figures are in decline in the established West European countries with a tradition of party membership, but that the trend in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain is a little different. Trends are, however, fluctuating. New parties, some traditional parties (such as UK Labour) and far right political parties have experienced increasing figures.

Membership figures have been available through the party headquarters, even if not always reliable (Katz and Mair, 1992; Scarrow, 2000; Mair and van Biezen, 2001; van Biezen et al., 2012; van Haute et al., 2018; van Haute and Gauja, 2015). Irrespective of the uncertainty concerning the precision of these figures, more importantly, these provide only an indication of the size of the membership organization. They do not reveal who the members are, how

representative they are of the party's electorate, and how they contribute to representative democracy.

These questions began to be thoroughly investigated when Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley completed their studies of the UK Labour (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992) and Conservative (Whiteley et al., 1994) parties. Teams in Norway (Heidar, 1994), the Netherlands (den Ridder et al., 2015) and Denmark (Bille and Elklit, 2003; Pedersen, 2003; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2015) were among the pioneers as well, and they repeated the comprehensive party member surveys across all parties represented in parliament, hence enabling longitudinal and country-specific analyses (Allern et al., 2016; den Ridder et al., 2015; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2017). Party member studies have focused on a series of themes, including who enrolls and their representativeness compared to the party's voters, how and why party members enroll, how and why party members participate, what they think of intra-party democracy, and whether they consider leaving their party. Where members are assumed to constitute parties, these themes speak to broader questions of organizational efficacy and viability.

One of the most pressing concerns of party scholars, which is presumably shared by scholars of other political organizations, is obtaining access to the groups that they study. It was a characteristic of these first membership studies that they were conducted in collaboration with parties. However, not all parties enable access to their organizations, and this has limited studies in many democracies. Furthermore, parties' willingness to grant access to researchers has changed over time, and therefore some newer studies have had to resort to recruiting members through large online panels used by market research companies (Bale et al., 2019); to exclude some parties (Kölln and Polk, 2015); limit the study to specific parties (Gallagher and Marsh, 2002; Gauja and Jackson, 2016) or specific participants, e.g. the delegates at the annual meeting (Barras et al., 2015).

Due to the infancy of this subfield (compared, for example, to election studies), international comparative party member studies have been limited. Some comparative analyses have been possible but not perfect due to the difficulties in coordinating data collection. This goes, for example, for the

Nordic comparisons between Norway and Denmark (Pedersen and Saglie, 2005; Heidar and Kosiara–Pedersen, 2006; Heidar et al., 2012), and recently with the addition of Sweden (Demker et al., 2019). However, most ‘comparative’ analyses have been based on national studies, including for example, the analyses of how representative party members are when compared to party voters (Heidar and Wauters, 2019). For comparative studies to be at their most powerful in identifying patterns across parties and systems, the questions asked in surveys need to be identical. This is difficult to achieve in different languages, national contexts, levels of access and indeed when the content of survey instruments needs to be negotiated with parties themselves. Collaborators also need to be clear on what they are studying, and the best way to ‘measure’ it.

The lack of cross-national coordination was remedied to an extent with the collaborative ‘Members and Activists of Political Parties’ (MAPP) project (see [www.projectmapp.eu](http://www.projectmapp.eu)). The first volume out of this project (van Haute and Gauja, 2015) reported the state-of-the-art of the national party member studies. More importantly, however, assembling a team of country experts with good relationships with their parties, led by Emilie van Haute, has created a comparative project across countries with and without a tradition for cross-party surveys. Data collection and analysis is currently under way, and it will take party member studies to a new level within comparative politics by enabling cross-country studies. Similar comparative methodologies – utilizing country experts and nationally-fielded surveys – are also being used to study the relationship between political parties and interest groups (for example, the PAIRDEM project <https://pairedem.org>) and the Comparative Interest Group Survey (<https://www.cigsurvey.eu>).

All three of the subfields just discussed (party leadership, candidates and membership) highlight the interplay between structure and agency within political parties as organizations, and the challenges for researchers in understanding both the role of individuals within these organizations, how they shape their parties and how, in turn, they are constrained by them. Comparative studies of political institutions have been challenged and supplemented by studies in political behavior, in particular as a result of the behavioral ‘revolution’ of the 1950s but also by the growth of quantitative



methods. The same goes for party organization research. While focus has been mainly on how parties organize, attention has also turned to the behavior (of MPs, party leaders, candidates, party members etc.) that various institutions promote or hinder. The development of the field of comparative party research has grown to provide methodologically sophisticated ways of assessing the balance between structure and agency within particular organizational contexts – reaching from single cases, to country studies to comparative projects. This could provide fruitful paths forward for methodologies and research designs in other organizational studies.

### *Party regulation*

The last decade has seen a rapid expansion in political science scholarship concerned with charting the character and consequences of party laws, with numerous studies examining the trend towards increased legal regulation and the implications for parties' relationship with the state, particularly in the realm of campaign finance (see for example, Koss, 2010; Nassmacher, 2009; Karvonen, 2007; Janda, 2005). This literature has complemented the longer-standing concern of law, party, and elections scholars as to the partisan consequences of electoral laws, as well as the politics of electoral law reform. Comparative and single-jurisdiction studies to date have made excellent inroads into documenting the diversity and scope of party laws in existence and research agendas are now beginning to focus more on their differential impact on parties within systems and across democracies.

