



# Getting ‘sucked into parliament’: Tracing the process of professional political socialization

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## abstract

How do newly elected members of parliament become attuned to the role of the professional politician? Drawing from research on organizational socialization, which highlights instances of sensemaking and identity formation, the article uses a four-stage model to examine the progress of a state-level parliamentary group from the Pirate Party of Germany, a party deeply invested in renewing political institutions. The findings indicate that, even though the party’s Members of Parliament set out to change established parliamentary practice, they felt it necessary to adjust their identities and behavior after taking their seats. In emphasizing organizational factors, the article sheds new light on the processes by which regular citizens are transformed into professional politicians.

## Introduction

People change when they become professional politicians; if we follow public opinion, they often change for the worse. Long before the current surge in populist resentment against ‘the elite’ all over the Western world, the opaque proceedings of politics were seen as having a corrupting effect, transforming idealistic newcomers into professional politicians with questionable morals and eventually alienating the public. It is a widely accepted view that people

turn into the worst versions of themselves once they take up politics. Consequently, politicians today are among the least liked and trusted professional groups. In light of this conventional wisdom, the relative lack of empirical studies on how newcomers are transformed into professional politicians – the process of *professional political socialization* – is surprising (Reiser et al., 2011). The literatures on *political professionalization* and *political socialization* have shown scant interest in the subject.

Studies on *political professionalization* provide only partial insights into how amateurs become politicians (cf. Hyman, 1969). In the polity dimension, they highlight the procedural knowledge that needs to be acquired on entering political office (cf. Sarcinelli, 2011: 131). In the politics dimension, Wodak (2009: 74), among others, discusses the (often exhausting) changes to daily routines and interpersonal relations. In the policy dimension, studies show how politicians' views are affected as they become insiders: 'compared to the general population, representative elites are more favorable toward democracy, more tolerant of minorities, more appreciative of parties and their competition and less supportive of the practices of participatory democracy' (Best and Vogel, 2017: 353). Their merits notwithstanding, what these studies have in common is a tendency to neglect the complex processes by which newcomers are transformed into seasoned professionals. Rooted in (normative) democratic theory (Mughan et al., 1997), the focus of this literature lies mainly on the relationship between officeholders and citizens (Vogel, 2018). The following quote from a Member of Parliament (MP hereafter) is indicative of the changes to which newly elected representatives are subject and that have yet to be fully understood: 'I think instead of me turning [the parliament] inside out, [it] turned me inside out a little' (Searing, 1986: 372).

Socialization has been studied extensively, with research typically focusing on the formation of the perceptual, evaluative, and behavioral dispositions that individuals develop through their interaction with the (social) environment (Hurrelmann et al., 2008). In a similar vein, studies on *political socialization* show how individuals acquire political orientations and behavior (Easton, 1968: 125). However, not only did this field of research have its heyday some 50 years ago, it also seems to have been more focused on *primary*

political socialization – the development of basic political beliefs – than secondary, or professional political socialization (cf. Niemi and Hepburn, 1995; van Deth et al., 2011). As a result, debates usually revolve around the question as to what might be the most crucial phase in primary political socialization – early childhood or adolescence? So we know a great deal about how children and/or adolescents first encounter politics, for example, how they internalize the basic norms of democracy, who the main agents of socialization throughout adolescence are, and what impediments to political engagement have to be dealt with, but our insights into how people become involved in professional politics and especially how they acquire the skills they need to be politicians are severely limited.

To address the gaps in these two literatures, we draw on research on *organizational socialization* to better understand how organizations shape the processes by which amateurs become professional politicians. There are two advantages to this approach. First, we can overcome the (implicit) biases of political research, most notably the root premise that politicians should be evaluated in terms of how well they fulfill their representative function (Brichzin, forthcoming; Ringel et al., 2019). Second, we cover the full set of tasks and activities that politicians are concerned with in their daily lives, some of which, according to political science, have little to do with politics.

Empirically, we explore an extreme case of political professionalization, that of the *Pirate Party of Germany*, a party intimately connected with digital activism and notorious for its radical views on a range of issues such as transparency, participatory democracy, and copyright legislation. After being elected to four state parliaments in 2011/2012, the party, which prides itself on its broad rejection of professional politics, was suddenly represented at the core of institutionalized politics and therefore underwent a ‘reality check’ in two respects: first, it suddenly had to put its organizational ideals into practice; second, it had to deal with the pressure of adapting to established parliamentary practice. In the course of this article, we will show that these two commitments were conflicting. Our dataset comprises qualitative interviews with members of the party’s biggest parliamentary group – in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). By focusing on the Pirates’

organizational socialization, we unveil subtle, yet powerful, mechanisms that have largely been unnoticed or unaccounted for by political research.

After outlining a four-stage model of organizational socialization in the next section, we present the case and the research process. Subsequently, we discuss our findings, which reveal that the Pirates, despite their opposition to established parliamentary practice, basically adopted the formal and informal norms of their new workplace in order to be able to participate in political processes in a meaningful way.

## **Organizational socialization**

Socialization into parliament is, by default, socialization into an organization. Some features of parliaments arguably make them organizations of an unusual kind: their members enter and quit the organization periodically due to legislative turnover, with the number of entrants and quitters often amounting to a large part of the organization's population; there is no way of planning the composition of the parliamentary staff as it is determined by general elections and thus by nonmembers of parliament; finally, parliaments have only limited ways to discipline their members who are protected by an often constitutionally guaranteed free mandate. In other respects, however, parliaments are quite normal organizations: membership is clearly defined by the legal framework, parliamentary proceedings are structured by formal rules, organizational charts assign tasks and responsibilities, and new members have to learn the 'rules of the game' (Brichzin, 2016; Ringel, 2017; 2019a). To analyze how the rules are learned, we borrow from research on organizational socialization.

