PREDESTINED PARTIES?
ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN NORWEGIAN POLITICAL PARTIES

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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 eventually will converge. The argument is that democratic polities offer a standardized setting, a common arena on which all parties fight for votes and power. This arena is made up by social parameters, institutional context and technological instruments that all parties have to face, forcing them to become more alike if they want to survive, to keep their voters and to stay in power. Regardless of party traditions they adopt elements from the ‘mass party’, the ‘catch-all’ party or the ‘cartel’ party models according to 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 is also reflected in the literature but of course in other works. Some theories inspired by economists stress the homogenizing political ‘pull’ of ‘the centre’ although the same fellows – the economists that is – argues the need for ‘product differentiation’. Clearly – as both the ‘determinists’ and the ‘voluntarists’ are well aware of – these positions are not intrinsically antithetical. Parties may become more alike politically and in certain practices while still 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 both for singular ‘models’ and plural ‘typologies’.

In this paper we will discuss the organization of the main political parties in Norway. We look for signs of stability and change, and our empirical focus includes both actual changes in organizational structure and party debates about such change. The research questions are; first, whether we can find proof of such change; second, whether the debates show a common trans-party understanding of the need and direction of organizational change and; third, whether these facts jointly indicate an increased homogeneity in the way Norwegian political parties operate in practice. In mapping developments in party organization we shall first discuss recent historical trends, i.e. till the mid-1990s. Then we focus on current debates and changes in three aspects of organizational structure: The organization and activities of party members, the decision-making mechanisms and, thirdly, 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. In conclusion we return to the question of organizational trends and their likely causes in Norwegian parties. We start, however, with sorting out some analytical issues.

**TOWARDS NETWORK PARTIES?**

The mass party was – according to Duverger (1954) – the most effective vote-catching political machine in industrial society. The old ‘caucus’ parties learned and copied from the rising socialist movement 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 that times have come for the cartel party model as a product of a new party-state relationship, in particular based on public finances.

What these authors have in common is an assumption that external forces are guiding the parties towards a similar organizational mode. An alternative approach is found in the institutional and historical focus of Panebianco (1988). He places a stronger emphasis on internal agency and organizational origin when searching for a party typology. In Panebianco’s world genesis and internal, dominant coalitions are the keys to understanding how today’s parties operates. There is more than one ‘party model’ option for party change.

In the following we shall try to balance the pluralism of party types and the assertion of a trend towards a single, unified model. Today the tendency in our view is towards parties that are loosening their formal organizational structure; they have ‘opened 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’. This party type is basically built on what Ruud Koole (1994) calls the ‘modern cadre party’ and borrows 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 the temporary end point of party history, only that the ‘network party’ may be a useful heuristic devise 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 has presented the model of the ‘modern cadre party’ 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 (Koole 1994). Apart from the cadre party label – which in our view gives flawed associations towards the old-fashioned Leninist parties – this model catches some of the main common trends in party developments. A label that would guide the thought in more appropriate directions is that of the ‘network party’. Its main features are as follows – borrowed from Koole (Heidar 2001):

1. The domination of a professional leadership
2. Leadership is anchored in the parliamentary party group or in government
3. Members are still important but there is a lower ratio members/voters
4. The party fight to maximize its vote but without diluting political profile
5. The party keep up the organization as a basis for developing new policies and recruiting new leadership
6. The party operations have less emphasis on formal organizational procedures, more on informal party networks
7. Combining private and public finances

The main tension within the network parties is between internal party democracy and the party elite with its professional staff acting on 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 work to convince the party faithful that this is what they are doing under challenging circumstances.
In empirical terms, this is what we will be looking for in this paper: 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? We will, however, concentrate on the elements of the network party model that involve the relationship between the parties and their members: the continued importance of party members (3), the continued importance of the organization (5), and the rise of informal networks (6). Other developments in party organizations, such as the expansion and professionalization of the party bureaucracy or the development of new campaign techniques, receive less attention.

