Political Parties’ Development as Extra-Parliamentary Organizations:
Significance for Democracy at Large

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Membership Parties and Democracy

The theses of party change – and decline – come in various forms. A dominating perspective in the scholarly literature and public debate is the electoral one. Persuasive and mounting evidence indicates general decline of party identification and trust among voters. It is beyond doubt that Western parties are less able to mobilize the electorate to the polling stations than before. The democratic legitimacy – popular acknowledgment – of parties is questioned (Wattenberg 2000; Dalton 2000; Pharr et al. 2000; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). In recent decades, considerable attention has also been paid to the organizational aspects of party development. The heyday’s of the European mass party model is said to be over. Western political parties still have members but in all long-established democracies the membership figures have significantly declined since the 1960s (Katz and Mair et al. 1992; Mair and van Biezen 2001; Scarrow 2000). Party politics are to a greater extent played out in public or private media channels. More resources are at the disposal of party leaders. Party headquarters are professionalized. A widespread hypothesis is therefore that former mass parties are increasingly dominated by public office-holders and leaders at the expense of party activists in political and strategic questions (Kirchheimer 1966; Panebianco 1988; Katz and Mair 1995; Katz and Mair 2002).

It is widely acknowledged that such an organizational development – like the electoral changes – entails important functional consequences (Strøm and Svåsand 1997). However, no unanimous agreement exists on the nature of the relationship between party organizations and democracy. On the one hand, scholars fear that parties – by abandoning the core features of the mass party model – are transformed into something too blunt to serve as a link between society and the state. Parties are said to be weakened as channels for interest articulation and preference aggregation (Kirchheimer 1966: 200; Gunther and Diamond 2001: 3-4; Lawson and Merkl 1988). On the other hand, others have argued that parties have not ceased to play a crucial role; rather their functions within democracy have been altered. Democracy is – and has always been – a contested concept, which calls for variations in institutional design (see e.g. Held 1987; Katz 1997; Lijphart 1999). Different party models are associated with alternative concepts of democracy. Intra-party democracy is a disputed institutional characteristic (Wright 1971; Teorell 1999). Archetypal mass parties promote a system based on popular sovereignty and mass participation, whilst more elite-dominated parties primarily support a liberal – economic, pluralist – model of democracy (Katz and Mair 1995).

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1 We would like to thank Knut Heidar, Jo Saglie and Knut Midgaard for valuable comments on an earlier draft.
Consequently, the decline of membership parties neglects a certain set of democratic values but favours others. In this paper, we will argue that neither the one nor the other assessment is a sufficiently accurate diagnosis or description.

It is widely acknowledged that representative democracy implies some sort of parties. Consideration for democracy has run as a thread through the study of party organizations but democratic values are usually either implicit or presented as self-evident truths, not arguable choices (cf. Daalder 1992: 269). Party models are to some extent linked to normative conceptions but democratic theory is seldom the primary guide of empirical research. At least, we are not aware of many analyses comprehensively using alternative and well-developed normative perspectives in empirical studies of party organizational change. Yet, it is an important task to highlight the normative choices and premises involved when political parties are amending essential features of their organizations. Our goal in what follows is to contribute to a better understanding of the significance of political parties' actual development as extra-parliamentary organizations for democracy at large.

Following this introductory part, in the second section of the paper, we summarize two major normative positions which can be ascertained in the literature on democracy, parties and party organizations in order to generate systematic evaluation criteria: The aggregative, competitive and the integrative, participatory models of democracy. We indicate for what purposes membership organization and membership power can generally be seen as relevant; useful or undesirable in each case. We also identify other, more specific organizational dimensions one has to include in this kind of analysis in order to reach a well-founded conclusion. We demonstrate that what internal democracy exactly means may vary. In this way, by for instance including the issue of formal structure, we furthermore take account of the fact that not all organizational trends necessarily indicate general decline of membership parties. The focus on party organizations implies that democracy based on parties as such is not questioned and compared with other basic types of government, like neo-corporatism or referendum democracy (see e.g. Katz 1987; Ware 1987). We do not intend to discuss to what extent other institutions could satisfactorily fill the functions parties are expected to perform.

In the third part of the paper we interpret the more or less documented, actual organizational trends among contemporary Western parties by systematically applying the displayed models and arguments as analytical tools. We use data describing West European

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2 Yet, party membership figures are not in decline in all parties – variation is found among parties and countries (see also Schmitt and Holmberg 1995).
3 In addition to their focus on parties, the reason for choosing these theoretical traditions as our starting point is that they – by and large – represent essential aspects of contemporary Western political culture.
parties in general, and available illustrative case studies when needed. Finally, we conclude on how the changing character of extra-parliamentary parties affects in what way democracy based on parties works.

Mass Parties and Democracy: What Does the Literature Tell Us?
The idea of democratic government is much older than the parties themselves. In fact, political parties emerged outside the juridical and constitutional sphere and have been described as the ‘orphans of political philosophy’ (Schattschneider 1942: 10-12). Party organizations were widely opposed in the early days of party politics (Katz 1997; Epstein 1967: 17) yet grew to be seen as a nearby inherent quality of representative democracies (cf. Bryce 1921: 119; Schattschneider 1942: 1; Pomper 1992: 143). Today ‘democracy’ generally connotes as a minimum representative government where principal public officials are chosen in free elections along some sort of party lines (Katz 1987: 2). Nonetheless, the literatures on parties and democratic theory have – to a great extent – developed in mutual isolation (Ware 1987: 1; Teorell 1999: 363).