Research on organizational socialization has produced an impressive body of literature since the 1970s. In general, organizational socialization is defined as 'the process by which an individual acquires the attitudes, behavior and knowledge needed to participate as an organizational member' (Bauer et al., 1998: 150). As Ashforth et al. (2007) highlight in a literature review, this process is complex and multifaceted, and involves activity on the part of the newcomers as well as the organization. In light of our focus on professional political socialization, we have adopted a stage model that allows us to

analyze step by step the changes individuals experience as they become fulltime politicians. By further combining it with an interpretative approach, we have also been able to trace instances of identity formation and role interpretation (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016). Although stage models have become classic tools, Ashforth et al. (2007: 9) maintain that they 'continue to provide a useful heuristic for thinking through the challenges that newcomers (and their employers) tend to face'. The four stages of organizational socialization identified in the literature are: the anticipation phase, the encounter phase, the adjustment phase, and the stabilization phase.

The first stage, *anticipation*, 'includes activities through which individuals develop expectations regarding the organization in preparation for entry' (Ashforth et al., 2007: 9; see also Merton, 1957). Although this is likely to be a crucial phase – organizational socialization usually involves as much 'changing from' as 'changing to' (Louis, 1980) – research has yet to harvest its analytical and empirical potentials. This is also the case in legislative research, which has paid little attention to preformative phases when studying processes of socialization in political institutions. Consequently, we might ask: how do previously formed expectations shape the ways in which individuals engage with their new roles as MPs?

The second stage, the *encounter*, has, by contrast, been extensively studied. Experiencing a new organizational ecosystem often causes a 'reality shock' (Hughes, 1958) as discrepancies between expectations and reality become apparent (Louis, 1980). New members of an organization face uncertainty in such an 'anxiety producing situation' (van Maanen and Schein, 1979: 214), sometimes resulting in intense emotional reactions (Weick et al., 2005). Newcomers are, therefore, likely to engage in what is often referred to as sensemaking: when facing ambiguous circumstances, which they cannot explain by applying established frames of reference, individuals try to regain a grasp of what is happening by actively searching for meaning and effectively creating it. This helps them integrate ongoing events into a plausible narrative, form a stable identity, and develop strategies for action (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005).

Sensemaking involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing. Viewed as a significant process of organizing, sensemaking unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances. (Weick et al., 2005: 409)

This quote indicates that sensemaking is usually not a clearly distinguishable and singular event, but an ongoing activity in which action and talk are intertwined in a cyclical relationship. In other words, it is ‘about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism’ (Weick et al., 2005: 415). Furthermore, sensemaking is fundamentally a social activity: actors craft meaning in social interactions to make their cognitive frameworks fit the respective (organizational, cultural, national, etc.) context. ‘Fit,’ however, does not mean that concepts correspond to an underlying ‘objective’ reality; sensemaking is not about finding out what *reality really is*, but involves the creation of an intelligible narrative – a working theory – of what is going on.

During the *encounter stage*, newcomers engage with other members of the organization but remain in some sort of probation period, which means that until their abilities, motives, and values have been approved, they do not enjoy full ‘inclusionary rights’ (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979: 222). Again, there is limited information available in the literature on how individuals cope with the need for sensemaking and establishing trust. We might speculate that this is due to the fact that normative theories of democracy tend to ignore concepts of meaning and processes of meaning-making as empirical phenomena in need of study (cf. Brichzin et al., 2018).

In the course of the *adjustment stage*, new members are integrated into the organization. As a result, they are ‘given broad responsibilities and autonomy, entrusted with ‘privileged’ information, included in informal networks, encouraged to represent the organization, and sought out for advice and counsel by others’ (Louis, 1980: 231). Studies reveal different organizational strategies to facilitate the integration of new members, distinguishing

collective from individual, formal from informal, and fixed from variable tactics, to name but a few (Ashforth et al., 2007; van Maanen and Schein, 1979). Parliaments are special in this regard because they barely, if at all, institutionalize such techniques to facilitate integration, which leaves the task of adjustment usually to the parliamentary group and the individual MP (Reiser et al., 2011).

The fourth and last stage concerns *stabilization*. For socialization processes to be successful (Porath and Bateman, 2006: 185), the sensemaking that started in the encounter stage must now lead to the formation of a (relatively) stable identity. Likewise, organizational proceedings must have become more or less self-evident to the individual and enshrined in a coherent narrative. Stabilization signifies 'that individuals are bona fide organizational insiders,' and is indicated by 'signals and actions ... including promotion, sharing of organizational secrets, lower stress, termination of mentoring, and integration into a group' (Ashforth et al., 2007: 9). In parliament, newcomers seem to reach the stabilization stage when they are fully familiar with parliamentary rules and proceedings, and succeed in forming a self-concept as an MP, that distinguishes them from the electorate (Reiser, 2018).

Research has shown that, as individuals become members of an organization, they go through different stages. Since professional socialization in parliaments is also a matter of organizational socialization, we suggest making use of the stage model presented here to trace how political newcomers are transformed into political insiders.