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 of this paper will be 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. 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 may distinguish between two dimensions of organizational innovation: changes in formal structures – like changes of the party rules – and actual practices. Party models measure organizational change by a mix of indicators derived in part from formal organizational structure and in part from other organizational processes. The Duverger approach emphasises structural characteristics like direct organization or indirect confederate types and the basic elements of organizational structure (caucus, branch cell, militia). Kirchheimer focused in his catch-all type on a blend of
structural change and practices: strengthened leadership, broader social appeal, less emphasis on ideology and membership.

Changes in formal structures and changes in actual practices are not necessarily related. For example, parties may change their statutes to authorize the use of membership ballots – without actually holding any such ballots. On the other hand, practices may clearly change within a stable formal structure. The internet, for example, may transform internal communication without 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, but to make sure that we look at both.

**Three-dimensional change**

What are we looking for? Organizational changes as well as innovations are multifaceted and we need a sharper focus. Three angles, which correspond roughly to Susan Scarrow’s (1996:28–32) three organizational dimensions, is guiding our search for changes in this paper. 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 lines of communications inside the party organization? How do the membership get their message across, what are the mechanisms through which the leadership receive policy signals and legitimacy from the grass roots, 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 two first angles.
THE CONTINUED ‘CONTAGION FROM THE LEFT’

Duverger’s mass party model is apparently still influential in Norwegian party politics. A recent study of change and adaptation in Norwegian party organizations concludes that ‘over time, the parties have become more similar. Roughly speaking, they all have become more like the Labor Party’ (Svåsand et al. 1997:118). Experiments with alternative party models have been carried out, but these innovations were rather short-lived. In other words, Duverger’s ‘contagion from the Left’ has been effective up until the late 1990s.

Normalization of alternative models

The two new parties of the 1970s – the Socialist Left Party and the Progress Party – were both examples of innovative organizational models. The Socialist Left Party represented a ‘grass-roots model’, like many European Green parties. The organization was designed for power-sharing, as opposed to the more hierarchical models of both the Labour Party and the Communists. Accordingly, the party practised office rotation: individuals could not serve in the same office for more than four years. Moreover, the parliamentary group had only a limited number of seats in the national executive committee – to prevent a ‘parliamentarization’ of the extra-parliamentary organization. These features were dropped during the ‘normalization’ of the 1980s. The rotation system underestimated the difficulties of finding able and willing candidates. And since the parliament is the country’s central political arena, the separation of the parliamentary party group and extra-parliamentary organization actually put the executive committee on the sideline (Svåsand 1994a; 1994b).

One innovation of the ‘grass-roots model’, however, became both permanent and contagious. The Liberal Party and the Socialist Left Party were the first Norwegian parties to adopt gender quotas, which required party conventions and committees to have at least 40 per cent of each gender (Inhetveen 1999). Gender quotas were later adopted also by Labour, the Centre Party and the Christian Democrats.

The Progress Party, on the other hand, was initially designed as a ‘charismatic party’. The party founder, Anders Lange, detested the established ‘particracy’ and its formal, bureaucratic organizations. He preferred a loose movement, and created an
anti-party party focused on his own personality and political message (Harmel and Svåsand 1993; Bjørklund 2000). However, Lange died in 1974, just a year after his party’s birth. Carl I. Hagen was elected party leader three years later – a post which he still occupies. His pro-organizational orientation was radically different from Lange’s views, and a ‘normal’ organization was created.

During the late 1980s, the Progress Party enjoyed electoral success. A large number of party members were elected to local public offices, and many new local branches were founded. As the party’s anti-establishment ideology tended to attract staunch individualists, the need for party discipline was apparent. The party’s organizational plans from this period reflect a continued ‘contagion from the left’. The goal was to build a ‘Progress Movement’; a strong organization with a well-developed network, inspired by the labour movement. A ‘Superiority Principle’ was introduced: the extra-parliamentary organization should be superior to party representatives in public offices, at both the national and the local level. The executive committee stressed the need for party unity. County and municipal branches were described as ‘subdivisions’, subject to the executive committee’s control and supervision – just like the branches of a company, which are controlled by the board. In other words, the party had gone a long way from the charismatic founder’s anti-party approach.