This development notwithstanding, the aggregative, competitive and the integrative, participatory models of democracy have resulted in some alternative lines of normative arguments concerning the shape of party organizations. Both traditions conceptualize the relationship between the abstract values of democracy and parties as institutions in terms of the functions parties are expected to perform, but this does not imply a structural-functional analysis in the technical sense. Scholars do not necessarily assume that the functions must be performed in any political system but often use the term more loosely, referring to the effects parties are expected to produce in a democracy perspective (cf. Katz 1997: 6-7). Next, the arguments usually have two major components: The function – supporting a certain norm – parties are expected to fulfil in order to make democracy work and the assumption of how internally democratic membership parties will perform with regard to this function (Assarson 1993: 50). Finally, it should be noted that we, for the sake of simplicity, emphasize the core values of the general traditions, not the multiple variations between individual theories.

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4 Like Sartori phrases it, functions of parties are “patterns of system-related activities, the consequences of which are assessed in system benefit terms, that is, by determining whether an activity serves the purposes of the system, or merely the purposes of the party itself ” (2005:22).

5 There is not necessarily a Chinese wall between values and functions. For example, aggregation can be seen as a function to be performed by political parties but also as value in itself. It should furthermore be noted that institutions only create and limit opportunities, “they do not guarantee that anyone will be willing and able to exploit them” (Katz 1997: 7). The impact of institutional change depends on how people react to it. Parties may restrain behaviour but the perception of voters also matter (Katz 1997: 7).
Aggregative, competitive models of democracy and party organizations

Scholars generally rejecting the need for party members and intra-party democracy base their arguments on so-called economic, pluralist conceptions of democracy (Downs 1957; Riker 1982; Arrow 1951; Schumpeter 1943/1996). Although many of these scholars formulate explanatory models, they have also inspired normative theory. Their models can be seen as a prescription for efficient democracy and hence a normative standard (cf. Miller 1983:135). Philosophically, the tradition might be traced back to the theories of the natural state.

In negative terms democracy is defined as freedom from restraints and exploitation of state power. Accountability is therefore a key norm, which is assumed supported through the retrospective sanctions of voters in elections between competing parties (Schumpeter 1943/1996). Party organizations make the accountability of control collective and, hence, more distinct (Wilson 1885; Katz 1987: 4). Positively, democracy is also about bringing together opposing and pre-political individual interests. More precisely political preferences are to be aggregated – not integrated – through elections and parliamentary or congressional decision-making. Aggregation both deals with adaptation to, co-ordination of and transformation into public policy of voter preferences (King 1969: 138).\(^6\) The crucial mechanism is again party competition (Miller 1983: 134ff). The argument is based on an economic analogy: Like voters, politicians are assumed to be rational self-interested actors. To attain private ends, they formulate whatever policies they believe will gain most votes (Downs 1957: 295). As organized political alternatives parties make it possible for voters to – more or less extensively – define the mandate of teams of representatives. In other words, the major systemic functions of parties are vote structuring and preference aggregation. Implicit is recruitment of political leadership, although the parties do not necessarily need to control the nomination of candidates firmly themselves.

Even if party organizations are seen as a necessary consequence of electoral competition (Robertson 1976: 1; Dahl 1984: 337), they are not supposed to be internally democratic and emphasize membership recruitment. The dual location of parties – between civil society and state – implies a particular democratic potential but also responsibility. A key norm is that all individuals through formal procedures are treated equally (Barry 1989), for instance by the means of universal suffrage. Political participation is primarily instrumental: Citizens’ involvement in parties should above all lead to vote structuring, aggregation of the preferences of the electorate at large, and protection from abuse of power.

\(^6\) Perfect aggregation is not possible (Arrow 1951; Riker 1982), but the goal is to minimize the elimination of interest pluralism (March and Olsen 1989).
Vote structuring, which is regarded as political parties’ basic and minimum democratic function (Epstein 1967: 77; King 1969: 120), is achieved when voters cast their ballot for either party candidates or parties. Following the aggregative approach’ proponents, internally democratic membership parties easily imply thorough internal debates and compromises, and thus unclear political alternatives for voters (Downs 1957: 25; Ranney 1951: 491). Conclusively, internally democratic organizations of mass membership risk weakening the parties’ basic ability to vote structuring. Most importantly, equal responsiveness to citizens’ preferences requires that party leaders are held accountable to voters, not members (McKenzie 1982: 195). Therefore, intra-party democracy is also considered an obstacle to effective preference aggregation (Schattschneider 1942: 60; Sartori 1987: 151; Schumpeter 1943/1996): Members are not necessarily representative of voters (cf. May 1973). As Sartori (1987: 151) puts it: “To be sure, structures are important. But their critical importance lies, with respect to how macro democracy comes about, in their interplay”. Membership organizations increase the risk of producing unclear alternatives, unrepresentative platforms and distortion of the lines of responsibility. In other words, internally democratic parties represent an anomaly according to the archetypal competitive models of democracy.