### **The Pirate Party of Germany: A newcomer to the political system**

We decided to study an extreme case of professional political socialization. By 'extreme,' we mean involving individuals whose beliefs deviate considerably from established parliamentary practice and who have little prior experience in professional politics or of the challenges they will encounter when they become 'insiders.' The case that we chose was that of the *Pirate Party*, a relatively young party founded in Sweden in 2006 and in several Western and non-Western countries thereafter. The rise of the Pirates was preceded by and connected with a variety of new social movements and technological

advances, particularly the Internet. These new social movements typically emerge outside traditional political arenas, are often hard to locate on the left–right axis, and remain highly skeptical of traditional political institutions such as parliaments, which they believe to be the root cause of many of the problems that we face today (Fredriksson Almqvist, 2016b). The Pirates are passionate believers in the benefits of comprehensive forms of government transparency. They frequently engage in digital activism and are fervent users of social media platforms, which serve as important electronic infrastructures for debates, temporary organizing (planning of events, campaigning etc.), and the implementation of participatory democratic procedures. It will come as no surprise that, as activists, they are very critical of the expansion of copyright legislation targeting the digital sphere, which they see as an impediment to citizens to exercising their freedoms online (Fredriksson Almqvist, 2016a). Consequently, copyright infringement has been the most important issue for the Pirate Party from the very beginning (Fredriksson Almqvist, 2015).

Although the Pirate Parties emerged from an environment that rejects institutionalized politics, they soon sought political representation and participated in elections in a number of countries. In contrast to how the Pirates are often perceived, this strategy indicates that ‘the primacy of institutionalized politics is not only a pragmatic choice by the most dedicated party activists but also consistent with the political imagination of their less organized followers’ (Fredriksson Almqvist, 2016b: 104). To put it bluntly, the Pirates felt that, in order to change the political system, they first had to adopt some of its conventions by participating in organized forms of electoral competition for representation. But what happens when a party that is not only dedicated to fringe issues (e.g., largely abandoning copyright legislation), but also to organizational procedures that in several ways radically deviate from the political common sense (see below), moves to the core of the political system in the wake of elections?

For a variety of reasons, the *German* Pirate Party is an ideal case through which to address this question. First, by being elected to four state parliaments in 2011/2012, it left the largest mark on the electoral map of all the Pirate Parties. Pirates were elected in Berlin (15 seats), North Rhine-

Westphalia (20 seats), Saarland (4 seats), and Schleswig-Holstein (6 seats). Compared to other countries, the German Pirate Party has moved closest to the center of political institutions and, as a result, has been exposed to significant pressure. Second, members of the German Pirate Party are openly distrustful of parliaments (Fredriksson Almqvist, 2016b), which is why we might expect tensions between the party base and the elected representatives. Third, with its emphasis on (a) comprehensive transparency and (b) radical participatory democracy, the party promotes procedural norms that deviate from the German political post-World War II consensus, which, in spite of international developments, has proven to be very resilient. Despite occasional endorsements of transparency, German political culture is firmly entrenched in the belief that privacy and secrecy are, at some level, necessary (Eilfort, 2003; Mayntz, 1989; Schöne, 2010). The lack of effective freedom of information legislation is an indicator of the cultural importance and legitimacy of secrecy in German politics. The German political system is built around the idea of representation and offers few opportunities for participation. As earlier studies on the Green Party and their experiments with grassroots politics and participatory models of decision-making suggest, anyone who tries to implement such measures in the German political system faces severe challenges (Poguntke, 1993).

Of the four German states in which the Pirates gained parliamentary representation, NRW seemed to be the most promising. Receiving 7.8% in the snap election in May 2012 at the height of the party's national popularity (public polling had them at over 10%), the state Pirate Party was eligible to form a parliamentary group with its 20 newly elected representatives attracting a high degree of media attention. In contrast to Berlin, the Pirates in NRW moved from the margins to the center of the political system within a relatively short time and, due to its being a snap election, they had little time to prepare. The first author studied the parliamentary group between 2013 and 2016, focusing on how members tried to put their organizational ideals of transparency and participatory models of democracy into practice. The findings have already been published elsewhere (Albu and Ringel, 2018; Ringel, 2017; 2019a; see also Ringel, 2019b for a detailed account of the research process and data collection). For the purposes of this article, we

revisited the dataset to focus specifically on organizational socialization, a theme previous publications had not explored. The article draws data from a variety of sources, such as narrative interviews, video streams, blog posts, twitter feeds, and newspaper articles, analyzed according to the grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1971). We specifically examined narratives and mechanisms of attuning the newly elected MPs to the ways of the state parliament. We further investigated processes of identity formation and the struggles involved with them, starting from the period before the election, moving then to the moment of encountering the full force of the state parliament, and the specific type of adjustment that took place in the months following the election.

### **Professional political socialization in parliament**

Having analyzed the data according to the stage model of organizational socialization, we present our findings in steps. First, we show how the Pirates' core beliefs (4.1.) clashed with those held by established actors in the state parliament. As a result, the newly elected MPs had to engage in sensemaking to create a meaningful interpretation of their new situation and to acquire a stable identity (4.2.). In the months after the election, they eventually adjusted to the established ways of the state parliament even though there were no rules or authorities forcing them to do so (4.3.). In effect, they were able to become – to some extent – normal members of the state parliament, thus enjoying some of the privileges of 'insiders' (4.4.).

#### *Anticipation: 'Renewing the operating system'*

The informants had strong expectations before entering the state parliament, which were only loosely grounded in actual political experience, given that the party had previously resided on the margins of the political system. As already mentioned, the Pirate Party not only stands for digital activism and related issues such as rolling back copyright legislation, it also embraces a core set of procedural and organizational ideals. There is reason to believe that it was also these ideals that made the party appealing to the electorate. Calling for 'the operating system to be renewed' (*Das Betriebssystem erneuern*, Appelius and Fuhrer, 2012), the Pirates wanted to make political decision-

making processes more inclusive, thus reducing the discretion of 'political elites,' to create flat hierarchies, and to render government and public organizations transparent, as expressed in utopian visions of a 'state made out of glass' (*gläserner Staat*). All of these these themes loomed large in the interviews.

