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

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Abstract

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

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Keywords

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Introduction

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

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reflected in the vast literature on organizational politics (Drory and Romm, 1990). This literature often stresses the inherently contested nature of organizational identities, practices, and procedures. Here, the organization is thus viewed as a 'political coalition' (March, 1962), and organizational politics is understood as a struggle to influence sanctioned and non-sanctioned means and ends (Mayes and Allen, 1977). As Fleming and Spicer (2007: 3) note: '[i]t is this struggle that gives organizations a sense of vitality and a life-giving political pulse'.

Recently, organization scholars have supplemented this longstanding interest in the *politics of organization* with increased concern for what might be called the *organization of politics*; that is, the internal orchestration of collectives that openly engage with political issues. This has resulted in empirical work on different political organizations such as worker collectives, activist networks, and social movements (e.g. Kokkinidis, 2015; Reedy et al., 2016; Reinecke, 2018). However, one type of organization has been almost entirely neglected: *the political party*. Considering the fundamental role that parties play in representative democracies (Rosenblum, 2008), it is surprising how little attention has been awarded to these political behemoths within OMS. A quick

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search through the most well-read journals in the field shows that, save for a few exceptions (e.g. Moufahim et al., 2015; Husted and Plesner, 2017; Ringel, 2019; Sinha et al., 2021), hardly any studies investigate parties from a truly organizational point of view.

This omission is striking considering that foundational texts on parties emphasize precisely the question of organization as crucial to understanding representative democracy. For instance, Michels (1915) famously characterized his ‘iron law of oligarchy’ as a problem of *organization* rather than a problem of ideology or membership demographics. Similarly, Duverger (1954: xv) argued that modern parties are distinguished not by their actual policies but by the ‘nature of their organization’. Hence, for these scholars, studying the organizational dynamics of parties is a precondition for understanding electoral politics altogether. As another key thinker on parties notes: ‘whatever else parties are and to whatever other solicitations they respond, they are above all organizations and (...) organizational analysis must therefore come before any other perspective’ (Panebianco, 1988: xi).

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Political parties are fascinating organizations that have managed to remain relevant by updating their central role in the 'management of democracy' (Mair, 2003: 3) and by adapting to institutional developments throughout time (Dalton et al., 2011). Their presence around the world in diverse forms, sizes, and governance structures, alongside their ability to initiate social change, make them interesting and relevant study objects for organization scholars. With an ongoing surge in new and alternative party formations (see Heath, 2019), the present constitutes an exciting time for organization scholars to engage with parties in an attempt to understand how they govern themselves and the world around us, and how their efforts to instigate change might be advanced along progressive lines.

In this essay, we therefore urge organization scholars to study political parties more closely. This is important for at least five reasons: (1) parties illuminate organizational dynamics of in- and exclusion; (2) parties accentuate internal struggles related to the constitution of identities, practices, and procedures; (3) parties isolate processes of normative and affective commitment; (4) parties prioritize modes of normative control; and (5) parties are currently facing profound institutional change. Having identified

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these characteristics, we argue that parties should be seen as 'critical cases' (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of organizing that expose and intensify commonplace phenomena. This allows researchers to use parties as magnifying glasses for zooming-in on organizational dynamics that may be suppressed or concealed in seemingly non-political organizations. In conclusion, we encourage organization scholars to engage with alternative parties in an attempt to explore and promote progressive change.

What is a party?

In perhaps the most widespread definition, Downs (1957: 25) identifies a political party as 'a coalition of men [sic!] seeking to control the governing apparatus by legal means'.

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

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

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

or loyalty [our emphasis].