The culmination of the mass party

Two developments in the ‘model party’ itself – the Labour Party – deserve to be mentioned. First, the 1992 party congress decided to abolish the practice of collective membership (i.e. that members of local trade unions could be affiliated collectively to the Labour Party), with effect from 1997. This weakening of the formal linkage between party and trade unions appears to support the catch-all thesis. On the other hand, the party and the Confederation of Trade Unions still cooperate closely at the elite level. The most important mechanism is the Joint Committee, where the top party and trade union leaders meet regularly (Allern and Heidar 2000; Skjeie 1999:108–14).

Second, we may regard the introduction of ‘management by objectives’ (MBO) in the Labour Party as the culmination of mass party structure and practices in Norway. This management philosophy spread from the private sector to governmental institutions during the 1980s. During the early 1990s, MBO was adopted by the
Labour Party, and – in a much less ambitious way – by the Centre Party (Heidar and Saglie 1994; Myking 1997).

Through MBO, the whole organization of the Labour Party should concentrate on selected objectives. The national council gave priority to three political and three organizational areas, on the basis of broad discussions in local branches. A ‘Strategic Plan’ outlined goals, sub-goals and measurable indicators within these selected fields. Local and county branches were to make and implement their own local plans, within the framework of the national plan. The whole process should be repeated every year. To repeat the procedure, however, created problems. On the one hand, the party could not just discard the prioritized fields (such as employment or children), and select completely new priorities. A party cannot change its priorities every year. It was, on the other hand, difficult to activate the grass roots in the continued planning process unless some renewal of the priorities took place. And if the number of prioritized areas increased, the prioritization would lose its effect. Therefore, the party gave up the MBO concept.\(^5\)

It might have been difficult to continue the MBO, even without these problems. In theory, the making of the ‘Strategic Plan’ should be a bottom-up process, with local activity as its starting point. In practice, it was driven forward by the party’s central office, while the grass roots were far less enthusiastic. Furthermore, the emphasis on plans, forms, and measurable indicators made the project rather bureaucratic. The MBO concept thus collided with the new discourse on societal changes. A few years later, Labour’s leader Thorbjørn Jagland (1999) claimed that the old-fashioned organizational pyramids were crumbling in the new information society. Individualization, decentralization and flat structures were required. Accordingly, our next question is: what happens to the mass party model in the so-called age of individualization?

THE MASS PARTY IN THE AGE OF INDIVIDUALIZATION:
HOW MUCH CHANGE?

Organization and activities of party members
The tree-like structure of Duverger’s mass party – where local branches are joined to the central organization by intermediate (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. In large parties and large municipalities, there are often several local branches within a single municipality. On the other hand, smaller parties tend not to have branches in the smallest municipalities. Branch meetings have been an important inter-election activity, and local party work has concentrated on municipal politics.

This model has run into serious problems. First, the parties are losing members. Total party membership in Norway fell from 461,000 in 1980 to 237,000 in 1999 (Heidar 2001:96). The membership decline has been stronger in Norway than in most other European countries. In spite of that, the Norwegian membership/electorate ratio is still among the highest in Europe (Mair and van Biezen 2001). Second, passive membership is widespread. Many members do not participate in any activities, and some branches do not even arrange membership meetings (Heidar 1994; Lesjø 2000). Passive members have of course always existed, also in the presumed ‘golden age’ of party politics. There are good reasons to be sceptical about the ‘myth of the blighted present’ (Scarrow 1996). Nevertheless, the combination of declining membership and widespread passivity worries the party organizers. Very few people actually participate in the parties’ policy and personnel decisions. This is perceived 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). The party therefore started a ‘project for visionary organizational development’, in order to develop alternative party models.