Increased interest pluralism strengthens the argument. To the danger that the state will oppress citizens must be added the possibility that an enduring majority oppresses minorities (Katz 1997: 49). The constitutional component is emphasized in order to protect minorities and individuals, whilst the need for popular involvement (in parties) is moderated. Voters ought to articulate their particular needs through organized interest groups instead of parties (Epstein 1967: 8; Wright 1971). Political parties of today must negotiate and mediate between heterogeneous interests, which pre-suppose considerable freedom of action for the party elite (Dahl 1956; Katz 1997: 53ff). Furthermore, it should be added that the incompatibility between intra-party democracy and democracy writ large does not vanish by limiting the

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7 As Schattschneider (1942: 60) phrased it: Democracy is to be found between parties, in the competitive mechanism, not within them. Like firms do not follow the preferences of their employees instead of consumers in commercial issues, parties should respond to voters, not members. However, it should be noted that Schattschneider did not discuss the mass party model of organized members. His statements were aimed at American parties.

8 There are two ways in which party members provide costs: First, by constraining party leaders in their decision-making procedures, and next, by compelling the party leadership to take stands that are unpopular among voters (Katz 1990: 153; Scarrow 1996: 40-41). The argument has also a less significant practical aspect: Members are assumed to threaten the competitive efficiency of the party organization because of internal strife (Duverger 1954/1972: 134).

9 Although the aggregative view of politics unite the different proponents, it could be argued that this summary ignore significant differences between them. Katz (1997) distinguishes for example between ‘liberal democracy’ (majoritarian and pluralist; see e.g. Schumpeter and Dahl) and ‘popular sovereignty’ (e.g. individualist popular concepts, like Downs’ model). Riker (1982) differentiate between ‘liberalism’ and ‘populism’ (see also Held 1987). For instance, the liberals – for different reasons – put less emphasis on preference aggregation through formulation of extensive policy programs, which reduces the possible need for participation in parties even more. In order to avoid permanent minorities, pluralist liberals in particular emphasize constitutional measures as share of powers (Katz 1997: 59). When looking for major patterns, however, we accentuate identifying general commonalities across individual theories.
internal democracy to leadership selection only. Still party leadership have two principals: voters and members (Teorell 1999: 366).

This conclusion notwithstanding, membership parties have been widely recognized in political cultures emphasizing aggregation of conflicting interests as a key norm. In practice, membership parties have not been regarded as incompatible with government based on party competition. One theoretical attempt to bridge this gap is presented by Alan Ware (1979). He objects to the basic assumption of free party competition and strong party responsiveness, especially in two-party systems. The economic analogy does not sufficiently correspond to real-world politics. In practice, the market of parties has few sellers, so that they can control the policies and/or quantity of alternatives supplied. New significant parties are difficult to establish. The party system resembles, in other words, an oligopolistic market. Consequently, the incentive for adaptation to the voter opinion is more limited than suggested above: Parties can – at least in the short run – resist realignments of socio-political cleavages without risking electoral defeat. Thus, a system of competitive parties does not carry out its purportedly function of fair aggregation of preferences (Ware 1979: 38, 43). Intra-party democracy is seen as a way to make up for this imperfect structure of party systems:

“The argument that is being presented here is that parties that provided for real control over policy goals by their activists would come to have a leadership that took account of new conflicts. To respond to these conflicts, the leadership would attempt to identify anew the political universe for the electorate, and doing so parties would be performing a major function that they have in a liberal society. In terms of Hirschman’s analysis party democracy would provide a ‘voice’ mechanism, to complement the ‘exit’ alternative already available to voters, an alternative that by itself does not function effectively under oligopoly” (Ware 1979: 78).

On these terms, the internal linkage may also prevent abuse of power by governmental elites: Political leaders are accountable to members in addition to voters, not at their expense (Assarson 1993: 49). Furthermore, it may be added that the underlying assumption of vote-maximizing parties is questioned by the models’ proponents, too. It is widely acknowledged that parties pursue other goals (Müller and Strom 1999; Wolinetz 2002). Above all, party leaders “may have ideological convictions which divert them away from a pure vote-maximizing electoral strategy” (Miller 1983: 150). Hence, the reasons for voter influence within parties are stronger than initially suggested. A necessary condition is, however,

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10 It should be noted that Teorell claims that parties are made into principals with two agents. We assume, however, that he intended to write about party leadership as agent, and voters and members as principals.

11 In this respect, Ware draws on the defence of intra-party democracy presented by the ‘Responsible Party Government’-school in American political science in the 1950s (APSA 1950). It should, however, be noted that not all proponents of this
institutional openness, especially within increasingly pluralist societies. Only a limited share of voters is in practice party members. The opinion patterns between the groups may in theory still significantly diverge. Party members and leaders should therefore put strong emphasis on external communication also within a modified competitive perspective.

The integrative, participatory models of democracy and party organizations

Social democratic parties developed organizations exemplifying internally what they aimed at creating nationally (Duverger 1954/1972; Assarson 1993: 42-43). Enthusiastic democrats have sometimes insisted that in a truly democratic society all associations would be democratic (Dahl 1989: 327). Advocates of intra-party democracy have above all pointed to the participatory value of intensive participation of the people in general (Ware 1987). Membership parties educate the individual voters to civic orientation, it is argued, and promote rational dialogue and human development: “They make him a zoon politicon” (Neumann 1956: 397).