We believe that this definition provides a good starting point for an organizational study of parties, since it highlights the characteristics that make the political party an interesting object of study for OMS. First, it defines the party as a 'durable' entity, meaning that parties are subjected to ongoing political, social, and technological developments. Second, it indicates an organizational structure whose legitimacy and political impact depends on connecting the power at the center to local 'enclaves' and a wider popular movement, which actualizes problems of inclusion, exclusion, and representation. Indeed, while a number of organizations have served to mobilize and integrate the public into civic and political life (e.g. trade unions and social movements), parties are particular in their role of 'linking' the public directly to the government (Dalton et al., 2011), because of their 'more or less single-minded focus on mobilising for political effect' (Rogers, 2005: 606). Finally, Chambers' definition implies that the party is inherently a value community that relies on shared norms and patterns of

commitment. We shall return to these aspects after briefly considering the role of political parties in the history of Western democracy.

Political parties as bastard children of democracy

Although the roots of Western democracy are planted deep in ancient Greek soil, the above definition is clearly the product of a 'modernising topos' (Anastasiadis, 1999). Back then, political leaders did indeed form small groups, but since ancient Greek city-states were direct and not representative democracies, modern conceptions of parties sit uneasily with ancient understandings of *dēmokratia* (Hansen, 2014). Furthermore, the notion of factionalism, later engrained in the word 'party' (from the Latin *partire*, meaning 'to divide'), was unanimously criticized by leading figures of ancient Greece for corrupting 'holist' understandings of the common good (Rosenblum, 2008).

These negative connotations associated with parties and factions were later solidified by Roman thinkers such as Cicero and Sallust who, perhaps even more forcefully, underscored the problems of promoting *partial* interests at the expense of society as a *whole* (Ignazi, 2017). Such holist conceptions laid the foundation for a profound

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skepticism toward all kinds of partisan expression, which came to dominate political thinking for almost two millennia and shape the common understanding of state building in the early modern era. As Hume (1742: 33) later put it in his essay *Of parties in general*. '[a]s much as legislators and founders of states ought to be honored and respected among men, as much ought the founders of sects and factions to be detested and hated'.

The development of the modern party

The contours of modern party politics emerged in the middle of the seventeenth century when English politicians began forming groups in Westminster (Ostrogorski, 1902). However, parties with actual members 'on the ground' did not appear in Europe until the immediate aftermath of the French revolution, where the so-called Jacobin Clubs proliferated by organizing members of the National Assembly around a common strategy for protecting the outcome of the revolution (Brinton, 1961). Although the Jacobin Clubs were soon disbanded, the seeds for the political party as the dominant template for political organization had been sown.

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

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

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of the industrial revolution, mass parties had problems reflecting concerns over gender, ethnicity, and environmentalism, and even greater difficulties responding to demands for intra-party democratization (Ignazi, 2017). This reconfiguration of the political landscape marked the end of the 'golden age' of political parties (Mair, 1994: 1).

Party decline and revival

As popular support for mass parties declined, they transformed into what has been described as 'cartel parties' (Katz and Mair, 1995). Cartel parties form stronger bonds with the state and collect more state funding, thereby becoming less dependent on the recruitment of members. The cartel party is thus less of a popular movement and more of a career route for politicians and functionaries, which has arguably contributed to the disillusionment with parties that gave rise to many 'new' social movements in the late 1960s and instances of digital activism in the early 2000s (see Gerbaudo, 2019).

While many intellectuals and activists today dismiss the party as a dated organization, incapable of addressing the needs and desires of ordinary people (e.g. Tormey, 2015), Europe has recently seen an upsurge of new and alternative party formations (see

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Heath, 2019). These include not only new left-wing parties like Podemos and SYRIZA, or nationalist single-issue parties like the Brexit Party, but also wider initiatives like DIEM25 and the International Pirate Party. These new party formations indicate that the very organization of parties is becoming an explicit manifestation of ideological positions: that the forms of interaction within the party 'prefigure' a vision of how society should be organized. Hence, while organization is always a product of power and thus implicitly political (Clegg et al., 2006), we maintain that the politics of organization are uniquely present in political parties, as their ideological content and political form are *indistinguishable* and have an *immediate* bearing on the governing of the state. Consequently, we believe that parties are far too important to be left to political scientists. We thus urge organization scholars to study parties as a way of contributing to understanding the internal mechanisms of representative democracy. Before we unfold this argument, however, we highlight some classical contributions to the party organization literature that can help us comprehend the value of political parties for OMS.

