

PREDESTINED PARTIES?

Organizational Change in Norwegian Political Parties

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we analyse changes, and the debates about changes, in the relationship between Norwegian political parties and their members. We ask whether parties develop from mass parties towards a 'network model', and whether such changes represent organizational convergence. The organizational diagnoses of the parties and their prescribed cures are similar. Thematic network structures, increased inclusiveness and membership ballots are debated within the parties, but actual change has been modest. While the Internet has brought about substantial change in the internal communication of parties, there is remarkable stability in Norwegian party organizations. Many of the structures and practices of the mass party remain, but network structures have emerged as an alternative ideal.

KEY WORDS ■ network party ■ Norway ■ party members ■ party organization

In the literature on political parties, organizational changes are often discussed in terms of predestined developments towards a particular party type – analytically presented as a 'model' – around which existing parties will eventually converge. The argument is that democratic polities offer a standardized setting, a common arena in which all parties compete for votes and power. This arena comprises the social parameters, institutional context and technological instruments that all parties have to face, and that force parties to become more alike if they want to survive, to keep their voters and remain in power. Regardless of party traditions, parties adopt elements from the 'mass party', the 'catch-all' party or the 'cartel' party models in accordance with the external forces defining their operative surroundings.

However, even though party convergence recurs in the literature, party heterogeneity prevails in the actual party world. This, too, is reflected in the

literature, but of course in other works. Some theories inspired by economists stress the homogenizing political ‘pull’ of ‘the centre’ although these same people – economists, that is – argue the need for ‘product differentiation’. Clearly – as both the ‘determinists’ and the ‘voluntarists’ are well aware – these positions are not intrinsically antithetical. Parties may become more alike politically and in certain practices, while remaining different as organizational types. Old Leninist parties may adopt modern communication techniques while remaining Leninist, and mass parties may hire more experts in media handling while remaining mass parties. In other words: parties may change in the same direction but within different modes. There is clearly a need for both singular ‘models’ and plural ‘typologies’.

In this article, we discuss stability and change in the organization of the main political parties in Norway. Our two research questions concern *actual and potential change* and *convergence*. First, is the need for organizational innovation debated within the parties, and have any actual organizational changes taken place? Second, do these facts jointly indicate an increased homogeneity in the way Norwegian political parties operate? We focus on three aspects of organizational structures and practices: the organization and activities of party members, the decision-making mechanisms and the internal party lines of communications. Our presentation is based on interviews with general secretaries or organization directors from the seven major Norwegian parties, as well as various party documents.¹ In concluding, we return to the question of organizational trends and their likely causes in Norwegian parties. We start, however, by developing an analytical framework.

Towards Network Parties?

According to Duverger (1954), the ‘mass’ party type was the most effective vote-catching political machine in industrial society. The old ‘cadre’ or ‘caucus’ parties learned and copied from the rising socialist movements on the left. In the emerging media society of the 1960s the party ‘contagion’ came from the right. The ‘catch-all’ party was – according to Kirchheimer (1966) – the organizational mode best suited for the new age of television and declining political loyalties. Epstein (1967) pointed to the American version of the ‘best practice’ party mode when he stressed the electoral advantage of the leadership-based campaign organizations. More recently, Katz and Mair (1995) have suggested a ‘cartel’ party as one product of a new party–state relationship based in particular on public finances.

What these authors have in common is an assumption that external forces guide the parties towards a similar organizational mode. An alternative approach is found in the institutional and historical focus of Panebianco (1988), who places a stronger emphasis on internal agency and organizational origin when searching for a party typology. In Panebianco’s world,

the keys to understanding how a party operates today are (a) its genesis and (b) its internal dominant coalitions.

The party models above are analytical constructions, ideal types, presented as instruments to describe how parties operate so that we can measure 'closeness of fit' and discuss variation and change in the party world. In the following we try to balance the pluralism of party types and the assertion of a trend towards a single, unified model. In our view, the tendency today is towards parties that are loosening their formal organizational structure, 'opening up' in the direction of less strict boundaries between internal and external processes. We stress both internal agency and external arena in the emergence of what we call the 'network party', which is built on what Ruud Koole (1994) calls the 'modern cadre party' and borrows many of its attributes. In favouring one model we, to some extent, plead guilty of a societal determinism similar to some of the authors mentioned above. We do not believe, however, that this is (even) the temporary endpoint of party history. Nor do we believe that this is the one and only party type to be found, only that the 'network party' model may be a useful heuristic device in organizing the discussion. It helps us to ask a question – is there a trend? – but it does not postulate an answer.

The Model

Duverger and Epstein look for the party drive to secure voter support, while Panebianco highlights internal organizational and political dynamics. To Katz and Mair, the cartel parties seek to control external variables, to secure their public finances and the state's regulation of the electoral market. They have found that the economic and legal 'base' determines the vote-catching 'superstructure'.