Paradoxically, participatory democrats themselves have not emphasized participation in political parties (Ware 1987: 27). The participatory models have roots in a normative tradition defining freedom as a collective phenomenon, not in terms of individuals. Democracy is about providing popular sovereignty. Interests are not privately pre-defined. Human beings are social creatures, whose preferences are developed through interaction with other citizens. Democracy is characterized by regular and intensive participation of the great mass of people (Katz 1997). Participation should be maximized in order to provide self-development, in addition to policy decision as system output (Pateman 1970: 43). It is assumed that direct participation decreases the risk of alienation and promotes political integration. Only in this way may people realize their potential as rational beings (Held 1987; Pateman 1970). An equal right to self-development may solely be achieved in a society which fosters, among other things, concern for collective problems and a knowledgeable citizenry. Hence, mass participation has pedagogical effects and is an ideal per se.

For self-determination of the people to be achieved, democratic rights need to be extended from the state to other societal institutions (Held 1987: 259). Parties, however, institutionalize by definition conflicts and are often bureaucratic and representative structures (Ware 1987: 27). Therefore, participatory democrats have instead focused on workplaces, industrial concerns, local communities, social movements and ad hoc-protests (Ware 1979: 1-

\[\text{school promote intra-party democracy. Schattschneider was in fact head of the committee presenting the APSA-report (Assarson 1993: 65).}\]
2). On the other hand, it is not clear how local and unconventional participation would make up for the weak involvement in national and regular politics (Teorell 1999: 379). Some participatory democrats have therefore actually emphasized both party competition and party organizations (Held 1987: 262). The representative system at the national level may be complemented by direct involvement at the base (Macpherson 1977: 94-108). Intra-party democracy is launched as the solution to how one could make a two-level democracy work (Macpherson: 112-115). ‘Participatory parties’ are to operate in a parliamentary or congressional structure (Held 1987: 262). The combination of involvement in parties and competitive political parties at the system level will secure the necessary promotion of self-development, it is argued. Most probably, this implies regular and intense involvement of members in internal party decisions.

However, not all of those who defend intra-party democracy based on an integrative model of politics acknowledge this argument. Like the original aggregative model, the participatory line of reasoning has been accused of lacking realism (Teorell 1999: 369). Even more importantly, political participation requires a purpose going beyond that of achieving personal satisfaction (cf. Elster 1986: 127). On this background, intra-party democracy has been justified by means of deliberative arguments. In the deliberative model of democracy preferences are not established pre-politically but through debate. The aim of democratic politics is also integration of citizens but by the means of rational, consensus-oriented decision-making. Deliberation at elite level is essential whereas participation among citizens is a free choice. Representative government and elections is not a second-best solution (Gutmann and Thompson 1996: 15-16, chap. 4), and the basic need for certain individual rights and aggregation of different perspectives is increasingly acknowledged (Habermas 1995; Gutmann and Thompson 1996: 16ff). Ideally, however, opinions should be formed through deliberation. Elections are not enough to make the representative assembly legitimate. Public debate – independent of the state – is at the core of democracy: “Deliberation should continue through a series of confrontations between officials and citizens, each providing its own contribution to an on-going argument” (Teorell 1999: 372).

Yet, deliberative democrats have been relatively vague about the institutional requirements needed to make a deliberative democracy work. The aggregative aspect of democracy requires political alternatives but little is said on the need for parties. Rather party

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12 Like in the case of the aggregative approach, it could be argued that the summary ignores important differences. According to Dryzek (2000: 3) a significant distinction is the one between liberal constitutionalist deliberative democracy and discursive democracy. Thus, some deliberative democrats are in their normative basis more different from participatory democrats than others.
organizations are considered to be at odds with the idea of a free public deliberation. Membership parties act as messengers for strictly defined policy alternatives. The emphasis on rational discourse may call for dominance by elites and experts, not popular involvement in parties. However, exceptions do exist. Teorell (1999) takes parties for granted in representative democracies and explicitly argues that party organizations are the essential linkage-providing institutions between different deliberative spheres. Public debate in mass media does not allow mass participation and provides only limited room for public deliberation in civil society. Concrete and more inclusive forums are needed. Although parties are not completely open communities, they represent a realistic alternative for mass deliberation. Moreover, most parties’ orientation towards society as a whole – not only particular interests and issues – makes them particularly suited for deliberative activities, in addition to aggregation of perspectives. In contrast to interest organizations they must take all kinds of political issues into account. By opening up for citizen participation in agenda-setting deliberations, parties reduce the risk of ignoring the public sphere for the purpose of maintaining power is diminished.

Hence, intra-party democracy could be seen as a supplementary mechanism to elections in making the legislative responsive to public opinion (Teorell 1999: 373). Competition between parties is insufficient. However, the objective would not be a direct or representative democracy of ballots. The aim is rather to establish deliberative procedures for exchange of arguments between leaders and members through for instance so-called deliberative polls: sampling of individual members summoned together for deliberation on, for example, the party manifesto and candidate selection. In this way, the problem of issue extremism is limited: “Party activists cannot proclaim their preferences to be in any respect sacrosanct” (Teorell 1999: 373). The better argument is to decide. Mere responsiveness is not a desired quality of leadership in any context. The model thus implies significant freedom to authoritative decision-making for party leaders. Public debate will in general take preference over internal discussions if time is limited. For the same reason, participation in party debates should not be for members only (Teorell 1999: 375-378). Finally, legislative deliberation entails that the parliamentary groups cannot be held directly accountable to the extra-parliamentary organization. In other words, within an integrative approach to democracy, membership organization and intra-party democracy is seen as necessary or positive institutional elements. However, the expectations with regard to the more specific organizational features – like the level of party activism and decision-making procedure – vary according to whether participatory values or deliberative norms have primacy.
All together, both the aggregative, competitive and the integrative, participatory perspective on democracy indicate that other organizational aspects have to be taken into consideration together with the decline of membership numbers when analyzing the implications of the development of extra-parliamentary organizations for democracy writ large. In addition to membership numbers and the de facto power balance between members and leaders, the outline above primarily identifies the party organizations’ formal structure, decision-making procedures, level and type of party activism, and members’ representativeness as important variables.