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 more fragmented. Party loyalty disappears. 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, such arguments were mentioned in almost all parties. This view is also stated by leading party politicians, such as the former Socialist Left Party leader Erik Solheim (1999:426–36) and Labour’s leader Thorbjørn Jagland (1999).
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 has increased during the late 1990s. Thus, innovations are not required to attract new members. Second, the Progress Party has gone through bitter factional and personal conflicts, which has led to suspension and exclusion of some members. Moreover, the party has adopted an office-seeking strategy. The party wants to be included in a government coalition, and needs to keep a unitary and ‘responsible’ profile. To the Progress Party leadership, lack of party discipline is apparently more worrying than membership apathy. The Progress Party’s unique problems have resulted in unique innovations. One example is an ‘organizational culture committee’ which is established to handle internal conflicts. Another example is the concept of ‘resignation by action’. If a member tries to harm the party in public (e.g. by strongly attacking the party or its elected leaders), this action may be regarded as a resignation from the party, and his/her membership is terminated without a formal exclusion procedure.

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 newly recruited members never actually paid their membership fee (Venstre 2000:22). The parties therefore want to make membership more attractive. We shall discuss two ways to increase attractivity: thematic structures and inclusiveness.

**Thematic networks**

Modern citizens must 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 (e.g. the EU 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 the individual member. To quote the Liberal Party report: the party needs a ‘better management of human capital’ (Venstre 2000:11). A proposed solution is to develop a thematic network structure, which cross-cuts the traditional geographic structure. Some parties have taken small steps in this direction. For example, the Socialist Left Party has established a network for consumer issues (SV 2000). To find members who may join such networks, the party has created a ‘Resource Bank’. The central office sent a questionnaire to all members, with questions about their fields of interests and their willingness to participate in networks.8

Another step in the same direction is thematic branches. Among others, there is an international politics branch, a University branch, a branch for culture and environment, a gay and lesbian branch, and a Sami branch within the Oslo Labour Party.9 Thematic branches were introduced in Labour’s party statutes at the 2000 party congress, but these branches existed before the formal rules were changed.

However, the interest in thematic branches and networks varies between the parties. The Centre Party, for instance, underlines the value of its geographical branches. This is partly because the party already has a very well-developed network of local branches, especially in rural areas.10 In addition, the Centre Party’s approach to party activity may be described as communitarian, with a strong emphasis on community politics.

Virtual branches (i.e. branches that meet on the internet) are also discussed, but no such branches have yet been created. In a document from the Socialist Left Party’s organization project, internet branches are described as especially useful for those who live in small municipalities, without enough members to start a geographical branch (SV 2000). The Labour Party introduced virtual branches in its statutes at the 2000 congress. However, these 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’.11
Inclusiveness

Increased inclusiveness – lower barriers between members and non-members – may also make party membership more attractive. Such barriers may be informal, such as subcultures that may seem closed to newcomers. The Centre Party, for example, has tried to reach out to new groups since 1959 – when the party changed its name from the Farmers Party. The party got many new voters in the early 1990s, during the EU referendum campaign. But the 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 1992:20–21). Most parties have some kind of subculture that the party organizers try to break down, with more or less success. In addition, they want to overcome norms and expectations about member activity. They emphasize that the individual member must be free to decide the activities in which he or she shall participate.

In line with Scarrow’s findings (1996), Norwegian parties try 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, has told its local branches that they have to arrange open meetings, if they want visits from central politicians during the 2001 election campaign.12

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 quite open. Most Norwegian parties draw on resources outside the party when they write their programmes. They seek for ideas and advice from those who are 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, which combines increased inclusiveness with thematic networks. The statutes for local Conservative branches were amended in 2001 to introduce a new category between regular members and ordinary voters: the ‘registered sympathizers’. These registered sympathizers will be connected to the party through various issue-based information networks. Sympathizers will receive information about party policy on selected issues, and they will be given the opportunity to pass on their opinions to the party. Membership fees are not required. Such information networks (based on e-mail) have been tried out in the party’s Oslo branch. Similar ideas are discussed in the Socialist Left Party.

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, for example, 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). A similar demarcation is made in the new statutes for Conservative Party branches. In addition, these statutes declare that registered sympathizers are not eligible for party offices. 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). Would anybody join a party that only imposed obligations on its members (such as paying membership fees), without any exclusive privileges?