*Participation* was deemed essential by our informants. For some of them, it was the main reason why they joined the party in the first place:

This is not a party in which you just tick the right box every couple of years in the voting booth. It's about being involved in organizing so that everybody can meet up, engage, participate at the local level. (Interview I)

Mirroring this sentiment, Informant O was intrigued by the possibility of 'becoming a member of the party and participating right away, organizationally and politically.' Clearly, what made the Pirate Party appealing was its ability to provide low-threshold opportunities for political engagement and its rejection of entrusting expert delegates with the task of discussing and determining policy positions at their own discretion. This is reportedly what some of the MPs had experienced as members of other parties.

I was a member of [Party X] and soon began to realize that, even though I liked their policies, I wasn't comfortable with the way they were organized. ... The Pirates allowed me to voice my opinion right away, without restriction. That was a lot tougher in [Party X] where you have to climb up the ladder slowly, and only after a long trial period can you participate in decision-making. (Interview I)

While it takes a long time and a high level of engagement before members of traditional parties are granted access to decision-making, the Pirate Party welcomes its members to participate immediately as it is convinced that deliberative processes benefit from unleashing the 'swarm intelligence' of the many (Piratenpartei Deutschland Wiki, 2012). Accordingly, democratic politics are to be taken out of the hands of the elites and given to the people, who should have equal opportunities in determining their own lives.

Closely related to participatory forms of organizing decision-making processes is the ideal of *flat hierarchies*. The Pirate Party is deeply skeptical of

formal authority because its members are convinced that, as one informant put it, ‘we all are the party base’ (Informant A). Another informant emphasized: ‘This critical view of hierarchies and power, the exercise of power, is what characterizes us’ (Interview L). This again is part of the reason why some MPs decided to join the party: ‘What I found especially appealing was this system of very flat hierarchies, which allows everyone to come in and take part equally. That’s what made me curious’ (Interview K).

Even though the Green Party had already experimented with both flat hierarchies and participatory decision-making in the 1980s, the Pirate Party’s quest for *transparency* was truly novel and subsequently became the cornerstone of its organizational identity, at least in Germany (see the discourse analysis by Hönigsberger and Osterberg, 2012). Once again, embracing this mode of organizational governance appealed to the informants when they decided to join the party, as the following quote illustrates: ‘What I really appreciated was that they posted their protocols on the Internet right after the meetings. No other party did that. So, I decided to go to one of their meetings’ (Interview O). Another informant emphasized that what united the members of the party was the firm belief that ‘everything has to be transparent’ (Interview A).

When running for office in 2012, the informants practiced openness in accordance with the party’s ideals and did not restrict the stream of information from the inside outward: videos of party conferences were made available online, meetings and mailing lists were open to everybody, candidates used social media and interviews they gave to journalists to speak their minds freely, and the party finances and expenditures were published regularly. Facing very little opposition from the other parties, being hyped by the media, and gaining an astonishing 20 seats in the state parliament, the Pirates saw their political vision confirmed. Naturally, they expected to be able to continue in this fashion and to change the ways of parliamentary politics for good: ‘There can be no conversations behind closed doors, all meetings must be public: board meetings, everything has to be streamed simultaneously’ (Interview A). Another representative affirmed this sentiment publicly: ‘Next stop: state parliament! Working hard to achieve the impossible: establishing our political ideals in parliament!’ (Marsching, 2012).

*Encounter: 'Reality shock'*

Whether it concerns inclusive forms of decision-making, flat hierarchies, or transparency, the established practice in German parliaments (at national as well as state level) clearly deviates from the Pirates' imaginings. Elected politicians tend to develop an 'esprit de corps' across party lines (Mayntz, 1989) as they consider themselves the experts best equipped to make decisions, which implies rejecting the inclusion of citizens. Even though parliamentary groups (and parliaments for that matter) are formally prohibited from disciplining individual representatives, studies point to a rich variety of informal mechanisms to establish and enforce de-facto hierarchies (Eilfort, 2003); and, while all parties invoke the importance of transparency in public statements, they nevertheless frequently engage in backroom negotiations (Deppenheuer, 2001).

How did the informants react to their new work environment? Instead of acting as bold agents of change, there are many indications that they felt rather overwhelmed and, especially during the first couple of weeks, seemed to have experienced a severe 'reality shock' (Interview L):

None of us had a real idea of what was going to happen. I didn't, and the others, they didn't either, even if some of them said something different. No, we didn't know what was coming our way. (Interview C)

On the one hand, the informants faced challenges *within* the parliament: Above all, building a parliamentary group and navigating the formal and informal structures of the parliament proved to be a complicated and time-consuming task. On the other, they had to deal with unforeseen reactions from *outside* the parliament: public perception in particular, which seemed to have changed dramatically:

Before the election, people had a positive view of [us being chaotic], so we had a bit of a sympathy bonus. They said we are fresh and new and everything. (Interview D)

This 'sympathy bonus' however, faded quickly and the parliamentary group faced a dissatisfied party base. One of the MPs complained in a blogpost that the party base seems to be under the impression that 'nothing more would be

heard of us, as if we had vanished into orbit like a satellite' (Brand, 2012). As for media coverage, journalists stopped reporting favorably and started to badmouth the parliamentary group. From leaving a stack of empty pizza boxes in the parliament cafeteria to poor handling of infighting, the Pirates became the subject of critical scrutiny (Ringel, 2019b). What surprised the MPs most was that they were suddenly criticized for the kinds of behavior they had generally been praised for before the election, such as the candor with which they publicized internal conflicts. As a result, the MPs were deeply confused, a state of mind typically associated with 'disjunctive socialization' (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979: 32) – situations of discontinuity between the 'old' and the 'new.' Much of the confusion seems to have been connected with the party's three maxims of organizational governance – participatory decision-making, flat hierarchies, and transparency – which we will now discuss in more detail.