Classical contributions to the study of party organizations

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The acceptance of parties as integral to representative democracy around the turn of the twentieth century coincides with the birth of political sociology as a hybrid-discipline, concerned with 'variables' previously taken for granted by political scientists (e.g. organizational dynamics) and topics neglected by sociologists (e.g. party organizations). Michels' (1915) canonical exposé of oligarchic tendencies in European socialist parties is one example. Having personally experienced how these otherwise democratic organizations slowly grew into bureaucratic machines and eventually succumbed to elite-rule, Michels (1915: 365) formulated his 'iron law of oligarchy', which would come to dominate party research for more than a century (see Diefenbach, 2019). As he famously put it:

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

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Michels' explanation for this seemingly inevitable drift toward elite-rule is that whenever a party gains maturity and influence, it becomes dependent on the state. Its leaders then seek to preserve their own position in the system and defend their privileges, even if this requires the party to react 'with all the authority at its disposal against the revolutionary currents which exist within its own organization' (Michels, 1915: 337). Hence, instead of trying to overthrow the established system and realize its own radical ideals, the party prioritizes the aggregation of members and the consolidation of power *within* the system. According to Michels, there is thus a certain conservatism embedded in the 'nature of organization', meaning that oligarchy can be found in any political organization that pursues 'definite ends'. This assumption, that 'democratic aristocracy' (ibid: 43) is inherent to formal political organizations, is likewise reflected in other founding texts within political sociology such as Follett's (1918) work on group organizations and Weber's (1919) writings on the 'politics as a vocation'.

Drawing on the work of Michels, Duverger (1954) introduces a completely new level of systematism to the study of party organizations. Instead of merely pointing to certain tendencies in electoral politics, he aims to develop a 'general theory of parties' to show

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how 'present-day parties are distinguished far less by their programme or the class of their members than by the nature of their organization' (ibid: xiii-xv). Duverger's main argument is that all parties consist of a number of 'basic elements', four of which are prevalent: caucuses, branches, cells, and militias. Whereas caucuses (small elite units) are the basic elements of conservative parties as well as American parties, branches (large mass units) function as building blocks in labor parties and Catholic parties, while cells (clandestine occupational groups) are the *sine qua non* of communist parties, and militias (highly disciplined private armies) constitute the backbone of fascist parties. Duverger uses this typology to describe how organizational structures distinguish parties. For instance, caucus-based parties (also called 'cadre parties') are characterized as having a very small but active membership base, while branch-based parties (also called 'mass parties') operate with a large but more passive membership pool. Similarly, although most parties are said to exhibit some degree of oligarchy, the means for legitimizing elite-rule varies, with militia-based parties openly embracing it due to the 'divinity' of their leaders and cell-based parties disguising it through an elaborate system of 'indirect representation' (ibid: 138).

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Several of Duverger's contemporaries shared his focus on structure as the primary unit of analysis. Many also continued to develop ideal types and categorize parties accordingly. One example is Kirchheimer's (1966) famous account of the transformation of Western European party systems, caused by the emergence of what he dubbed 'catch-all parties'. To some extent, catch-all parties resemble mass parties organizationally, in the sense that enrolling members is a key ambition. Unlike mass parties, however, catch-all parties are characterized by a weak ideological position that allows parties to cater for the 'median voter' (Downs, 1957) and secure political power by 'catching all'.