**Decision-making mechanisms**

The principle of delegatory democracy has been 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), for example, described the situation in this way:

The parties must take into account that people, in their daily life, feel that they are taken much more seriously than before, and 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, which speak and make decisions on behalf of all members. The way from the individual member to the decision-making organs often becomes too long. Much of public opinion is lost on the way. And people lose their interest in participation.

In short, direct democracy may be another way of making party membership more attractive – in addition to those mentioned earlier. 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 (see e.g. Scarrow 1996; 1999; Scarrow et al. 2000; Seyd 1999). Direct intra-party democracy is discussed by Norwegian party organizers as well – primarily in Labour, the Liberals and the Socialist Left Party (see e.g. Forfang 1996; Jagland 1999; Venstre 2000; Solheim 1999; SV 2000). Some innovations in formal party structures have taken place. Sections that authorize consultative membership ballots have existed in the statutes of the Liberal Party and the Progress Party for some years. A similar section was introduced in the Labour Party statutes in 2000. 17 The Socialist Left Party went a step further, and introduced both consultative and binding membership ballots in its statutes at the 2001 congress. 18 The party’s organizational project proposed a more radical innovation: to elect the party leader by a binding membership ballot during the next congress in 2003. A large majority rejected this motion. 19

However, it is difficult to find cases where membership ballots actually have been held (at least at the national level). One exception may be a consultative ballot held by the Progress Party in 1992, regarding the party’s EU policy. This ballot, though, was somewhat semi-official. The party’s EU committee and the party
newspaper (not the executive committee) arranged it, and the turnout was low. Only 700 members cast their vote (Saglie 2000:84).

Candidate selection

Candidate selection in Norway is another example of delegatory democracy, but this process is more decentralized than policy decisions and election of party leaders (see Valen 1988; Valen et al., forthcoming). 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 without any substantial changes. The prescribed rules are not mandatory; the parties are free to choose their own procedures. But if they abide by the law, public funding covers the expenses connected with the 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 does generally not interfere in the selection process. Interventions by national leaders usually provoke angry reactions in the constituencies – as it did in the Progress Party prior to the 2001 election. The conventions are composed of delegates elected by the municipal branches, at meetings where all branch members can participate. The Election Act (§ 19) permits the convention to submit the list to a membership ballot. To our knowledge, such a ballot has never been held.

In addition to the procedure established by the Election Act, a comprehensive hearing procedure usually takes place before the convention. The county branch appoints a nomination committee, which asks the local branches to propose candidates. The committee then drafts a list of candidates – which normally is sent out for further discussions – before it submits its final list to the convention.

Although the procedure 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. In some cases, branches have even advertised for candidates. 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. In short, the innovations have been moderate.

That may change in the future. The Electoral Reform Commission, which was appointed by the government to discuss and propose changes in the Election Act, presented its report in 2001. The commission – with representatives from all parties as well as lawyers and political scientists – unanimously proposed to abolish the sections on candidate selection (NOU 2001:230–1). The commission recommended that public funding for nomination conventions should be included in the general subsidies to political parties, without prescribing any specific nomination procedures. Consequently, an economic disincentive to innovation will disappear if the commission’s recommendations are adopted by the Parliament.

*Preferential voting*

Some aspects of the electoral system have profound effects on the distribution of power within the party. As Gallagher (1988) 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. Norway is a case of party dominance, also in this respect. Preferential voting is used at municipal elections, but the only choice for Norwegian voters at parliamentary and county council elections is the choice between competing party lists.