For the most part, laws are categorized according to their source (that is, whether they appear in constitutions, or specific legislative instruments) and what aspect of party organization and behavior they target (van Biezen, 2008; Karvonen, 2007). Some studies attempt classification based on the degree of regulation – see for example, Plasser and Plasser's (2002) 'minimal' versus 'strictly' regulated distinction – or on the anticipated outcome, for example, Janda's (2005) distinction between proscriptive, permissive, protective, and prescriptive regimes.

Global patterns of regulation can in part be explained by different institutional settings and historical developments, each of which reflects

different regulatory imperatives: for example, new versus established democracies, and presidential versus parliamentary systems. Karvonen (2007: 450–1) argues that in non-democratic states, party laws are used by regimes to restrict the activities of their opponents, in newly democratized states laws are used to counteract ‘lingering anti-democratic tendencies’, and in democratised states they are used to regulate political finance. Van Biezen and Kopecky (2017) also argue that we can associate different party organizational models with particular patterns of financing – much of it regulated by the state. For example, cadre parties with large private donations, mass parties with membership dues and cartel parties with public funding. Using data from the PPDB, they examine this relationship and demonstrate the ‘increased importance of public subsidies and the corresponding decline of the financial relevance of the membership organization’ (van Biezen and Kopecky, 2017: 88).

While party regulation and political finance are separate fields of inquiry – the former is more wide-reaching with the potential to impact on parties’ behaviour, ideology and organization – they overlap significantly as money is perhaps the most important lever that states have to influence the behaviour and organization of not just parties, but all political organizations. For example, of increasing concern to scholars is also the extent to which laws treat political parties differentially to other types of civil society organizations. The cartel party thesis predicts, and indeed comparative empirical research has confirmed, that political parties occupy a privileged place among political organizations as recipients of a significant amount of public funding (van Biezen and Kopecky, 2017). Yet at the same time, they are not subject to many of the transparency requirements, governance arrangements and administrative accountability mechanisms that affect interest groups, charities and trade unions (Bolleyer, 2018; Gauja, 2016).

### **The newest trends in party organization research**

In this final section, we want to highlight three important new trends within party organizational studies. Each of these trends challenges the notion of political parties as organizations with common collective interests and clearly

defined boundaries between insiders and outsiders. First, the concept of personalization (and the related idea of presidentialization) have become important strands in party organization research, but also have implications for social movement organizations (Bennett, 2012) and studies of organizational leadership more generally. As a concept, personalization is multi-faceted, involving institutional, behavioral, media and campaign elements, which all point to a stronger focus on leaders, candidates or politicians instead of political parties and collective identities (see Balmas et al., 2014; Kriesi, 2011: 826; Karvonen, 2010: 4; Poguntke and Webb, 2005). This has potentially very serious implications for the nature of political parties as organizations. Balmas et al. argue that 'personalization implies a decline in the role of parties', because of the following trends:

People identify with personalities rather than parties; individual politicians, rather than parties, become the representatives of specific policies; interest aggregation occurs more on an *ad hoc* basis rather than within parties; individuals rather than parties communicate with the public; policy emerges from an interaction between individuals in government rather than as a product of debate and deliberation within the party; and, to a certain extent, candidates and leaders select parties rather than the other way round. (Balmas et al., 2014: 47)

However, empirical studies of personalization provide only mixed evidence for these claims (Karvonen, 2010). Wauters et al. (2018), for example, reviewed 40 articles concerning personalisation and were unable to find clear evidence in either direction. Pruyssers et al. (2018: 6) suggest that this empirical disagreement reflects conceptual ambiguity, and note that in some areas, for example, media attention to individual candidates and leaders, it is far more pronounced than in others, for example, voter behavior. In the most comprehensive study to date, including 26 democracies over 50 years and creating a comprehensive index, Rahat and Kenig (2018) found a general trend of party decline, accompanied by personalization, with the two processes feeding each other. The authors contend that for proponents of parties and the role in society, the findings are alarming, but argue that

Those who face the challenge had better forget about the good old days when parties were parties. Political parties are way beyond their peak; personalization is here to stay. (Rahat and Kenig, 2018: 263)

The second new trend that we will point to is the transition of social movements into parties. Although much has been written on the emergence of the Greens as a movement party in the context of an increasing focus on post-materialism in the 1970s (see for example, Kitschelt, 2006; Kitschelt, 1988) in recent decades the interaction between social movements and political parties has been an area of comparative scholarly neglect. However, with changes in digital technology and the rise of mass protest mobilizations in response to the Global Financial Crisis, a number of movement parties have once again come to the attention of party scholars. Studies, for example, of the Occupy movement have highlighted important links between movement and party politics in Italy and Turkey (Draege et al., 2017).