The final contribution that we wish to highlight here is Panebianco's (1988) contingency theory of party organization, which distinguishes political parties based on two factors: history and environment. In terms of history, parties tend to uphold decisions made by their founders, even when proven unwise or outdated. In terms of the environment, parties are influenced by a variety of contingencies such as changing laws, sources of finance, technological developments, as well as electoral results. This theorization introduces a new kind of dynamism to the static models developed by previous studies,

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because it acknowledges the often neglected point that a party is 'a structure in motion', reacting to contextual changes (ibid: 49). Based on this premise, Panebianco develops a framework for measuring the level of institutionalization achieved by parties at certain points in time. The more institutionalized a party is, the more autonomous it is *vis-à-vis* its environment, and the less likely it is to change its organizational structure. Consequently, Panebianco argues that if we want to explain political changes, we must attend to structural dislocations within the organizational core of parties and to the external pressures exercised upon this core.

Building upon these classical contributions, we now move to a discussion of what organization scholars could learn from studying political parties, focusing on the characteristics that make political parties a particular type of organization.

The value of parties for organization studies

Political parties provide an interesting study object for organization scholars, since their ideological content and organizational form are more explicitly intertwined than in most other organizations. The organizational form of a political party needs to reflect and

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express the values it seeks to promote. Duverger (1954), for example, maintains that the organizational configuration of parties has a direct bearing on the structure and composition of democratic systems. Many of the failures of political parties that we addressed in the previous section such as the party oligarchy that Michels (1915) described or the cartel party thesis discussed by Katz and Mair (1995) reflect a failure to reconcile the organizational structure of the party with its ideological content and democratic aspirations. The inherently ideological nature of parties therefore represents a number of specific characteristics that make them particularly interesting for organization scholars.

In this section, we identify and focus on five of these characteristics and specify how organization scholars might begin to explore them. Our main argument is that parties should be seen as 'critical cases' in relation to all five characteristics, in the sense that they contain more information about otherwise commonplace phenomena (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This does not mean that the themes discussed below are necessarily unique to parties, but it means that parties can be used as magnifying glasses that allow us to

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better understand organizational dynamics that may be concealed or suppressed in other organizations.

Between inclusion and exclusion

All organizations rely on exclusions to demarcate themselves from their environment and to maintain a sense of distinctiveness (Luhmann, 2018). Even the most inclusive and permeable associations draw a distinction between inside and outside, if only to exclude from the collective those who are not deemed inclusive enough. While all membership organizations struggle with this 'paradox of inclusion and exclusion' (Solebello et al., 2016), many attempt to conceal the limits of the collective by appearing fully inclusive. This not only applies to social movements that champion values of inclusivity and open-mindedness (e.g. Reinecke, 2018), but also to corporations that seek to project an image of themselves as catering to all interests and as working for the common good (see Rhodes and Fleming, 2020). As such, the seemingly apolitical façade of many contemporary organizations makes it difficult to see that organization requires exclusion and how exactly exclusionary dynamics unfold in practice.

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Political parties, on the other hand, generally reveal the exclusions that constitute them as collectives. There are several reasons for this. One is that negative campaigning is frequently seen as an effective tool for mobilizing risk-averse voters. Another is that parties are exposed to the constant threat of elections, meaning that they must attempt to maintain their distinctiveness at all times (Karthikeyan et al., 2015). Finally, since parties are tasked with translating universal values into particular bills and proposals, they have to add positive content to otherwise empty signifiers, thereby narrowing-down the scope of political representation (Husted and Plesner, 2017). This makes parties critical cases of organizational in- and exclusion, which is a point that has been raised by a number of organization scholars working with parties, although it obviously applies more to fringe parties than to centrist catch-all parties. One example of the former is Moufahim et al.'s (2015) study of Vlaams Belang, a Flemish extreme-right party. Based on an analysis of party propaganda, they show how organizational identities can be manufactured almost exclusively through the 'othering' of certain people (Muslim immigrants in this case), and how such identity constructions can serve as objects of identification for supporters longing for ethnic and religious homogeneity.