Koole (1994) has presented the model of the 'modern cadre party', building on the old models although in opposition to the strong state focus of the cartel model. He aims to capture the mix of internal and external sources of change as well as the blend of traditional and new in today's party flora. The 'mass' label is no longer sustainable for parties with low and declining membership figures. Whereas some of the above-mentioned models take existing trends to the extremes, Koole's model aims at a more realistic picture of the main common trends in party developments. In our view, however, the cadre party label gives flawed associations towards the old-fashioned Leninist parties. A label that would guide the thought in more appropriate directions is that of the 'network party' (Heidar, 2001), the main features of which are given below adapted and developed from Koole:

- 1 Predominance of professional leadership groups.
- 2 Leadership is anchored in the parliamentary party group (or in the government), but leadership accountability and legitimacy is still formally tied to the party organization and its members.

- 3 Low membership, but members are important to the party.
- 4 The party fights to maximize its vote but without diluting its political profile.
- 5 The party keeps up the organization as a basis for debating and deciding new policies and recruiting new leadership.
- 6 Party policies and strategies are developed in informal party networks with less emphasis on the formal organizational procedures of representative, 'mass party' democracy.
- 7 The party relies on a combination of private and public financing.

The characteristics describing the network parties are a mixture of 'cadre' and 'mass' elements. The main tension we expect to find within the network parties is between internal party democracy and the party elite with its professional staff acting in the media-driven public arena. Politically, the party elite will adapt quickly to a transient and turbulent external market, while at the same time anchoring its policies in party manifestos – or at least the elite will try to convince the party faithful that, under challenging circumstances, this is what it is doing.

In empirical terms, this is what we will be looking for in this article. Different as today's Norwegian parties no doubt still are, can we find a common understanding of challenges and remedies in party debates on organizational change? Can we find a common trend in practical organizational engineering among these parties – from the mass party model towards the network party? We will concentrate on the elements of the network party model that involve the relationship between the parties and their members.

Three-dimensional Change

Organizational changes are multifaceted and we need a sharper focus. Three angles, which correspond roughly to Susan Scarrow's (1996: 28–32) three organizational dimensions, guide our search for changes in real parties. The first angle deals with the *organization and activities of party members*. How are the members integrated in the party organization? We discuss innovations in the branch structure and branch activities, as well as Scarrow's 'inclusiveness dimension' – i.e. the height of barriers separating party members from other supporters. The second angle turns to innovations – and debates about innovation – in *decision-making mechanisms*. In all political analysis the central question is how decisions are made. This corresponds to Scarrow's 'centralization dimension': do the norms and procedures of delegatory democracy prevail, or is direct democracy introduced in policy and personnel decisions? The third angle looks at *communication* between elite and mass, between leaders and members. What are the lines of communications inside the party organization? How does the membership get its message across? What are the mechanisms through which the leadership receives

policy signals and legitimacy from the party's street level ambassadors? This is an aspect of Scarrow's 'mediation dimension': the extent to which party structures mediate contact between individual members and party leaders. However, the degree of mediation is also related to our first two angles.

These three aspects of organizational change roughly match three expectations of the network model which we target in our empirical investigation: a persistent membership importance (point 3), the party as a forum for debating and (formally) deciding policy issues (point 5), and the emergence of new informal networks of communication (point 6). However, membership importance, decision-making mechanisms and lines of communication cannot readily be disentangled, as demonstrated below.

A Note on Change and Innovation, Structure and Practice

Organizational *change* is the difference found between two points in time in the way a party operates. Organizational *innovation* is the part of that change which is intentionally brought about by some agents inside the party. Decline in party membership is organizational change while the introduction of Internet-based party branches would be innovation. The emphasis in this article is on innovation, although the dividing line is sometimes hazy and – for our purpose here – not crucial. In this perspective, the rapid decline in party membership is not necessarily relevant to the discussion of party models. As Duverger (1954: 63) pointed out, the distinction between mass and cadre parties 'is not one of size but of structure'. Mass parties can lose members but maintain their mass party structure and practices.² However, innovation will sometimes be triggered by other kinds of change. For example, decline in branch level activities forces the party leadership to innovate in order to keep useful lines of communications with the members, the activists and the devoted party supporters.

We can distinguish between two dimensions of organizational innovation: changes in *formal structures* – such as changes in the party rules – and *actual practices*. Both are important features of party models, but they are not necessarily related. Parties may change their statutes to authorize the use of membership ballots – without actually holding any ballots. On the other hand, practices may change within a stable formal structure. The Internet, for example, can transform internal communication without there being any resolutions by decision-making bodies. The point here, however, is not to engage in the scholastics of drawing the fine line dividing structure and practice, form and content, but to make sure that we look at both.

Organization and Activities of Party Members

The tree-like structure of Duverger's mass party model – where local branches are joined to the central organization by regional structures –

characterizes all Norwegian parties. All parties have municipal and county branches, in addition to the central level. This corresponds to the administrative structure of the Norwegian state. There are often several local branches within large municipalities, while smaller parties tend not to have branches in the smallest municipalities.