*Participatory decision-making.* Creating procedures what would enable the party base to participate in decision-making proved more difficult than anticipated. On the one hand, the MPs discovered that, as one informant put it, 'when you ask the party base, you often don't get an answer' (Interview L). On the other hand, if the party base did provide 'an answer,' it often turned out to be inadequately prepared, especially when the issues were complex: 'If you work [in a non-political profession] you have only a limited amount of time that you can dedicate to political issues, which is why your knowledge will be rather shallow' (Interview K). Some informants felt that the software solutions that the party had developed to be more inclusive (for example, a digital tool called Liquid Feedback) were liable to acts of sabotage, which should be taken into consideration when seeking the input of the party base:

I can make an online survey and within two or three hours I get thirty respondents. Considering that we have six thousand members in North Rhine-Westphalia alone, this makes barely one half per mill of all of us. No, that doesn't work. (Interview H)

Evidently, the MPs struggled to follow their initial intention of granting the party base immediate and unlimited access to policymaking.

*Flat hierarchies.* The Pirates rejected any mechanism to reprimand or discipline party members regardless of their supposed transgressions. Two early scandals that rocked the parliamentary group of NRW stand out in terms both of public reactions to them and of the internal turmoil they created (see Ringel, 2017 for a detailed account). The first scandal was caused by an MP who became the target of intense media scrutiny after sending two tweets. In the first, she mentioned that she had taken an HIV test after unprotected intercourse; in the second, two months later, she complained about long and tedious plenary sessions. The media overreported on both tweets, seeing them as clear evidence that the Pirate Party was in a veritable crisis; even her colleagues expressed frustration over her actions. An MP went so far as to ponder in public whether the parliamentary group should continue to exist; she worried that, while chaos was growing, the group seemed to be unable to act professionally (Brand 2012). The second scandal also revolved around a tweet. In it, another MP made a controversial statement about Israel, accusing its government of waging wars. In the wake of these (and related) events, the MPs struggled to maintain their favorable view of flat hierarchies.

*Transparency.* A core belief held by many Pirates is that political institutions should be less secretive, which is why they made the commitment that, once elected, they would operate with a kind of transparency that was unrestricted and comprehensive. During their first weeks in office, however, the informants realized that implementing transparency in a work environment such as the state parliament is much more complicated than they had anticipated. For instance, they struggled with requests by their political rivals to have private conversations:

Well, there's no other way. I can't force this on others. I can tell them I want to record it. Then they can decide, do they want that or not. If they say no, then the conversation simply does not take place. (Interview M)

Disrespecting other peoples' need for privacy, the MPs learned, comes at the cost of privileged access to interparty meetings, which are sites of informal information exchange and deliberation. Another drawback, from the informants' point of view, was that the party base simply could not handle the amount of raw information thrown at them as a result of unfiltered transparency. One of the MPs explained:

That's the downside of transparency. If you make everything transparent, then you really have a lot of raw data which you have to somehow process. That's just how it is, unfortunately. (Interview I)

*Adjustment: 'Sucked into parliament'*

Following their initial surprise and feelings of uncertainty, the informants tried to adjust to their new work environment so as to regain a sense of belonging. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) distinguish three individual responses to organizational efforts to get newcomers to adjust: custodianship, content innovation, and role innovation. New organizational members who engage in *custodianship* accept the status quo and basically try to learn the formal and informal rules of the game. Those who practice *content innovation* make 'substantive improvements or changes in the knowledge base or strategic practices of a particular role' (*ibid.*: 228). Lastly, when newcomers strive for *role innovation*, they reject 'most of the norms governing the conduct and performance of a particular role' (*ibid.*: 229) and seek to redefine it. The Pirates' initial goal clearly was to redefine what it meant to be an MP and how parliamentary business should be conducted. However, after a short period of confusion the MPs arrived at an interpretation of their role that more closely resembled a mix of custodianship and content innovation, even though there was no formal authority mandating and organizing the process of adjustment. There are many indications that this process of adjustment was mainly facilitated by daily interactions between the Pirates and a variety of other actors, who might be referred to as socialization agents. As a result, the informants were able to craft a coherent narrative and a new identity, which was a blend of the Pirate Party's organizational ideals and the traditional norms and practices of the state parliament.

It seems as if the informants abandoned the ideal of 'renewing the operating system' because the state parliament appeared as something objective to them, an external force of sorts. An informant describes a feeling of being 'sucked into parliament' (Interview H), a sentiment mirrored by the frequent use of such expressions as 'we must,' 'we had to,' 'of course we need to,' 'it was necessary,' and so forth in other interviews. See for instance the following quote:

And, we really *had to* set up the faction from scratch. We *had to* write a statute, we *had to* develop rules of procedure, all these formalities. And then we *had to* think about the practical stuff, too. We *have to* hire staff – at first, we were no more than twenty people, only the twenty MPs, nobody else. But a parliamentary group consists not only of representatives, we *need* people who occupy the offices, who take care of the correspondence, we *need* people who work with us professionally, assistants – yes, everything *had to be* set up from scratch. (Interview I, emphasis added)

The taken-for-grantedness ascribed to the formal and informal rules of the state parliament is captured most vividly in a quote by an MP who argues that they 'had to learn the how-to's of the state parliament' (Interview A). The expression 'how-to' is illuminating as it suggests that parliamentary traditions – the current 'operating system' – are self-evident sets of rules bearing a resemblance to technical manuals.