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Such studies show how constructions of organizational identities are never ethically or politically neutral. Although this is not a novel observation, the detailed examination of party propaganda could help organization scholars illustrate more vividly the political constitution of any given organization. For instance, few business firms would readily admit to discriminating against certain groups in terms of recruitment or promotion (e.g. immigrants), although this is the unfortunate reality of many contemporary workplaces. However, studying a xenophobic party such as Vlaams Belang that deliberately moves discriminatory dynamics to center stage allows for a deeper understanding of how exclusionary processes unfold in practice, and how they can help constitute organizational identities. To develop this line of thinking, and to curb the tendency to view organizational exclusions as inherently negative, future research might inquire into exclusionary practices in parties that discriminate progressively (e.g. *against* racists, nationalists, or misogynists). This would allow scholars to theorize how 'inclusive exclusions' operate in practice, and how such boundaries may be drawn in the service of democratic ends.

Fighting in the open

Because organizations require exclusions, they also host internal struggles to decide how and where to draw the boundaries (Fleming and Spicer, 2007). Such struggles are often represented by the notion of 'organizational politics', understood as a perpetual scramble to influence sanctioned and non-sanctioned means and ends (Mayes and Allen, 1977). However, while this makes conflict 'endemic to organizations', most contemporary enterprises go to great lengths to silence internal struggles in order to appear harmonious (Contu, 2019: 1446). This is arguably why the public rarely hears about political struggles in business firms, NGOs, or public agencies until after the conflicts have been resolved.

In political parties, however, internal struggles about programs and procedures are often fought in plain sight and passionately covered by various media outlets. History is replete with examples of members who have aired the party's dirty laundry in public and used the press as a lever for influencing the organization. This obviously makes it much easier for observers to study how such conflicts unfolds in practice, and this is precisely why it makes sense to view parties as critical cases of organizational politics.

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Additionally, since parties typically represent a highly formalized mode of organization (cf. Chambers, 1967), their structural configuration is often geared to address internal conflicts, providing spaces such as annual conferences where political struggles can unfold and be observed (Faucher-King, 2005).

The easy access to internal struggles has not gone unnoticed by the few organization scholars that study party organizations. One example is Kelly's (1990) study of intergroup relations during the 1988 leadership contest in Britain's Labour Party between Neil Kinnock and Tony Benn. Kelly explores how the minority group (left-wingers supporting Benn) and the majority group (right-wingers supporting Kinnock) stereotypically perceive each other and how the minority group is particularly committed to accentuating intergroup differences in an attempt to win the contest. Similarly, in a more recent study, Sinha et al. (2021) study what they term the 'dramaturgical resistance leadership' of Jeremy Corbyn in relation to his successful 2015 leadership campaign. They identify three core elements in Corbyn's strategy. One of these involves a rethinking of the organizational structure of the party, predicated on a blurring of the otherwise stable boundary between registered party

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members and non-registered supporters. This reconfiguration of the organization afforded a type of distributed leadership that gave Corbyn's campaign a more democratic structure and an almost movement-like identity that clearly contributed to its success.

Both studies rely on the premise that political dynamics, which may exist in all organizations, are more intense and visible in party organizations. As Kelly points out, the link between ingroup identification and intergroup differentiation appears much more clearly in her study of party factions than in studies of occupational groups because 'in a political context, intergroup relations are inherently competitive and there is no consensual status hierarchy' (Kelly, 1990: 597). This does not mean that the link is non-existent in other organizations; it is simply less visible. The point is thus that 'politically-led organizations can provide useful insights into generic processes in organizational behaviour' because they 'expose fundamental problems connected with rationality and action and can teach us a great deal about problems and solutions in organizations' (Morrell and Hartley, 2006: 486). Future research might thus explore organizational conflicts within and between parties, in an attempt to understand and

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theorize how such struggles unfold, who they involve, and what they achieve in terms of improving or deteriorating democratic institutions.