In a study of organizational change in Norwegian parties, Svåsand (1994a: 327) points to convergence: 'Over time, as the parties have become more similar to one another, they have also each become more like the Labour Party, the "model" party organization'. Alternative party models – a 'grass-roots model' in the Socialist Left Party and a 'charismatic model' in the Progress Party – have been tried out, but these innovations were short-lived (Svåsand, 1994b). In other words, Duverger's 'contagion from the left' was effective up until the 1990s.

A decade later, however, this perspective has run into serious problems. First, the parties are losing members. Even though the Norwegian membership/electorate ratio is still among the highest in Europe (Mair and van Biezen, 2001; Scarrow, 2000), the trend is clear. Total party membership in Norway fell from 461,000 in 1980 to 237,000 in 1999 (Heidar, 2001: 96). Second, passive membership is widespread. Many members do not participate in any activities, and some branches do not even arrange membership meetings (Heidar, 1994; Heidar and Saglie, forthcoming; Lesjø, 2000). Of course, there have always been passive members, even in the presumed 'golden age' of party politics. There are good reasons for being sceptical about the 'myth of the blighted present' (Scarrow, 1996). Nevertheless, the combination of declining membership and widespread passivity worries party organizers. The fact that very few people actually participate in the policy and personnel decisions of parties is seen as a threat to the legitimacy of the parties and their policies. For example, the Socialist Left Party declared that 'we do not want the political parties to be reserved for a microscopic group of people, but to engage and challenge most people' (SV, 2000: 3).³ The party therefore started a 'project for visionary organizational development'.

The party elites appear to agree on the diagnosis: they regard an *individualization* of political and social preferences as the reason for their enrolment losses. Political participation has become fragmented. Party loyalty is disappearing. People prefer single-issue participation to the 'package deals' that political parties represent. In addition, citizens have less spare time to devote to political activity. During our interviews, arguments like these were mentioned in all parties except the Progress Party (see also Jagland, 1999; Solheim, 1999: 426–36).

The parties also blame themselves. The Centre Party stated that 'many citizens feel that the parties are isolating themselves from the people, instead of being a tool for the people. We are on our way to a rigid and firmly cemented party apparatus which has little contact with the people' (Senterpartiet, 1996). Similar diagnoses are found in most parties.

The Progress Party is an exception, for obvious reasons. First, the party's

membership *increased* during the late 1990s. Innovations were not therefore required to attract new members. Second, the Progress Party went through bitter factional and personal conflicts, which led to suspension and expulsion of some members. Moreover, the party adopted an office-seeking strategy.⁴ The party wanted to be included in a government coalition, and needed a unitary and 'responsible' profile. To the Progress Party leadership, lack of party discipline was apparently more worrying than membership apathy. The Progress Party's unique problems resulted in unique innovations. One example was an 'organizational culture committee' established to handle internal conflicts. Another example was the concept of 'resignation by action'. If a member attempted to harm the party in public (e.g. by an attack on the party or its elected leaders), party organs could regard this action as resignation, and a reason for termination of the perpetrator's membership without any formal expulsion procedure.⁵

Most parties carry out recruitment campaigns, but they are rarely successful. For example, a Liberal Party report states that the declared 'winners' of such campaigns often turned out not to be real winners, because many of the recruits never actually paid their membership fee (Venstre, 2000: 22). The parties therefore want to make membership more attractive, and *thematic structures* and *inclusiveness* are among the prescribed organizational cures. Thematic structures refer to new activities and structures *within* the limits of the party organization, while increased inclusiveness means that the boundaries between the party and its environment become less distinct.

Thematic Networks and Branches

Modern citizens have to be offered something more exciting than branch meetings, according to the party organizers. Many resourceful members are not given the opportunity to participate in activities within their own field of interest. Commitment to an issue brings members into the party. These issue activists are hardly satisfied with debates on municipal affairs (such as the construction of local roads and sewerage systems). Even worse: party branches may not discuss politics at all – only organizational matters. Politics is left to the party group in the municipal council. This is a problem for the party – which needs knowledgeable people as policy developers – as well as for the individual member. To quote the Liberal Party report: the party needs 'better management of human capital' (Venstre, 2000: 11). One proposed solution was to develop a *thematic network structure* which would cross-cut the traditional geographic structure. Some parties have taken small steps in this direction. Examples from the Socialist Left Party include an energy policy network and a Central America network. To find potential participants, the central office of the Socialist Left Party sent a questionnaire on fields of interests and willingness to participate in networks to all its members.⁶

Whereas these networks cross-cut the branch structure, *thematic branches* are given the same formal status as geographical branches. Among others, there is an international politics branch, a University branch, a 'café branch', a gay and lesbian branch, and a Sami branch within the Oslo Labour Party.⁷ Thematic branches were introduced in Labour's party statutes at the 2000 party congress, but such branches existed before the formal rules were changed. The interest in thematic branches and networks, however, varies between the parties. The Centre Party underlines the value of its geographical branches. This is partly because the party already has a well-developed network of local branches, especially in rural areas.⁸ Community politics is also a central element in the Centre Party's approach to party activity.