As they, of course, lacked any real technical manuals detailing the 'how-to's of the state parliament,' the Pirates realized that they had a problem: unlike the other parties, they had neither experienced colleagues or staff to help them get adjusted and learn the 'rules of the game'.

Don't forget: in every other company, if you are new, there's someone who takes this newcomer by the hand and shows them the ropes. That's how it usually is. Touring the office: here's the toilet, and here's the coffee machine, and here's the phone if you need to make a call. It's like that in every other company. We didn't have that. (Interview F)

Deprived of existing structures on which they could build directly, the Pirates sought external assistance: first, from other MPs, with whom they had more and more informal meetings and, second, from the administrative staff of the state parliament, who they thought were tremendously important, especially at the beginning:

We've been in touch with the parliamentary administration on a regular basis [...]. We had different heads of department coming to caucus meetings – which took place, as I already told you, every day at that time. And they introduced us to certain procedures. (Interview K)

When hiring aides, the MPs defined many of the tasks as not being of a political nature, which is why they favored candidates with a professional

background and who, preferably, had already been working in parliament. Such candidates, the informants felt, had the advantage of being unbiased: 'I'm happy that we had people who did not try to push us in a certain direction, but who simply showed us how things are done around here' (Interview A). Thus, it did not matter whether aides were party members; several informants mention that, for all they cared, aides could 'even be members of another party' (Interview M). In spite of many disagreements within the parliamentary group, the MPs generally agreed with this hiring practice, even Informant D, who was critical of his colleagues' efforts to normalize relations with other parties in the state parliament: 'We hired a handful of people with prior experience in parliament who could show us how things are done' (Interview D).

Because they experienced the established parliamentary traditions and norms as an objective reality to which they had no other choice but to adapt, the MPs exposed themselves to socialization agents of various kinds and subsequently revised their understanding of participatory decision-making, flat hierarchies, and transparency. The following quote indicates that this process entailed intense discussions and sensemaking:

Suddenly, we got together almost every day for hours in a room and were supposed to be a team. Of course, we were at odds at first because people have different agendas. The dynamics were fierce. And at the same time, we had to become acquainted with the ins and outs of this place and self-organize. (Interview A)

In this process the MPs came to embrace a more modest model of *participatory decision-making*, acknowledging both its merits and limitations:

The thing you have to keep in mind is that we are 20, or now 19, MPs. We are professionals. We are highly specialized and everyone focuses only on a handful of topics with additional resources at our disposal: staff, parliamentary group staff, personal aides. At the same time, if you consider the party base's participation, uh, that is, people outside the state parliament, so to speak, hobby politicians – they do this on a voluntary basis and in their spare time, while they already have a job that keeps them busy 40 or even 50 hours per week. They want to be taken along too. (Interview L)

The quote illustrates a profound change in how the MPs defined themselves in relation to the party base: while they had become *professionals*, in possession of the in-depth knowledge required to participate in policymaking, the party base consisted mainly of 'hobby politicians' or *amateurs*. As professionals, they were able to acquire a kind of expertise for which amateurs had neither the time nor the resources, which is why, in the words of Informant L, the party base was suddenly in need of being 'taken along.' As the MPs saw it, the increasing distance between the parliamentary group and the party base was not necessarily a problem but a by-product of professionalization. The MPs had no doubt that the input of the party base could still be of high value, but ultimately they had to decide which suggestions were reasonable.

Thus, the gap between them and the party base was widening, but, by the same token, the MPs seemed to be moving closer to their political opponents in the state parliaments. Some informants even began to trust them: 'You have to trust people, right? Because you can't take care of everything yourself' (Interview C). A good example of what this meant in practice was the preparation of the so-called 'bee proposal,' which mandated the regulation of monocultures for the preservation of bees. The proposal was put forward by the Pirates and subsequently passed by the state parliament in February 2013 (more than half a year into the term). A group of Pirate MPs and their aides worked on the proposal on their own, as their colleagues trusted them and did not feel the need to intervene or to mandate their own opinions. This suggests that the MPs had grown accustomed to following each other's recommendations to some extent. Expertise and knowledge were now an important part of their shared identity.

Even though the MPs remained critical of *hierarchies*, they had become more accepting of rudimentary disciplinary measures following their negative experiences with public scandals in the encounter stage. Take the 'bee proposal' again: during informal negotiations with the Green Party whose support the Pirates were seeking, a Pirate MP sent out a press release criticizing the Green Party, which the Greens felt was highly inappropriate. According to an informant, the Pirate MPs who were involved in the negotiations successfully pressured their renegade colleague to take the

statement on the website. These types of interventions seemed to occur more frequently after the first couple of months:

It is interesting to see that at first nobody said anything, and now there is a group that exerts pressure. Something has changed, for instance when people are constantly late. Now it's possible to say: that's enough! That wouldn't have been possible only three months ago. (Interview C)

Even though the Pirates Party opposes the exertion of pressure because its members believe that everyone should be allowed to speak their mind freely no matter what the consequences, the informant was evidently arguing that there are occasions when such measures are warranted – fellow MPs (who 'are constantly late') displaying a lack in professionalism being a case in point.