Digital parties such as the International Pirate Party and the Five Star Movement (Italy), originating from popular mobilizations, have provided organizational templates for other formations such as Podemos in Spain and La France Insoumise. As Gerbaudo (2019: 4) notes, these movement-based parties ‘display evident commonalities in the way in which they promise to deliver a new politics supported by digital technology; a kind of politics that [...] professes to be more democratic, more open to ordinary people, more immediate and direct, more authentic and transparent’. However, whether digital parties in general, as e.g. Danish Alternative, provide ‘a type of oligarchization that is cloaked in a veil of participation and engagement’ remains to be seen (Plesner and Husted, 2020: 250). How these groups institutionalize their organizations, achieve electoral success and ultimately transition from movements to parties are questions that animate current research. Beyond the field of political parties, this research might resonate with debates around the characteristics of social movements and their relationship with the organizational form, as well as the transition of social movements into other types of political organization, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The blurring of boundaries between movements and parties is not just a feature of movement politics. Party scholars have also noted the increasing importance of leader-centred populist parties, particularly those of the far right, which challenge the traditional organizational form of parties as membership-based and participatory. Recent comparative research has

argued that right-wing populist parties display distinctive organizational characteristics: although they may claim widespread partisan support, they concentrate and centralize power in the party leadership and develop formal or informal mechanisms designed to constrain intra-party democracy (Heinisch and Mazzoleni, 2016). The interaction between these organizational structures and the party's supporters is an avenue for further research. For example, can centralized and non-democratic parties retain legitimacy and command popular support (beyond the act of voting)?

The third trend that we want to point to is new forms of party affiliation. In recent years, and in light of the pervasive membership decline noted above, scholars of party organizations have begun to re-interrogate what organizational membership actually means (Gauja, 2015; Scarrow, 2015). A particular emphasis concerns the role of digital technology in reshaping membership relations, which is an area of inquiry that is more developed in studies of political communication, campaigning and organizing, particularly in the US. Writing on the experiences of advocacy organizations in the US, David Karpf notes that a key affordance of technology is that it enables existing organizational tasks to be done more quickly and cheaply (Karpf, 2012). Some even suggest that digital technology leads to the end of organization, with a shift in primary analytic focus to 'organizing' (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Margetts et al., 2015). In relation to party membership, views are also mixed. Some are concerned that it promotes organizations to further reduce the substance of 'membership' to mere 'clicktivism' and fosters centralizing tendencies within organizations that prompt greater elite control (see Gibson and Ward, 2009). Yet, others argue that this technology can enable organizations to engage with members more frequently, broadly, and quickly – as political communications scholars suggest (Chadwick, 2007; Karpf, 2016) – and engage more representative members (Achury et al., 2020). More specifically, we see several themes emerging, such as the blurring of membership status and the creation of new 'types' of membership (Gibson et al., 2017), as well as the increasing role of technology in promoting self-organizing, for instance by creating supportive communities beyond 'core' members. These trends align party membership more towards the kind of

support seen in other types of political mobilization such as interest organizations and social movements.

## Conclusion

From the infancy of political parties as organizations, comparative party scholars have observed that they perform a number of functions that are central to the workings of representative democracy – among them, providing policy and leadership alternatives to the electorate, providing sites for participation and selecting candidates for public office. Scholars who study party organizations today ask questions about *how* parties perform these functions and *why* they differ. These are now perhaps more important questions than *what* they do, which was the key concern of scholars until the latter decades of the twentieth century. The comparative approach has enabled researchers to understand patterns of organization between parties, countries and over time. In many ways, it has highlighted the similarities that characterize political parties as adaptive organizations and explain their longevity over time.

Theoretical advances in the field, in particular the development of a succession of ‘party types’, have enabled a greater understanding of the complexity of parties’ organizational forms, and the relationships between internal dynamics and external environments. From Ostrogorski and Michels onwards, party organization scholars have been concerned with intra-party relationships of power. Case studies have been instrumental in showing how political parties develop their own internal logic and culture and how these play a crucial role in structuring their dynamics, how they respond to competitive demands and how they change and adapt over time. However, the comparative research agenda has also been important in highlighting the inherent link between parties’ organizations and how they respond to external pressures of political competition – whether these are policy-related, ideological, legislative or electoral – or changes in their broader environment, such as technological developments. The ability of party scholarship to capture the pressures that drive organizational change across cases,

democracies and time is one of the key strengths of this field of inquiry that other organizational researchers may learn from.

Questions concerning party organization are not exclusively empirical – as we have seen they are also heavily influenced by normative democratic theory. In this sense, party scholars ask whether political parties *ought* to organize in a particular manner. While the party organization research agenda might have moved on from ‘big picture’ studies of parties’ place in representative democracy to investigating the performance of more discrete functions, the normative foundation of much research is still evident. Relevant considerations include: What aspects of intra-party decision-making (for example, candidate selection) should be subject to democratic determination? Which democratic values (participation, representation, deliberation) are prioritised? Who should be empowered in making intra-party decisions (members, supporters, leaders) (Cross and Katz, 2013)? These normative questions continue to drive party scholars in searching for forms of party organization and practices that can better serve modern society and are questions that are equally applicable to other organizational studies and researchers.

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