Virtual branches (i.e. branches that meet on the Internet) are also discussed (see, e.g., SV, 2000: 37) – but to our knowledge there is only one virtual branch (in the Labour Party) in Norway at the time of writing (2002).⁹ The Labour Party introduced virtual branches in its statutes at the 2000 congress. However, the statutes illustrate a potential problem with virtual branches: the collision between the faceless anonymity of the Internet and the face-to-face contact of the mass party. At annual meetings and meetings with elections to party offices, the virtual branch 'must carry out these meetings in such a way that those who participate in debates and votes are present in the same room when the debates and votes take place'.¹⁰

Inclusiveness

Increased *inclusiveness* – lower barriers between members and non-members – may also make party membership and party activity more attractive. These barriers can be informal, such as subcultures that seem closed to newcomers. The Centre Party, for example, acquired many new voters during the early 1990s, but attempts to recruit the new voters as members failed, partly because of the mismatch between the newcomers and the traditional (agrarian) party culture (Madsen, 2001: 270–1; Senterpartiet, 1996). The Christian Democrats have faced similar problems. For instance, a study document explained that it is fine to hold *closed* party meetings at the chapel, and begin them with a prayer – but this may not be suitable for *open* meetings (Kristelig Folkeparti, 1992: 20–1). Most parties have some kind of subculture that the party organizers try to break down, with different degrees of success. They also want to overcome norms and expectations about member activity, and emphasize that individual members must feel free to decide on the activities in which they will participate.

In line with Scarrow's (1996) findings, Norwegian parties are trying to change branch activity from closed party meetings to open debate meetings and other outreach activities, such as meetings with local organizations or contact with the local media (see, e.g., Senterpartiet, 1997: 10–11; SV, 2000). Party organizers want to utilize their members in election campaigns and as ambassadors to the community. The Christian Democratic Party, for

example, told its local branches that they had to arrange *open* meetings if they wanted visits from central politicians during the 2001 election campaign.¹¹

Barriers between the party and the outside world may also be lowered by pulling non-members into party processes. At the elite level, the programme process appears to be fairly open. Most Norwegian parties draw on resources outside the party when they write their programmes. They seek ideas and advice from those affected by certain policies, and from policy experts (see also Allern, 2001). Various interest groups (e.g. environmental organizations or trade unions) are usually consulted.

At the local branch level, many non-member citizens fight for issues or candidates without committing themselves to any party or programme. For the party organizers, the question is how to include those who refuse formal membership. The Conservative Party has chosen an innovative option, one that combines increased inclusiveness with thematic networks. A new category between regular members and ordinary voters was introduced in 2001: 'registered sympathizers'.¹² These sympathizers are connected with the party through various issue-based information networks. They receive information about party policy on selected issues, and they are given the opportunity to pass on their opinions to the party. Membership fees are not required.¹³

Nevertheless, there are clear *limits to inclusiveness*. The parties want the ideas, opinions and expertise of non-members, but they are not included in formal decision-making processes. This is clearly stated in a Liberal Party report. On the one hand, it is argued that people should be free to participate in party activity, without joining the party as a member. On the other hand, only members should have the right to vote when the party makes its policy and personnel decisions. Non-members may propose candidates for public offices, and even run for office at party lists, but not participate in the selection (Venstre, 2000: 19). The new statutes for Conservative Party branches declare that registered sympathizers are ineligible for party offices.¹⁴ Most parties draw such clear limits to inclusiveness. The reason is obvious: the whole idea of party membership (and a membership party) rests on a set of privileges and obligations (Scarrow, 1996: 16–21). Why would anybody join a party that imposed obligations on its members (such as paying membership fees) without giving any exclusive privileges?

Decision-making Mechanisms

The principle of delegatory democracy is a central feature of Norwegian party organizations. Members participate by attending branch meetings. From the local units, delegates are mandated to congresses at the county level. The 19 county branches elect most of the delegates to the national congress, which officially is the highest organ of the party. The problem with

this chain of command is the distance between the individual member and the actual decisions. Some party organizers regard delegatory democracy as unsuitable in the age of individualization. The Labour Party's leader Thorbjørn Jagland (1999) described the situation in this way:

The parties have to take into account that people, in their daily lives, feel they are being taken much more seriously than previously, and that they are allowed to use their abilities and knowledge immediately. This is lost in the delegatory democracy of the parties, where branches elect representatives to higher organs that speak and make decisions on behalf of all members. The route from individual member to decision-making organ is often too long; public opinion is lost along the way and people lose their interest in participation.

Briefly, direct democracy may be another way of making party membership more attractive. The following section concentrates on three kinds of direct intra-party democracy: membership ballots, changes in candidate selection and preferential voting.