**Significance of Party Organizational Development for Democracy at Large**

The general question to be discussed in the remainder of this paper is if the different normative perspectives on parties and democracy give rise to a clear-cut conclusion with regard to the significance of recent party organizational development for democracy at large. We discuss how Western parties by and large perform in light of the normative expectations along the relevant organizational dimensions. The models are applied separately. We start both sections by analyzing the state with regard to membership figures and internal balance of power.

**Emphasis on party competition – favourable organizational development?**

If democracy is defined in line with the aggregative, competitive models of democracy, the greatest freedom lies within holding politicians responsible by switching votes if unsatisfied (Downs 1957; Schattschneider 1942; Sartori 1987). Membership organizations and intra-party democracy were therefore generally seen as an anomaly by the original competitive democrats. Thus, an increasing trend of elite-dominated parties, both in the quantitative and the qualitative sense, is not to be considered a particular problem. However, we will argue that this can be seen rather differently if emphasis is put on the more realistic, ‘softer’ version of this approach.

**Membership figures and internal balance of power**

Despite certain variations among parties and countries, by and large the number of party members has significantly declined in Western democracies since the 1960s, whether membership is measured in absolute or standardized terms (Katz and Mair et al. 1992; Mair and van Biezen 2001; Scarrow 2000; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995). It is also argued that the intra-party democracies in a certain sense are weakened: former mass parties are increasingly dominated by public office-holders at the expense of party activists in political and strategic
questions (Katz and Mair 1995; Katz and Mair 2002). In line with the archetypal aggregative, competitive model, an increasing organizational trend in this direction is to be evaluated positively. Here, party members are considered to be an obstacle to efficient preference aggregation and strong accountability. The smaller and less powerful the membership organization, the larger is the freedom of manoeuvre of the party leadership: The ability to respond to the general voter opinion is probably strengthened. Besides, parties dominated by elites and professionals tend to apply various new techniques taken from the advertising industry like focus groups and opinion polls (Farrell and Webb 2000, Poguntke 2004), which provide the political elite with sophisticated means for identification of the pattern of preferences within the electorate at large.

Yet, a certain reservation needs to be made for membership organization in relation to the vote structuring capacity. Historically, West European experiences give grounds for questioning the premise of membership organizations as a hinder for parties’ ability to structure votes. Membership organizations – often characterized by internal strife – have in practice not prevented voters from casting their ballots in long-established democracies. During the so-called heydays of the mass membership model after World War II, the voter turnout was high in Western democracies (Wattenberg 2000: 71ff). One possible – albeit not sufficient – explanation is that regular members and activists have given their respective parties a human face by acting as ‘ambassadors’ to local communities (Scarrow 1996: 43; Whiteley et al. 1994: 4), and hence functioned as informative, personal ‘guides’ to the polling station. Today, capital-intensive advertising techniques and use of mass media dominate political communication and electioneering (Bowler and Farrell 1992: 227; Butler and Ranney 1992: 280-283) but party members are still seen as useful for electoral purposes (Whiteley et al. 1994: 5; Pedersen 2003: 250-256; Carty and Eagles 2003; Ward 2003; Denver et al. 2003). Existing empirical research on party member behaviour shows that grass roots do discuss politics with their environment and encourage family, friends and other voters to vote (Pedersen 2003: 297, 301; Seyd and Whiteley 2002: 81; Heidar and Saglie 2003: 770). In Denmark, three quarters of the party members have discussed party policies with non-members within a five-year period (Pedersen 2003: 297). This figure is similar in the British Labour (86 pct.) (Seyd and Whiteley 2002: 81). In Norway a little more than half of the members have discussed party policies with non-members within a year (Heidar and Saglie 2003: 770). In a long-term perspective declining membership may therefore have a

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13 It should be noted that, of course, significant differences may exist between countries. Only 1 pct. of the Fine Gael members engaged in persuading friends or family at the most recent campaigns (Gallagher and Marsh 2002: 96).
negative effect on the parties’ ability to structure votes.\textsuperscript{14} Fewer citizens than before will be concerned with explaining party positions in local communities, workplaces and the like.