The Norwegian party dominance is challenged in this sphere, too. The Electoral Reform Commission unanimously proposed to introduce preferential voting in Norwegian parliamentary elections (NOU 2001: ch. 8). The commission’s arguments are familiar. First, it points to rising levels of education and political information, which is supposed to raise the voters’ potential for individualized participation. Second, the shrinking number of party members means that participation through the party channel becomes even more limited. In addition, the commission states that political divisions in many cases cut across party lines, and that the choice of individual candidates is important to many voters (NOU 2001:140). The commission recommended a limited variant of preferential voting for parliamentary and county council elections. First, the voters should continue to primarily cast a party vote. Votes for individual candidates on the party list is an additional option. Second, a candidate must be chosen by at least five per cent of those who vote for a party list, in order to be elected via individual votes. The parties’
own ranking of their candidates will therefore 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 the 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. The technological development adds to the demand for rapid response. 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, instead of 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. In particular, the parties have learnt to use the internet. In this section we discuss how the parties use the internet to improve external and internal communication. Another question is whether and how a traditional channel of communication – the parties’ internal newspapers – survive in the internet era.

**Internet**

Some Norwegian parties have done more to utilize the internet than others. Parties with many young and well-educated members and activists tend to be in the forefront. Some general developments have, however, taken place in all parties during the 1990s. All parties use the internet for communication with the general public as well as internal communication.

All parties have developed websites, where they present news and information about their party and current political issues. In some parties, people can subscribe to e-mail 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 at the internet.

The websites also facilitate two-way communication. Many voters and members send e-mail to the parties – and thus increase the workload at the 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, e-mail may lower the threshold for contact. In addition to e-mail contact, most parties have an open discussion forum on their websites. However, the easy access and the anonymity of the internet sometimes 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 chose to close down its open forum.27

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 or the national council) more effective and speedy. For example, documents are often distributed as e-mail attachments. However, this is mainly done in the most central parts of the organization. Regular use of e-mail within a broader circle encounters difficulties. Central 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 as supposed; information is lost on its way up and down. Now individual members can receive party documents by e-mail, 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 may recruit them to central positions directly – bypassing the branch structure.28

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. When these registers were established, party leaders could send mail directly to all their members. 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 closed discussion forums for their members, where passwords are required. The Conservative Party organizers, for example, have given each member a user name and password – printed on the giro payment form for membership fees. These closed forums are used for internal debates and training. They may be especially useful for members of municipal councils. In the smaller parties, party groups in municipal councils are very small – often one or two persons. They easily 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.

An informal version of thematic network may develop in this way. However, the distinction between such informal networks and factions may 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 e-mail.

Still, we should not exaggerate the possibilities of electronic communication. Party organizers tend to be very enthusiastic about the internet, but many members are sceptical. The party secretary of Labour’s branch in Troms County (Heitmann 2000) describes 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 though internet access becomes more widespread, the dilemma will not disappear for some time. Many people, especially in the older generation, are cut off from any internet participation. A sharp distinction, that threatens the egalitarian ideals of party democracy, may develop within the parties. Accordingly, electronic communication is mainly used as a forum for discussion, not for decision-making.
**Internal party newspapers**

What happens to printed communication in the internet age? Internal newspapers were an important channel of communication between members and leaders in all parties. The Centre Party and the Socialist Left Party have had membership newspapers – distributed to all members – for some time. The other parties used to publish subscription newspapers or magazines (usually weekly or monthly). The Conservative Party, however, closed down its magazine in 2000, and is at present the only Norwegian party without an internal newspaper or magazine at the national level. The Christian Democrats has kept its subscription newspaper. The three remaining parties – the Liberals, the Progress Party and Labour – all replaced their subscription newspapers with membership newspapers or magazines in 1999/2000 (see Kristelig Folkeparti 2000: appendix 12).

The most immediate motivation appears to be changes in public subsidies to the parties’ information activities. In 1999, subventions targeted at party publications were reduced and replaced with a general support for party information (Kristelig Folkeparti 2000:3–4). However, Labour and Liberal party organizers also mentioned other arguments. They wanted to communicate with all members, instead of the minority who subscribed to the newspaper. Members deserve information, in return for their membership fees. They also need information to function as ambassadors to the community. In addition, Labour’s membership magazine was partly a response to the criticism against internet-based information. Printed information was needed, to reach members without access to the internet.