Membership Ballots

Membership ballots on policy and personnel questions have been introduced in several European parties (Scarrow, 1999; Scarrow et al., 2000; Seyd, 1999). Norwegian party organizers, primarily in Labour, the Liberals and the Socialist Left Party, also discuss direct intra-party democracy (Forfang, 1996; Jagland, 1999; Solheim, 1999; SV, 2000; Venstre, 2000). Sections on consultative membership ballots have existed in the statutes of the Liberal and Progress parties for some years. A similar section was brought into Labour's statutes in 2000, while the Socialist Left Party introduced both consultative and binding membership ballots in its statutes at the 2001 congress.¹⁵ The Socialist Left organizational project proposed a more radical innovation, namely to elect the party leader by a binding membership ballot, but a large majority of the congress delegates rejected the motion.¹⁶ Some innovations in formal party structures have thus taken place, but without corresponding changes in actual practices. No official membership ballots have been held yet (not at least at the national level).

Candidate Selection

Democratization and decentralization of candidate selection have taken place in a number of parties (Pennings and Hazan, 2001), although the changes have been modest in most Western European parties (Bille, 2001). Norwegian candidate selection is decentralized, and the procedure is another example of delegatory democracy (Valen, 1988; Valen et al., 2002). The formal structure has been extremely stable. The present nomination procedure for parliamentary elections dates back to the Nomination Act of 1920, which was incorporated into the Election Act of 1985 and repealed

in 2002. The prescribed rules were not mandatory; the parties were free to choose their own procedures. But if they abided by the law, public funding covered expenses connected with nomination conventions.

Each party selects its parliamentary candidates at nomination conventions in each of the 19 constituencies, which are identical to Norway's 19 counties. The national party elite has no formal right to veto local decisions, and generally does not interfere in the selection process. The conventions are composed of delegates elected by the municipal branches at meetings where all branch members can participate. In addition to this formal procedure established by the Election Act, local branches also participate in the selection process through a comprehensive hearing procedure before the convention. The Election Act permitted the convention to submit the list to a membership ballot. To our knowledge, such a ballot has never been held.

Although the process is decentralized, demands for a more open and inclusive procedure have been raised. The parties have responded in two ways. First, they have tried to expand their search for candidates. Individual members are asked to propose candidates, and some branches have even advertised for candidates.¹⁷ Second, some county branches of the Labour Party and the Socialist Left Party introduced consultative membership ballots prior to the 2001 parliamentary election. These ballots, however, were held at an early stage of the nomination procedure. The final decisions were taken by the convention, as before.¹⁸ In short, the innovations were modest.

That may change in the future. An Electoral Reform Commission, comprising party representatives and experts, was appointed by the government to discuss and propose changes in the Election Act. The commission unanimously proposed to abolish the sections on candidate selection (NOU, 2001: 230–1). It recommended that public funding for nomination conventions should be included in the general subsidies to political parties, without prescribing any specific nomination procedures. The commission's recommendations were enacted by Parliament in 2002. Consequently, an economic disincentive to innovation has disappeared.

Preferential Voting

Some aspects of the electoral system have profound effects on the distribution of power within the party. As Gallagher (1988: 239) has pointed out, preferential voting is comparable to direct primaries. In both cases, the voters – not the members – choose the individuals who represent their party in parliament (although under preferential voting the voters' choice is narrowed down to names put forward by the party). Norway is a case of party dominance, also in this respect. Preferential voting is used at municipal elections, but the only effective choice for Norwegian voters at parliamentary elections is the choice between competing party lists.

The Norwegian party dominance is challenged in this sphere, too. The

Electoral Reform Commission unanimously proposed the introduction of preferential voting in Norwegian parliamentary elections (NOU, 2001: ch. 8). The commission's arguments are familiar. First, rising levels of education and political information are assumed to raise the potential for individualized participation. Second, the shrinking number of party members limits participation through the party channel. Third, the choice of individual candidates is important to many voters because political divisions often cut across party lines (NOU, 2001: 140). The commission recommended a limited variant of preferential voting for parliamentary and county council elections. According to the proposal, the parties' own ranking of their candidates will still be important. It is nevertheless a paradox that party organizers emphasize that candidate selection is an exclusive right for members, while they intend to let voters in through the 'back door' of preferential voting.

Internal Party Lines of Communications

Intra-party democracy is time-consuming – and time is a scarce resource for party leaders today. The mass media demand quick answers to a wide range of questions. Technological development adds to the demand for rapid responses. There is not enough time to consult the members – while other political actors, such as lobbyists and interest groups, manage to get their message through to the party leaders. Furthermore, members themselves often require quick answers from their leaders, rather than waiting for the proper democratic procedures. Consequently, the party organization has become a 'dead-end street' to political influence – according to a Liberal Party report (Venstre, 2000: 16).

No party has found any easy organizational solution to this dilemma, but new communication technology creates possibilities as well as problems. Political parties in many countries have learned to use the Internet, both to disseminate information and to communicate interactively with voters and members (see, e.g., Gibson and Ward, 1998; Löfgren, 2000; Norris, 2001: ch. 8).