More importantly, however, the assumption that the party competition \textit{per se} provides fair preference aggregation and accountability may be questioned. According to Ware (1979: 38, 43) the naturally limited number of parties makes intra-party democracy needed in order to prevent that parties resist realignments of socio-political cleavages. Within a system of limited competition some organized bottom-up influence on the parties’ agenda-setting by more or less unrepresentative members seems to be better than no such impact at all. Thus, decline of membership figures and dominance could rather be considered a negative trend. Although we do not know to what extent the European membership organizations have in fact caused more adaptive political parties than had been the case without members, the manifesto-making processes of mass parties have at least bred wide-ranging and rather detailed electoral programmes. Thus, intra-party democracy have given parliamentary party groups distinct political mandates and made manipulation of voter opinion less likely over time (cf. Duverger 1954/1972: 372-373). Besides, the numerous internal debates at different organizational levels transform initially heterogeneous and perhaps incoherent preferences into manageable packages (Poguntke 2004: 4). The manifesto-making process of membership parties is about prioritizing between numerous interests and policies. Even though new research techniques includes focus groups serving as surrogates for ‘real discussions’, the decline of the membership party signals a development whereby it is not interest aggregation but interest collection that takes place in parties (Poguntke 2004: 5). Hence, when membership figures are de facto reduced and if policy development is for elites only, the parties’ ability of further nurturing the aggregation process by extending and systematizing the political programmes presented to voters may be weakened.

The same logic is applicable in regard to leadership recruitment if representativeness is emphasized.\textsuperscript{15} When membership figures decline, the pools of potential candidates become smaller, unless the propensity to stand for election increases. So far there are few reports of parties lacking candidates for general elections. In Denmark, for example, a sufficient number of the party members generally say they would stand for election if asked by the party but smaller parties do experience recruitment problems (Pedersen et al. 2004: 379). The current membership figures become even more of a problem if certain social groups among the

\textsuperscript{14} Case studies from Great Britain and Norway indicate that the number of party members who engage in electioneering is not increasing (Seyd and Whiteley 2002: 82; Heidar and Saglie 2003).

\textsuperscript{15} Like argued by Sartori (2005: 29), party recruitment does not necessarily provide the best leadership in every sense of the word.
elec.torate abstain from party membership, for example women or younger people like
analyses of party members’ biographies suggest (see below). As phrased by one Danish party
chair: “All parties scream for young women – and I do, too”. It could be argued that mass
parties represent schools of political education, which prepare for socially more representative
candidates for public office than do pure elite parties. Membership organizations give people
without financial resources and personal contacts a more fair chance to be selected. In other
words, according to a modified competitive model, there are several reasons to deprecate the
declining membership figures and parties becoming more elite-dominated.

The argument is strengthened by research claiming that there is a growing tendency
towards oligopolistic party competition in Western democracies. Scholars have characterized
contemporary party systems as increasingly resembling cartels, which suppress articulation of
new political conflicts, issues and, to a certain extent, restrict the rise of new parties at the
national level (Katz and Mair 1995; Pelizzo 2003; Katz and Blyth 2005). According to Katz
and Mair (1995:21-23), this development reflects transformation to a new type of democracy.
However, as long as democracy is in fact supposed to be about more than voters choosing
from a fixed menu of political alternatives, one could argue that the more cartelized the party
competition, the stronger the need for influential membership organizations. Members may
make party elites less remote and incorporated in the state apparatus.

Empirical research has also – as argued above – rejected Downs’ assumption that
parties are primarily vote-maximizing actors. The incentives for adaptation to the general
voter opinion are more limited than originally suggested. Following the cartel thesis political
elites are increasingly emphasizing access to office, which make the need for anchoring the
elites in some sort of popular organization perhaps even stronger. Furthermore, West
European elections are contested on the basis of multiple dimensions, and it is argued that the
relative importance of the various cleavages is likely to be weighted differently by each actor.
Parties assumingly build up their electoral support on issues which they have made their
“own” (Budge and Farlie 1983). As voters also put different emphasis on various issues,
parties may find it useful to establish more enduring ties to some segments in order to
stabilize some support. Similarly, rational voters themselves may want to influence one
party’s profile more intensively through extensive political involvement, at least for a limited
period. Hence, the actual pattern of party competition and voter behaviour gives us reason to

17 In practice, the argument echoes the so-called ‘party democracy’ model identified by Wright (1971). Its normative
foundation was unclear but membership parties were in practice seen as organizational tools for pre-defined voter groups
question the initial positive assessment of the general party organizational development. If a
full-blown democracy implies more than retrospective voting in free and regular elections, the
actual changes in intra-party democracy could be considered a negative trend which should be
opposed, not encouraged.

*The development of formal structures and decision-making procedures*

It is not evident whether all aspects of the decline of the mass party model points in the same
direction. The classic concept of intra-party democracy refers to an organizational structure
that allows voters to participate in internal decision-making processes of political parties, an
organization whose leaders and representatives are held accountable to the membership
organization through mid-level elites. The party activist has been at the core of the mass
party’s internal democracy. According to Katz and Mair (1995), the increased dominance of
the national party leadership, in contrast, implies organizational structures which are
transforming from hierarchies to stratarchies (Katz and Mair 1995). On the other hand, a
better documented tendency within West European parties is that the formal rights of rank-
and-file members have been strengthened at the expense of the mid-level elite when it comes
to national policy-making and, in a few cases, candidate selection (Scarrow et al. 2000: 138-
149; Hopkin 2001; Bille 2001). Thus, in these parties, there is still a formal – but more direct
– link between the elite and the grass roots.

As members are more numerous, and probably more heterogeneous than activists, this
could be seen as a positive change when emphasizing the need for a voice-mechanism due to
limited party competition, among other things. A party without powerful members makes
political elites – and sub-elites – more able to resist changes in the pattern of political
preferences among voters in general and reduces the chance for governmental elites being
hold accountable also between elections. The fact that the reformed structures come in the
shape of membership ballots, strengthens the argument. Following an aggregative perspective
on politics, decisions are to be taken by the means of contest and polls, not deliberation.
However, the long-term implication of such reforms for the range, richness, and consistency
of party programs remains to be seen. If intra-party democracy generally transform into
membership polls only, the number of issues and policies developed by other than the
national leadership will most likely be rather limited.