**CONCLUSION: BETWEEN MASS PARTIES AND NETWORK PARTIES?**

Norwegian party organizers still regard some kind of membership party as their ideal. Many of Scarrow’s (1996:40–50) arguments in favour of members were mentioned by Norwegian party organizers, though the weight of the different arguments may vary between parties. Party strategists value members as ambassadors to the community, as election campaigners, as policy developers, and as 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 kind of membership party do the party organizers prefer?

First, changes in the organization and activities of party members have been limited. Some parties try to develop a thematic network structure, but debates about innovations have been more extensive than actual innovations. Moreover, thematic networks will most likely only be a supplement to the traditional geographical branch structure. We have also seen a development towards increased inclusiveness. Party organizers try to open up the party (with more or less success), both by pushing members out of the traditional meetings and into the community and pulling non-members into party processes. However, there are distinctive limits to this inclusiveness.

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 may pave the way for changes in actual practice. Moreover, the recommendations of the Electoral Reform Commission may bring about even more direct democracy in the future.

Third, the parties’ internal communication has changed substantially. Party leaders can communicate more rapidly and less costly with their members on the internet. Parties have moved in the direction of decreasing levels of mediation between party elites and individual members. Party elites may bypass the branch structure to communicate directly with members. Individual members throughout the country may also bypass the party elite. However, many members do not have access to the internet. Therefore, the internet is mainly a forum for debate, not for democratic decisions.

In conclusion, the party organizers’ diagnoses and their prescribed organizational cures are quite similar, though the Progress Party appears to be a deviant case. Most parties have taken smaller or greater steps towards a network party model – most clearly envisioned in the Socialist Left Party’s organizational project (SV 2000). Nevertheless, the discussions of innovation have – so far – been more extensive than the implementation. There is a remarkable stability in Norwegian party organizations. Some innovations have been implemented outside of the main theme of
this paper, such as a professionalization of electoral campaigns. The relationship between parties and their members has also changed in some respects, as the party-linked social and cultural networks of the mass party have waned. Still, many organizational structures and practices of the mass party model prevail.

**Does innovation lead to similarity?**

Does innovation cause convergence or divergence between party organizations? The answer depends on the nature of the pressure for organizational innovation. We may distinguish between three sources of innovation: external factors, party internal factors, and imitation.

First, societal change affects party organizations. Technological innovations, such as the internet, are an obvious example. Changing value orientations among the citizens – individualization and fragmentation – were frequently mentioned by the party organizers. There may be reason to suspect that some of them overestimate the actual extent of individualization, but their perceptions are in any case decisive. Parties also respond to changes in a country’s legal framework. Changes in state subventions, for example, contributed to the decline of the internal subscription newspapers. Likewise, future changes in the electoral system may impact on organizational practices. Societal and legal changes affect all parties, and may thus cause *convergence* between party organizations. However, societal change may interact with characteristics of individual parties. The extent of internet-related innovations in a party will presumably depend on the proportion of members with access to the internet.

Second, innovation may be brought about by party 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 is the Progress Party, where membership increases anyway and internal conflict is a more acute concern. These problems have led to a relatively hierarchical and centralized party model. This example may illuminate how internal factors cause *divergence* between party organizations.

Third, party organizers look to innovations made by other parties. One example is found in a Christian Democratic committee report on the party’s internal
and external information. The information activities of the six other Norwegian parties are summarized in an appendix to the report, whereas a similar report from a Liberal Party committee is reprinted as another appendix (Kristelig Folkeparti 2000: app. 12 and 13). However, 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 be replaced with a ‘contagion from abroad’. Prior to the Labour Party’s statute changes, for example, the party’s international secretary wrote an article in the party’s internal newspaper, titled ‘Other countries have tried it: Is direct membership democracy something for us?’ (Forfang 1996). In this article, he discussed the use of membership ballots by the German Social Democrats, the French Socialists and the British Labour Party. The same issue also included an article on virtual party branches in the German Social Democratic Party (Olsson 1996). Without closer case studies, however, it is difficult to distinguish ‘contagion effects’ from similar, but independent, solutions to similar problems.