All Norwegian parties have developed websites where they present news and information about their party and current political issues (Hestvik, 2002).¹⁹ In some parties, people can subscribe to email newsletters from the party leaders. This way, the party elites are able to present an unfiltered party message to members and voters – not distorted by hostile and sensationalist journalists. The traditional party press has been depoliticized, but a modern version of the loyal party press has reappeared on the Internet.

The websites also facilitate two-way communication. Many voters and members send email to the parties – and thus increase the workload at central office, if the letters are to be answered. In principle, this is nothing new. People have always written letters to politicians. But to some groups,

email may lower the threshold for contact. Some party websites also provide open discussion forums, but the easy access and the anonymity of the Internet create problems. For example, the Progress Party discovered that various extremist groups abused its discussion forum. Right-wing extremists used the forum to discuss racist ideas, whereas left-wing extremists used it to accuse the party of Nazism. Understandably, the party closed down its open forum.²⁰

Party members use these open channels, but the party organizers have also developed new *internal communication channels* for their members. First, electronic communication has made political processes in central party organs (e.g. the executive committee and the national council) more effective and speedy. Documents are often distributed as email attachments. However, regular use of email outside the inner circles encounters difficulties. Party activists at the regional and local level, such as members of county councils, do not always have access to the Internet.

Second, the Internet facilitates direct communication between leaders and ordinary members. Traditionally, information is distributed through the party hierarchy. Contact between national leaders and individual members is *mediated* by branch leaders. That does not always work; information is lost on its way up and down. Now individual members can receive party documents by email, or download them from the party's website. Moreover, individual members may establish contact with national leaders directly. On the basis of individual members' contributions to the internal debate, party elites can recruit them to central positions directly – bypassing the branch structure.²¹

In principle, the most important step towards decreasing mediation was the development of centralized and computerized membership archives. This process was completed in all Norwegian parties by the early 1990s. In practice, however, the postage expenses limited the extent of direct mail. The Internet has made direct contact much less expensive.

Third, some parties have created closed discussion forums for their members. The Conservative Party organizers, for example, gave each member a user name and password for this forum – printed on the giro payment form for membership fees.²² These closed forums are used for internal debates and training and are especially useful for municipal councillors. In the smaller parties, party groups in municipal councils are small – often only one or two people. They readily become isolated. Through the party's internal web system, they can get in touch with colleagues from other municipalities, and discuss common problems and solutions in different policy areas.

Informal versions of thematic networks may develop in this way, but the distinction between informal networks and factions can be vague. Organized opposition factions also utilize the Internet. For example, a left-wing network within the Socialist Left Party had its own website and communicated by email.²³

Still, we should not exaggerate the possibilities of electronic communication. Party organizers tend to be enthusiastic about the Internet, but many members are sceptical. Labour's branch secretary in Troms County (Heitmann, 2000) described the situation in this way:

Often, when I talk passionately about this, I get very harsh reactions. 'This is not the party we used to know. How about us, who have never touched a computer? Are you going to distribute all information on the web, so that we – who lack the skills – are cut off? No, we do not want that kind of party democracy'.

This is a very real problem. Even as Internet access becomes more widespread, the dilemma will not disappear for some time. Many people, especially of the older generation, are cut off from any Internet participation. This 'digital divide' threatens the egalitarian ideals of party democracy. Accordingly, electronic communication is mainly used for discussions, not for decision-making.

Conclusion: Between Mass Parties and Network Parties?

Our first research question dealt with the party debates on organizational innovation and the actual implementation of such innovations, especially in the relationship between parties and their members. While other features of the party organization have changed (e.g. the professionalization of electoral campaigns), our interviews show that Norwegian party organizers still regard some kind of membership party as their ideal. Many of Scarrow's (1996: 40–50) pro-membership arguments were mentioned by Norwegian party organizers. They value members as ambassadors to the community, election campaigners, policy developers and potential candidates for public office. Financial benefits were also mentioned, in spite of generous public subventions for parties. In terms of Katz's (1990) cost-benefit approach: to the party leaders, the benefits of members outweigh the costs (though the calculus may look different from the point of view of the potential members). But what have they done to develop their organizations?

First, changes in the organization and activities of party members have been modest. Some parties have tried to develop a thematic network structure, but the debates about innovations have been more extensive than the actual innovations. Moreover, thematic networks will at best only be a supplement to the traditional geographical branch structure. We have also seen development towards increased inclusiveness, as party organizers attempt to open up their parties – but within clear limits.

Second, Norwegian parties still practise delegatory democracy as their main decision-making mechanism. The structures and practices of the mass party are still present. Yet, change may be under way. Recent changes of party statutes, and the recommendations of the Electoral Reform Commission, may pave the way for changes in actual practice.

Third, there have been some substantial changes in the parties' internal communication, especially among top- and middle-level elites. Party leaders can communicate more rapidly and more cheaply with their members on the Internet. The level of mediation between party elites and individual members has decreased. But because many members lack access to the Internet it is mainly a forum for debate – not democratic decisions.