Unrestricted and comprehensive *transparency* might be the hallmark of the Pirate identity (Hönigsberger and Osterberg, 2012), but MPs' frustrations grew as they tried to make good on their promises. Once more, the 'bee proposal' is an illuminating example. The group of Pirate MPs and aides responsible for drafting the proposal not only worked on their own, but also in secret. The proposal became an item on the agenda of a caucus meeting only after it had been finalized. This way the Pirates effectively prevented other parties – who, according to the informants, were always watching the video streams of caucus meetings – from stealing the idea and making a proposal of their own. This put the other parties in the position of having to support the proposal in the plenary session since voting against animal rights is generally seen as a bad strategy in politics. The Pirates, it turned out, had succeeded by following 'the rules of the game': 'We played chess and checkmated the others because they simply couldn't be against it' (Interview F). As the MPs accepted that secrecy is sometimes necessary for success, unrestricted and comprehensive transparency regardless of the costs incurred ceased to be a goal: 'I don't have that attitude anymore,' (Interview A). Some MPs even voiced this opinion in public:

A protocol in and of itself does not guarantee transparency. Quality is of equal importance, which is also true of legislative work. Open sessions in and of themselves do not guarantee transparency (Marsching, 2013)

Transparency, the MPs concluded, does not necessarily mean that information has to be provided in real time. An informant even mentions having heard aides telling each other the following joke: ‘If you want to hide information, just put it in the public wiki [of the Pirate Party] where no one can find it’ (Interview C). Thus, in contrast to the dominant vision within the party, the MPs embraced a more modest concept of transparency:

I define ‘transparency’ as the traceability of decisions. The best example of this are the proceedings of the court of arbitration: in this instance, transparent procedure means documenting the proceedings and publishing them AFTER the fact. (Marsching, 2013, capital letters in original)

Transparency was no longer equated with total accessibility and the publication of raw information. That, the informants argued, may actually conceal as much as it ostensibly unveils. A more sensible kind of transparency, on the other hand, requires information to be edited.

#### *Stabilization: Dealing with the ‘Pirate disease’*

Having become regular members of the state parliament, the MPs had gained the trust of their colleagues and were therefore granted certain privileges and access to information they did not have initially. Some MPs and aides had confidential conversations and meetings with members of other parties on a more or less regular basis and thus gained important insights into the backstage workings of the state parliament. For instance, at a collaborative barbecue after work, press officers learned that the Pirates were soon going to be attacked in public, which gave them ample time to prepare a response in advance.

However much the Pirates were accepted as members of the state parliament and self-identified as professional politicians, some MPs occasionally ‘went off script.’ Their newly acquired identity, in other words, was not as stable as it seemed. An MP who lashed out at his fellow parliamentary group members in a blog post – published well into the term, one and a half years after the election – is a good example. The blog post provided a detailed account of what had happened in the closed part of a caucus meeting and therefore, according to the norms of the state parliaments, constituted a breach of trust.

Washing dirty laundry in public was clearly considered inappropriate, and yet the MP still decided to take this step:

my proposal was not accepted. ... Even though I tried to voice my concerns, I failed. Then, 20 minutes before the deadline for submitting proposals, we had a vote on whether or not to discuss my proposal. I gave up and left the meeting. All of that happened in the closed part. (Schwerd, 2013)

We learned from the interviews that the informants are well aware of this problem, which they seem to interpret as more or less spontaneous public outbursts by individuals who cannot resist the urge. As an informant put it, MPs occasionally 'fall back into old habits' (Interview B), or, more dramatically, they succumb to what another informant refers to as the 'Pirate disease' (Interview L).

While some might be quick to rush to judgment, labelling such behavior irrational or a direct consequence of an emotional rush (or conversely, the expression of true democratic sentiment), there might be another explanation: organization members often have to navigate *membership in multiple contexts*. Such phenomena have attracted little attention in the literature on organizational socialization, which tends to conceive of organizations as having an almost 'tribal' character with individuals being a member of only one of them. Van Maanen and Schein, for instance, explicitly argue for a limited analytical framework that accounts only for the focal organization. Yet they also acknowledge that the broader context might be an important factor:

changes in the larger environment within which organizationally defined roles are played out may force certain changes upon role occupants despite perhaps vehement resistance or whatever particular backgrounds, values, or predispositions define those who presently perform a given role. But, these factors go well beyond our interests here for they essentially lie outside an organizational analysis. (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979: 229)

Following Weick (1979) and others, we maintain that it is crucial to recognize that individuals are inevitably only partially included in most organizations. That means they usually hold multiple commitments. No-one is *only* a politician, accountant, doctor, scientist, teacher, or travel agent; they are, at the same time, a father, mother, worshipper, member of a bowling club, and

so on. Some of these commitments involve organizations (e.g., being a member of a bowling club), and some do not (e.g., being a father or mother). Taking multiple memberships into account we believe might help research on organizational socialization to gain new insights. For instance, we might arrive at a different interpretation as to why some Pirate MPs occasionally 'fall back into old habits.'

In the case at hand, the MPs of the parliamentary group had to balance their newly acquired professional identity with being members of the Pirate Party. They could not completely abandon long-held ideals of participatory decision-making, flat hierarchies, and radical transparency and sometimes felt compelled to reaffirm them, thereby violating established parliamentary practice. In the words of an informant: 'perhaps it's always like that – if the pendulum swings too far in one direction, you want to stop it. And perhaps, then it will swing a little too far to the other side.' This illustrates that, in order to understand the behavior of the MPs properly, it is necessary to consider the full set of valued commitments they hold – not only to the focal organization (the state parliament), but also to other contexts (the party). The above quote also suggests that such commitments can be mutually exclusive: individuals who act according to the Pirate Party's ideals violate established parliamentary practices, and vice versa. To put it differently, as long as the party promotes organizational ideals that are at odds with institutionalized practices in the political system, there are limits to how comprehensive the professional political socialization of their elected representatives can be.