In summary, external factors and imitation pull parties towards convergence, while party internal factors may cause divergence. As we have seen, party debates about organizational problems are quite 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 have pointed to three additional – and perhaps more rational – causes for stability. The administrative structure of the state constitutes 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 hand, network structures and direct democracy.
First, the geographical branch structure is firmly rooted in the administrative structure of the Norwegian state. Parties are organizations that 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. Moreover, the administrative structure places legal constraints on the parties. The Liberal Party wanted to merge some county branches into larger regional branches, but discovered that electoral law and public subsidies to parties often required correspondence between the party structure and the country’s administrative structure. 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 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 does rarely work that way. Delegatory democracy easily turns into oligarchy. The point, however, is that a fluid and informal network structure may 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. Direct democracy may – just like delegatory democracy – 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 the question wording on the ballot? And who controls the information that accompanies the ballot? Membership ballots in the British Labour Party have been criticized. The objection is that members are merely invited to support the leadership, rather than making a real policy choice. Members are consulted, but the leadership sets the terms of the consultations (Seyd 1999). If the party really want to make membership more attractive, this practice is hardly viable. An alternative solution might be a combination of direct and deliberative democracy. Policy options and candidates for office may be discussed thoroughly in the organization prior to the ballot. The internet
may facilitate such deliberations. But this solution is also problematic, at least if many such ballots are held. Most members do not want to participate actively in all kinds of issues. Delegatory democracy often result in unrepresentative decisions, but direct democracy may become equally unrepresentative if turnout is low. During the 1970s, various left-wing groups preferred democracy by deliberations and votes at general meetings. In practice, small activist groups bored the meetings with endless debates. When the vote finally was held, only a few dedicated activists remained in the room. Today, this kind of ‘general meeting democracy’ may very well reappear on the internet.

These three arguments contribute to the prevalence of the mass party organizational structures and practices – in spite of declining membership. The outcome may be characterized as mass parties without a mass membership. The most significant change during the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, is a wider range of ideals. The mass party structures and practices are still present, but no longer as uncontested ideals. Network structures have emerged as an alternative ideal, at least as a supplement to the traditional model. Party organizations may range between a traditional mode based on community politics in geographical branches, and a network mode with direct democracy, thematic networks and internet communication. 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 may lead to organizational divergence, where some parties adopt a network mode while others prefer the mass party structure. Thus, our initial question about ‘predestined developments’ cannot be readily answered. The actual use of the wider range of ideals remains yet to be seen.
NOTES

1 We have 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 Our discussion of these two cases draws on Svåsand (1994a; 1994b).


5 Interview with Solveig Torsvik, 30.1.2001.


7 See e.g. <http://www.frp.no/nyheter/20010308235421.asp>. The concept of ‘resignation by action’ is more clearly defined in the proposal for new party statutes (§ 3), which will be discussed at the 2001 congress:

8 Interview with Turid Leirvoll, 1.2.2001.

9 Interview with Oddvar Igland, 5.2.2001. See also Senterpartiet (1997).


11 Interview with Inger Helene Venås, 1.2.2001.

12 ‘Normallover for Høyres kommuneforeninger’ (statutes for party branches), § 3, amended by the national council 6.3.2001.

13 Interview with Kjell Reinsfelt and Per Tonstad, 8.2.2001.

14 Interview with Turid Leirvoll, 1.2.2001. See also SV (2000).

15 ‘Normallover for Høyres kommuneforeninger’ (statutes for party branches), § 3, amended by the national council 6.3.2001.


19 This was about 5 per cent of all registered members, and 15 per cent of the dues-paying members.


21 Interview with Geir Olsen, 30.1.2001.


23 A voter may cross out a name on the party list. This has no effect on the outcome, unless half of the party list’s voters cross out the same name. That has never happened.

24 One of the commission’s 17 members (who represented a minor party) preferred a more radical variant of preferential voting.


26 Interview with Leif Hjeltnes, 13.2.2001.


28 Interview with Kjell Reinsfelt, 8.2.2001.

29 <http://www.nyorientering.net/>.


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