In conclusion, the party organizers' diagnoses and their prescribed organizational cures are similar, though the Progress Party appears to be a deviant case. Most parties have taken steps towards a network party model. Nevertheless, there have been more discussions about innovation than actual implementation. There is remarkable stability in Norwegian party organizations. Party member surveys confirm this picture of stability. The share of party members who participated in a number of party activities barely changed between 1991 and 2000, and Internet-based participation has not become widespread at the grassroots level (Heidar and Saglie, forthcoming). Both party members and congress delegates prefer the present delegatory type of democracy to more direct democratic procedures (Saglie and Heidar, 2002). In short, many organizational structures and practices of the mass party prevail.

Does Innovation Lead to Similarity?

Let us turn to our second research question: does innovation cause convergence or divergence between party organizations? The answer depends on what triggered the innovation: was it external changes, internal organizational problems, or imitation?

First, external factors may cause *convergence* between party organizations. All Norwegian parties have been affected by the new communication technology, and they will presumably be influenced by future changes in the electoral system. Party organizers also point to changing value orientations among citizens. They may overestimate the actual extent of individualization, but their perceptions are in any case decisive. However, societal change may *interact* with characteristics of individual parties. This may lead to divergence. For example, the extent of Internet-related innovations in a party will depend on the proportion of members with access to the Internet.

Second, innovation may be brought about by internal factors. Party leaders often prescribe organizational cures to remedy some problem within the organization. Declining membership has led Norwegian party organizers to search for innovations that make membership more attractive. The exception was the Progress Party, where membership increased anyway and internal conflict was a more acute concern. These problems led to a relatively hierarchical and centralized party model. This example may illustrate how internal factors cause *divergence* between party organizations.

Third, party organizers look to innovations made by other parties. One example can be found in a Christian Democratic committee report on the

party's information policy. A similar report from the Liberal Party and a review of other Norwegian parties' information activities were printed as appendices (Kristelig Folkeparti, 2000). Sister parties in other European countries are even more important as sources for innovative ideas. Norwegian parties have developed a wide network of international contacts (Heidar et al., 1997). Other Nordic parties are especially important, but Norwegian parties also look for ideas elsewhere. Duverger's 'contagion from the left' seems to have been replaced by a '*contagion from abroad*'. Prior to the Labour Party's statute changes, for example, membership ballots in Germany, France and Britain, as well as virtual party branches in Germany, were discussed in the party's internal newspaper (Forfang, 1996; Olsson, 1996).

In summary, external factors and imitation pull parties towards convergence, while party internal factors may cause divergence. Party debates about organizational problems are similar. This points to convergence. On the other hand, the implementation of organizational cures is limited, and varies between parties. At this stage, we do not know whether the 'pioneers' will implement their visions, and whether the 'latecomers' will follow them or maintain the traditional model.

Why Stability?

Although some innovations have been introduced, we find it equally important to explore the causes of the evident *stability*. One obvious explanation is organizational inertia. Old habits are difficult to change. Nonetheless, our discussions with party organizers pointed to three additional – and perhaps more rational – causes for stability. The administrative structure of the state is an external source of stability. The internal factors concern the tension between, on the one hand, traditional concepts of intra-party democracy and, on the other, network structures and direct democracy.

First, the geographical branch structure is firmly rooted in the administrative structure of the Norwegian state. Parties seek to elect office-holders at the national, county and municipal level. A network structure that cross-cuts administrative structures might be less efficient for election campaigns. The administrative structure also places legal constraints on the parties. The Liberal Party wanted to merge some county branches, but discovered that electoral law and public subsidies to parties often required correspondence between the party structure and the country's administrative structure.²⁴ In addition to the obvious interest in controlling local decision-making, it is worth mentioning that a municipality is more than an administrative unit; it is also a community. Many party members identify with their community, rather than with some thematic field of interest. They regard the geographical party branch as a tool for participation in community politics – as well as an arena for face-to-face contact with fellow party members.

Second, the mass party structure has some democratic qualities. The

responsibility for decisions is clearly defined, and the power of the leadership is restricted by a set of formal rules. Moreover, it is in principle an egalitarian structure; all members have their say in party decisions via delegatory democracy. Of course, it rarely works that way. Delegatory democracy readily turns into oligarchy. The point, however, is that a fluid and informal network structure can increase oligarchic tendencies. Personal connections may become even more crucial at the expense of equal rights.