### **Concluding discussion: Professional political socialization as organizational socialization**

In this article we have examined the social process of professional political socialization by tracing the transformation of newly elected MPs in terms of their behaviour and identities. Drawing from data collected in a study on the MPs of the Pirate Party of Germany in the federal state of NRW, we have studied the process step by step, starting with anticipatory expectations and moving on to the first encounter with the ways and norms of the state parliament, the adjustment that takes place in the months thereafter, and

finally to a fragile stabilization. Making use of the stage model suggested by Ashforth et al. (2007) and Weick's concept of sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), we found that by recognizing individuals' expectations and previously held beliefs, studies can explain their reactions to and handling of new work environments.

Our findings suggest that the newly elected MPs experienced a severe 'reality shock' on entering the state parliament caused by the divergence between their beliefs regarding participatory decision-making, flat hierarchies, and comprehensive transparency on the one hand, and established parliamentary practices on the other. When they found that they were unable to reconcile those ideals with the ways of the state parliament, they adjusted to the latter by editing the former and creating a new identity that aimed to bridge the divide. They grew cautious of participatory decision-making and saw themselves as professionals, best equipped to form an opinion on matters of policy, making participation contingent upon expertise; they introduced rudimentary disciplinary measures in order to navigate the intricacies of parliament; and they embraced a narrower vision of transparency, grounded in the idea that true visibility cannot be achieved by merely dumping large quantities of information on the internet. We should note that there are no indications of a formal or informal authority 'putting the screws' to the MPs. Rather it seems as if they themselves were the main drivers behind those efforts as they actively looked for the help of various socializing agents such as the administrative staff of the state parliament, other parties, and aides whom they recruited based on prior experience. However, we have also shown that the process of integration into parliament was never completely finished, with MPs occasionally deviating from parliamentary norms, for instance by disclosing private conversations in blog posts. To get a better understanding of why MPs occasionally 'fall back into old habits,' as one informant put it, we have suggested broadening the analytical scope and taking into account the multiple commitments of individuals. Such a view draws attention to the fact that the MPs are not only members of parliament, but also committed to the Pirate Party. Their professionalization notwithstanding, the informants still feel compelled to act in accordance with the party's ideals, and, what is more, in doing so they can even mobilize external support for their own agenda.

What are the main takeaways from our study? First, in borrowing from research on organizational socialization, we were able to trace how newly elected MPs make sense of their work environment and flesh out new identities to establish a coherent interpretation of the situation. While such processes have been studied extensively in other work contexts, research on political socialization has largely neglected them, either focusing on the formation of political opinions in childhood/adolescence or on how well-attuned elected politicians are to the preferences of the electorate. While these studies have provided important insights into politics, we argue that by *studying parties or parliaments as organizations*, research can shed new light on a variety of issues from the alienation between politicians and voters to mechanisms of informal coordination within as well as between parties (see also Ringel et al., 2019).

Second, the study indicates that organizational socialization is not necessarily mandated by formal or informal authorities as often implied in the research literature, which tends to focus on how organizations adjust newcomers, who are thus seen as reacting to stimuli. In the case of the Pirate Party, the newly elected MPs felt 'sucked into' the state parliament even though no one directly applied pressure to them. Quite the contrary. It seems in fact as if the MPs actively went looking for socializing agents to tell them what to do. In other words, even in situations in which individuals enter an organization in order to inspire fundamental change, there is reason to believe that, regardless of their motives, the mere fact that there are established practices and beliefs indicates that these newcomers will be affected once they have crossed the boundary from the outside to the inside, even more so in the case of organizations such as parliaments with longstanding traditions and well-institutionalized structures. By taking a comparative perspective, future studies might look more closely into how taken for granted the rules and traditions of an organization appear to new members, which implies a phenomenological approach that is sensitive to perception and sensemaking.

Third, in contrast to Van Maanen and Schein (1979) cited above, who limit their analytical scope and take only intra-organizational processes into consideration, we maintain that context (other organizations, fields, sectors,

or even society) matters a great deal. Borrowing from Weick (1979), we have argued for expanding the scope of research on organizational socialization by accounting for commitments to multiple contexts – in our case to the professional environment of the state parliament and to the ideals of the Pirate Party.

In closing, we would like to emphasize that, in the course of this paper, we have made use of the analytical tools provided by research on organizational socialization (a) to offer an alternative interpretation of the alienation between politicians and the electorate and (b) to suggest new avenues of research studying political practice as organizational practice. Our point has not been to dismiss the many concerns voiced in public discourse and by political research. Both tend to discuss negative trends as being caused either by questionable ethics on the part of the political establishment or by systemic ruptures rooted in ideologies such as neoliberalism. However, we are convinced (and we hope that this paper has shown) that there are other, perhaps less obvious factors as well that might help explain phenomena such as the frequently claimed disconnect between politicians and the electorate. Tracing the organizational processes by which amateurs become politicians has allowed us to provide a more all-embracing account of the transformation that someone undergoes who crosses the boundary from the outside to the inside of a political institution. Whatever opinion we might have of these transformations, future studies on professional political socialization are well advised to take into account that any changes they find in individuals can only be understood if embedded in the larger organizational context that gives shape to and facilitates this process.

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