(Epstein 1967: 15f, Wright 1971: 20-21; Ware 1979: 78f). A grass root organization and intra-party democracy provide
Nonetheless, the negative evaluation of present party organizational structures presupposes institutional openness. In democracy based on the competitive model, one cannot – in any case – approve of parties who make party members sacrosanct. Parties blurring the distinction between members and voters – as in the cartel party model (Katz and Mair 1995) – may in a certain sense improve parties’ democratic performance outside Parliament. Within increasingly pluralist societies, it is of utmost relevance and importance that parties actively try to identify the grievances of voter groups in general. Doing this, parties boast a range of options. A traditional opening is towards interest organizations where former formal ties to specific interest organizations (such as the links between social democratic/labour parties and unions) are replaced with more ad-hoc oriented contacts with a variety of organizations. In Norway, for example, dialogue meetings with various interest organizations are increasingly playing a part when parties work out their political platforms (Allern, forthcoming). A newer possibility is the advent of new information and communication technologies which enable parties to have discussion forums of various types or at least give the electorate the options of input on specific topics. This all point towards improved interest aggregation if used in addition to comprehensive internal debate. In other words, to the extent that grass roots are empowered and the party organization opens up to external milieus, the decline of the mass party model can be seen as an enhancement of the parties’ ability to perform essential democratic functions.

Activities and representativeness of party members and activists

The argument regarding the increased dominance of party leadership as questionable and formal empowerment of regular members as a more favourable feature, presupposes that the grass root is in fact involved in party decisions. Unless the members are engaged within the party they cannot provide control with party leadership or contribute to the manifesto-making process. To put it differently, the possible trend towards more dominant party leadership would be assessed even more negatively if the party members have been rendered more passive despite strengthened formal rights. Hence, it should be revealed whether the number of activists, not just the total number of memberships, has decreased.

Membership figures alone may only be applied as an indicator of activism under the assumption that the proportion of party activists among party members is constant, since differing shares of activists indicate differing levels of activity with the same membership figure. Yet, this is not always the case. Systematic, comparative data is not yet available but three different scenarios are supported by case studies within the party literature: First, it has
been argued that the ratio of activists is stable since exiting and incoming members display
the same level of activism as those members already in the party (Heidar and Saglie 2003).
Second, a positive correlation between the membership figures and the activist ratio is found
(Panebianco 1988: 188; Whiteley and Seyd 1998: 115). Thirdly, others identify a negative
correlation between party membership figures and party activity (Goul Andersen and Hoff
relationship between party membership figures and activity is further supported in that six of
13 advanced industrial democracies displayed a positive correlation between the trends in
membership figures and activist/member ratio in the 1980s, whereas the opposite was found
in the other seven nations (Scarrow 2000: 95-96).18 Thus, it is not clear whether declining
membership figures do in fact imply less popular participation in general and thereby also to
less control of party leadership.

Nonetheless, one question still remains to be answered. To what extent are party
members and activists different from the electorate at large? None of the competitive
arguments regretting the decline of membership figures, potential activists and empowerment
of party leaders makes it clear why we can take for granted that the political opinion of the
activists will match those of the party’s possible electorate. In theory members may realize
the importance of electoral victories to a greater extent than the party leadership (cf. Heidar
and Saglie 1994: 153) but one cannot pre-suppose such behaviour. The question of
correspondence – or lack thereof – has to be examined empirically. Consequently, one needs
to look into the representativeness of party members and activists.

According to the aggregative, competitive models of democracy, representation is
primarily about correspondence between opinions. In regard to opinion representativity,
already at the turn of the 20th century, Ostrogorski argued that party organisations are
unrepresentative of voters in general: “It is an almost general fact that the Association is more
Radical than the mass of the party, more so even than the M.P. who has to submit to its
demands” (1964: 305). May develops this theme in his much disputed “Special Law of
Curvilinear Disparity,” where sub-leaders are thought to be more extreme than both parties’
top-leaders and non-leaders, and top-leaders are more in accordance with non-leaders than
sub-leaders (1973: 139). These differences are due to the patterns of intra-party control,
recruitment patterns and socializing associated with mass parties (May 1973: 144-151).

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18 In addition to variation in the level of activity due to variation in size and over time, other factors, such as
party structure, ideology and culture may also affect the type of membership activity engaged in within political
parties (e.g. Poguntke 1993; Scarrow 1996).
Empirical studies only partially confirm the thesis (Narud and Skare 1999; Kristensen 1980: 54; Buch Jensen 2000: 285; Seyd and Whiteley 1992: 101; Whiteley et al. 1994: 120). Instead, another pattern is found in a number of cases (Denmark, Britain, Norway and Sweden), namely a tendency towards increasing polarization at higher levels of the party hierarchy (Buch Jensen 1999: 143; Holmberg 2000: 168; Nielsen 2003: 42; Norris 1995; Narud and Skare 1999; Bäck and Möller 1997: 118). Differences in opinions among party supporters increase the higher the level of the party or party attachment, which indicates that the distance between members of different parties is smaller than between elected officials of different parties. Conversely, in the Irish Fine Gael there are “very few disparities of any sort” between opinions of members and voters (Gallagher and Marsh 2002: 170). Thus, the jury is still out on how special the opinions of party members or sub-leaders are. Most importantly, the assumption of lack of representativeness is not generally supported.