Third, the classic objections to direct democracy also apply to intra-party democracy. Just like delegatory democracy, direct democracy may be manipulated by party elites. Membership ballots pose a range of new questions: who selects the issues on which membership ballots are held? Who decides how the question is worded on the ballot? And who controls the information that accompanies the ballot? Norwegian party organizers have not dealt with these questions. Membership ballots are usually discussed in terms of legitimacy – as a means towards making the party more attractive – and not in terms of power. As two members of the Socialist Left Party's statute committee put it: the proposed statute section on membership ballots suffered from a lack of 'quality control'.²⁵ Furthermore, many members do not want to participate actively in all kinds of issues. Delegatory democracy often results in unrepresentative decisions, but direct democracy may become equally unrepresentative if turnout is low. During the 1970s, various left-wing groups preferred democracy by deliberation and votes at general meetings. In practice, small activist groups bored the meetings with endless debates. When the vote was finally held, only a few dedicated activists remained in the room. If parties try to combine direct and deliberative democracy today, this kind of 'general meeting democracy' may very well reappear on the Internet.

Persistent 'Mass' or Emerging 'Network' Parties?

The three forces of stability addressed above contribute to the prevalence of the mass party organizational structures and practices – in spite of declining membership. With regard to our selected organizational dimensions, Norwegian parties may be characterized as mass parties without a mass membership. The most significant change during the late 1990s and early 2000s could be the emergence of a wider range of ideals, including some elements found in the network party model. The normative ideals of mass party structures and practices are still present, but no longer uncontested. Party networks seem to have gained legitimacy, at least as supplements to the traditional model. However, the extent to which the network model is useful in describing recent developments in Norwegian parties – or parties in other countries for that matter – is a question which should be answered by further research covering *all* elements of the model.

This leaves us with three possible scenarios for future party development. First, the forces of stability may prevail. Party organizations may converge

around the traditional mass party model, and alternative models may remain lofty visions without practical implementation. Second, strong external pressure may lead to convergence around the network model. Third, variations in party internal factors could lead to increased organizational divergence. Party organizations might range between a traditional mode based on community politics in geographical branches and a network mode with direct democracy, thematic networks and Internet communication. Whether the wide range of ideals emerging in the new debates on party structures will actually be put into practice, only the future can tell.

Notes

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- 1 We interviewed General Secretary Solveig Torsvik (Labour Party, 30.1.2001), General Secretary Geir Olsen (Liberal Party, 30.1.2001), General Secretary Turid Leirvoll (Socialist Left Party, 1.2.2001), General Secretary Inger Helene Venås (Christian Democratic Party, 1.2.2001), Assistant General Secretary Oddvar Igland (Centre Party, 5.2.2001), Organization Director Kjell Reinsfelt and Organization Director of the Oslo branch, Per Tonstad (Conservative Party, 8.2.2001), and Organization Director Leif Hjeltnes (Progress Party, 13.2.2001).
- 2 Although in both Koole's and our models the loss of members is seen to bring organizational change within parties.
- 3 Throughout the article, we alone are responsible for translations from Norwegian.
- 4 Strategy document adopted by the Progress Party's national council, 20.2.2000. Appendix 3 to the party's annual report for 2000–1.
- 5 Statutes for the Progress Party, §3, amended by the party congress 27–9.4.2001.
- 6 Interview with Turid Leirvoll, 1.2.2001. A list of Socialist Left Party networks was downloaded from <http://www.sv.no/> (2002).
- 7 A list of Labour's thematic branches (forumsforeninger) in Oslo was downloaded from <http://www.dna.no/> (2002).
- 8 Interview with Oddvar Igland, 5.2.2001. See also Senterpartiet (1997).
- 9 Email from Political Adviser Roar Thun, 26.2.2002.
- 10 Statutes for local Labour Party branches, §5, amended by the party congress 9–12.11.2000.
- 11 Interview with Inger Helene Venås, 1.2.2001.
- 12 Statutes for local Conservative Party branches, §3, amended by the national council 6.3.2001.
- 13 Interview with Kjell Reinsfelt and Per Tonstad, 8.2.2001.
- 14 Statutes for local Conservative Party branches, §3.
- 15 Liberal Party statutes, §10; Progress Party statutes, §4; Labour Party statutes, §9; Socialist Left Party statutes, §25.

- 16 See documents for SV's 2001 party congress, item 9.2, proposal V-5.
 17 Interview with Geir Olsen, 30.1.2001.
 18 Interviews with Turid Leirvoll, 1.2.2001, and Solveig Torsvik, 30.1.2001.
 19 Labour Party: <http://www.dna.no/>; Progress Party: <http://www.frp.no/>;
 Conservative Party: <http://www.hoyre.no/>; Christian Democratic Party:
<http://www.krf.no/>; Centre Party: <http://www.senterpartiet.no/>; Socialist Left
 Party: <http://www.sv.no/>; Liberal Party: <http://www.venstre.no/>.
 20 Interview with Leif Hjeltnes, 13.2.2001. See also Hestvik (2002: 12).
 21 Interview with Geir Olsen, 30.1.2001.
 22 Interview with Kjell Reinsfelt, 8.2.2001.
 23 The network (<http://www.nyorientering.net/>) ceased its activities after the 2001
 party congress.
 24 Interview with Geir Olsen, 30.1.2001.
 25 'Landsstyrets innstilling. Forslag til endringer i SVs vedtekter'. Documents for
 SV's 2001 party congress, item 9, p. 36.

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