Commitment without contract

One of the most vital resource for present-day organizations is committed members. Without dedicated staff or devoted volunteers, no organization will be able to fulfill its purpose, especially not collectives that rely on more than simple remuneration to attract members. Although definitions vary, commitment is usually conceptualized as ‘a *partisan, affective attachment* to the goals and values of an organization, to one’s role in relation to goals and values, and to the organization for its own sake, *apart from its purely instrumental worth*’ (Buchanan, 1974: 533, our emphasis). The italicized parts of this definition are particularly important, as they emphasize how commitment has little to do with material rewards. This, however, also makes commitment a difficult phenomenon to study. Because, how can the ‘partisan’ and ‘affective’ aspect of a person’s involvement with an organization be isolated from attachment based on wages and benefits? This might be one reason why the literature on commitment is often described as confusing and contradictory (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001).

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In contemporary political parties, there are few instrumental benefits associated with being a member, which is perhaps why so few people are today registered as rank and file (van Biezen et al., 2011). In most cases, all one gets from a party membership is access to events such as annual conferences and the right to call oneself a member. Furthermore, *unlike* social movements and activist networks, parties usually charge membership fees. Taken together, these two factors make the entry barriers in political parties incredibly high and the exit barriers equally low. Fortunately for organization scholars, however, this means that those 3-4% of the population that remain members do so precisely because they are committed to the goals and values of the organization, to their own role in relation to these, and/or to the organization for its own sake. As such, parties could be seen as critical cases of what Meyer and Allen (1991) call 'affective' and 'normative' commitment.

Within organization studies, Husted (2020) has illustrated this point through a study of the relationship between organizational values and commitment in a Danish green party. Husted explores how the party's claim to be guided by six core values has

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profound consequences for how commitment is created and maintained within the organization. While some of the values encourage members to pursue their own political objectives, other incentivize them to remain morally inclusive toward fellow members that hold different views. These two types of values produce a strong combination of normative and affective commitment that motivate party members to stay with the organization and realize their personal aspirations through the collective. The party thereby allows its members to be 'different together', which is a finding that has implications for scholars interested in alternative organization and diversity management. Future research might thus use parties to investigate more closely how organizational commitment is forged and maintained in voluntary associations such as parties, and to theorize what (managerial) technologies that are conducive in terms of building strong commitment to democracy and democratic participation.

Modes of party discipline

Although commitment is generally seen as something positive, there is also a darker side to the affective dimension of organizational attachment. Commitment comes at a price, since being attached to certain goals and values, as well as to certain

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organizations, can be both liberating and constraining. Wiener (1982: 419) describes it like this: 'the central element in most definitions of commitment – the acceptance of organizational expectations and values as guides to an individual's behavior, i.e., identification – represents a form of normative control over a person's actions'. In other words, the values that attract people to organizations may equally tie them to a particular mode of being. While normative control has been studied in occupational settings (e.g. Kunda, 1992), workplace organizations also have traditional controls such as contracts and material incentives at their disposal. This is arguably why normative control was initially conceived as most prevalent in religious and political communities (Etzioni, 1964), and why it can be hard to separate normative control from other modes of control when studying organizations in general (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004).

However, just like political parties lack formal tools for *attracting* members such as paychecks or benefits, they also lack formal mechanisms for *controlling* their members. Faced with declining membership rates and a general dissolution of party loyalty (Ignazi, 2017), parties are today forced to rely primarily on normative control to ensure

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that members stay 'on board' and 'in line'. As Rye (2015: 1053) puts it: '[c]oercion may not be entirely redundant, but in modern consumer-oriented societies, voluntary organizations such as parties need more subtle methods to bring their members into line in terms of conduct, style and message'. This is perhaps why organization scholars like Willmott (1993) have emphasized the close link between normative control and the notion of 'party discipline', understood as social and political cohesion sustained by party members through the culture of the organization. As such, party discipline may be seen as an intensified version of traditional normative control, as observed in other kinds of organizations, which is why it makes sense to think of parties more generally as critical cases of normative control regimes.

Organization scholars have recently realized that studies of party discipline can tell us something interesting about normative control. For instance, in a study of the German Pirate Party, Ringel (2019) analyzes how normative ideals of full transparency have caused problems for the party's elected politicians whose parliamentary work often require a certain degree of secrecy. This leads the politicians to oscillate strategically between 'open' frontstage behavior and 'secret' backstage behavior, thereby carving

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

Husted (2021) takes a similar approach in a study of a local party organization in South-West England, which has won all town council seats for two consecutive terms on a supposedly non-ideological platform. Inspired by the concept of ‘neo-normative’ control (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009), the author investigates how an exhortation to ‘just be yourself’ creates a culture that thrives on heterogeneity rather than conformity, and how this unconventional type of party discipline allows confident councilors (often males) to dominate and marginalize less assertive councilors (often females).

The main contribution of these studies is that they illuminate the political dimension of normative control and commitment. When employees are subjected to particular norms, their personal space of action is clearly restricted, but it is often difficult to appreciate the political implications of such management techniques. However, when representatives of the Pirate Party fail to enter coalitions because members expect them to disclose all information, or when female councilors are barred from influence in a town council, we see much clearer how (neo)normative control regimes underwrite certain ideological agendas and suppress others. This insight might reinvigorate an

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area of research sometimes accused of having reached a 'theoretical stalemate' (Cushen, 2009: 102). Future research should therefore explore how parties develop new modes of party discipline that exceed the limits of our current understanding of normative control and examine how this development is tied to the ongoing evolution in party models that we describe below.

From bureaucracies to platforms

The four characteristics discussed above make political parties important research objects that organization scholars, in our view, cannot afford to neglect. This was true when Michels and Duverger authored their path-breaking accounts of European parties, and it remains true today. However, our claim is that the present represents a particularly interesting time to reignite the 'empirically grounded study of parties as organizations' (Mair, 1994: 1), since many contemporary parties have been forced to reconsider their organizational structure and modus operandi in light of recent events. In this section, we will consider one aspects of the present that make party studies even more relevant today.

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Like so many other organizations, parties have always adapted to their environment, albeit at a much slower pace than what might be expected (Panebianco, 1988). For instance, when environmentalism and second-wave feminism began to emerge in the 1960s, and when demands for more democratic decision-making processes were voiced in the 1970s, most parties were slow to respond (Ignazi, 2017). However, with the rise of digital technology and various web 2.0 platforms in the early 2000's, the old party machines have gradually started to change, as these media seem to afford unique opportunities for mobilizing voters and engaging members. Gerbaudo (2019) chronicles this development in his work on 'the digital party', understood as a type of party that resembles online corporations like Google or Facebook by following a 'logic of platforms'. Examples of digital parties obviously include the Pirate Parties, but also populist formations like Podemos in Spain, Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy, La France Insoumise, the Momentum faction of the UK Labour Party, as well as certain alternative parties at a regional level (see Barcelona En Comú et al, 2019).

What makes these parties interesting for organization scholars is that they employ online platforms in an attempt to democratize their organization, and that they often

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redefine the meaning of party membership by involving the entire electorate in policymaking (Husted and Plesner, 2017). The technology-based democratization of 'digital' parties has hitherto been most visible in decision-making processes. Such processes have traditionally been characterized as oligarchic and opaque, but with the advent of interactive online platforms, parties are beginning to experiment with horizontal and consensus-based decision-making. For instance, based on interviews with Pirate Party members, Fredriksson (2016) shows how the pirates' preoccupation with membership participation has led them to develop digital tools for decision-making that afford a direct mode of engagement but also privilege the most active users. Gerbaudo (2019: 127) observes a similar tendency, arguing that many digital parties have failed to deliver on the 'lofty promise' of bottom-up involvement, and that online platforms work best in cases of plebiscites rather than in cases of substantial political deliberation.

Contrary to 'digital' parties, other formations such as the Dutch Freedom Party or the Brexit Party have gone in the opposite direction by creating organizations entirely devoid of rank and file. What characterizes these party organizations is the

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uncontested power of the leader who is idealized by supporters as an entrepreneurial superman. The 'memberless party' is therefore conceived as a radicalization of the so-called 'business-firm party model', understood as parties that operate like profit-seeking corporations and focus almost exclusively on vote maximization (Krouwel, 2006). However, while business-firm parties lack ideological consistency, memberless parties often rely on a coherent vocabulary of populist tropes that serves to compensate for their less professional mode of operation (Mazzoleni and Voerman, 2017).

All these new party models are relevant for organization scholars, not only because they draw inspiration from the world of business and entrepreneurship, but because their success represents profound institutional change. For more than a century, party organizations have predominantly assumed bureaucratic forms and resisted environmental pressures to change. Regardless of whether the most dominant model in the field was called 'mass party' (Duverger, 1954), 'catch-all party' (Kirchheimer, 1966), 'professional-electoral party' (Panebianco, 1988), or 'cartel party' (Katz and Mair, 1995), the party machine was always bureaucratic. The fact that this remarkable

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case of institutional isomorphism is beginning to fade therefore represents a watershed moment in the history of Western democracy. Organizational changes that took decades to materialize in the world of business are now unfolding at an unprecedented speed in the world of party politics. Every year sees the rise of several innovative formations, many of which never succeed, but some do – and when they do, they often leave a lasting mark on entire democratic systems (Panebianco, 1988).

Consequently, OMS has an important role to play in helping us understand the organizational dynamics of political parties and their role in governing contemporary societies. In what follows, we close the paper by briefly discussing how organization scholars might use this moment of institutional change to actively engage with alternative parties that challenge un-democratic developments and promote progressive change *within* the formal political system.

Conclusion: Engaging alternative parties

In this paper, we have advanced three related claims. First, we argued that parties are intimately linked to mass democracy, but that they have failed historically in terms of

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realizing hopes for democratic participation invested in them. Second, we maintained that OMS has much to learn from studying parties, because they expose and intensify dynamics that may be found but concealed in other kinds of organizations. Third, we suggested that we are currently living through a moment of profound institutional change, in which bureaucratic party models are giving way to new and unconventional configurations (e.g. digital parties, business-firm parties, and memberless parties). This moment of institutional change, we believe, furthermore constitutes an opportunity for organization scholars to positively influence the course of history by engaging with parties that actively seek to promote democratic ideals (internally as well as societally) at the expense of simple voter maximization and oligarchy.

To this end, scholars might find inspiration in the burgeoning literature on alternative organizations, understood as collectives that 'prefigure' progressive ideals related to notions of individual autonomy, collective solidarity, and responsibility for the future (Parker et al., 2014). Within this literature, it is generally recognized that research and politics cannot be separated, and that researchers have to forge political alliances with case organizations deemed ideologically progressive (Parker and Parker, 2017).

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However, this literature has entirely overlooked the possibility that certain *parties* may also be considered alternative, and that they too should be seen as potential allies (Husted, 2021). These would be parties that curb the oligarchic tendencies that seem inherent to the formal political system by softening the homogenizing force of party discipline and by allowing members to participate in decision-making processes that go beyond plebiscites.

Engaging with such alternative parties will undoubtedly allow organization scholars to explore the five characteristics that we identified above, but it likewise offers a unique opportunity for researchers to 'make a difference in the world' by rethinking their role as 'intellectual activists' (Contu, 2020: 748) within the formal political system. This venture entails various forms of 'building' work related to the construction of alternative archives, agential capabilities, and accountability structures (ibid), and it is an intellectual praxis that clearly requires a strong commitment to democratic ideals as well as research ethics. Given the pivotal role that parties play in contemporary society, however, it remains a venture that critical organization and management scholars simply cannot afford to ignore.

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