Secondly, representation could be about social background. There are numerous reasons for emphasizing equal political representation of social groups: Within a party, social groups may differ in their preferences and must therefore be present in order to have their voices heard (Hernes 1987). Also, their life experiences and resources vary whereby they in different ways contribute to political decision making (Oskarson and Wängnerud 1995). Besides that it could be argued that democracy is unfair if some social groups are excluded (Phillips 1995). Existing empirical research suggests that participation in the parties of various socio-demographic groups among the electorate is skewed. According to numerous case studies, party members are in general not socio-demographic representative of voters at large. Underrepresented among party members are women, the 18-30 year olds and workers (Widfeldt 1995). Party members also differ in several demographic respects even if compared only to parties’ own electorates (Gallagher and Marsh 2002: 71; Heidar and Saglie 2003; Pedersen 2003: 165-175).

In other words, empirical research gives no straightforward answers as to what extent party members are representative of voters. If members or activists are much more extreme than leaders and voters, and socially unrepresentative, intra-party democracy will only to a limited degree supplement the competitive mechanism. Recent party organizational changes may thus not be considered to weaken the parties’ ability to perform systemic functions as significantly as the ‘soft’ competitive model initially suggests. On the other hand, if the pattern of increasing polarization of opinions at higher levels of democracy is to be

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19 It remains an empirical question whether political opinions are linked to socio-demographic characteristics but some support is found (see e.g. Narud and Valen 2000; Heidar and Pedersen forthcoming).
generalized, there is more reason to worry and to encourage continuous membership recruitment and democracy.  

In sum
When emphasis is on party competition, the organizational development of Western parties could at the outset be interpreted as progress. Fewer members and increased elite dominance will generally promote the parties’ capacity of structuring votes, fairly aggregate preferences and select candidates for elections according to the archetypal competitive model. However, the actual validity of the implicit assumptions of this argument is rightfully questioned. The empirical evidence generated from existing party research partially supports, among other things, the objection concerning limited party competition and the need for more extensive popular involvement. According to this argument, the observed declining membership figures, increased leadership dominance and possibly decreasing party activism, is limiting the parties’ contribution to democracy at large. The tendency towards more extensive use of direct democratic measures within parties appear to be an improvement of the party organizations’ ability to provide positive and negative freedom, as long as the range and richness of party manifestos do not suffer. However, it is of paramount importance that party members are not very different from voters socially and in terms of opinions. For the sake of fair preference aggregation, party organizations should not operate ‘behind closed doors’. The organizational tendency of weakening parties’ institutional boundaries towards the environment is potentially a positive development.

Accent on mass participation or public debate: Organizational development to question?
Parties were originally neither embraced by participatory or deliberative democrats. Yet, above it is argued that internally democratic membership parties represent a realistic option for participation by the people at large. Due to the party organization’s dual position between civil society and state it represents a participatory or deliberative arena not easily replaced. However, we think it is far form evident that all changes of the mass party model means decline of parties as democratic institutions in these integrative perspectives.

20 Proponents of directional theory might object that voters need extreme alternatives – clear stances on policy and ideology – in order to make their choice (see e.g. MacDonald et al. 1991). Party members purifying political profile might thus enhance parties’ ability to translate (unclear) political preferences into political mandates. However, this theory opposes the fundamental idea of preference aggregation through proximity between voter and elite preferences which is at the core of the economic, competitive model of democracy.
Membership figures and internal balance of power

When democracy is interpreted as a system that allows regular participation of the great mass of people, the decline of membership parties is essentially more challenging than is the party development from the point of view of competitive democrats. Consequently, the reduction of membership figures has to be seen as a deterioration of parties’ democratic performance. When more limited shares of voters engage in party politics, the possibility for the realization of participatory norms like popular sovereignty, rational human beings and political integration is reduced. To what extent existing parties do in fact educate members – or make them more cynical – is not clarified (Heidar, forthcoming), but increased emphasis on party leaders and the party in public office is certainly no favourable development.

Yet, it has been argued – by others sharing the goal of political integration – that the expectations of the classic participatory democrats are nonetheless unrealistic. In the deliberative perspective the aim of democratic politics is also integration of citizens through rational, consensus-oriented decision-making but over substantial issues and possible conflicts. At the outset, mass participation is also in the deliberative model regarded as more important than in the aggregation-oriented perspective. However, deliberation at the elite level is prominent, and participation among citizens between elections considered an opportunity, not a civic duty. Consequently, the decline of party membership figures is a negative development but less challenging than in a classic participatory perspective. Focus is on the qualitative, not the quantitative aspects of political involvement in a deliberative democracy.

Furthermore, less emphasis is also put on the power balance between the members and the leadership. The party leadership is expected to take account of all relevant view points, and free deliberation is supposed to continue in Parliament. In this sense, if ascendancy of the party in public office and national party leadership turn out to be a general trend, it may have some positive aspects for democracy. Freedom for elites to rationally discuss all possible solutions is seen as a precondition for democracy writ large.

The development of formal structures and decision-making procedures

However, like in the aggregative, competitive perspective, the democratic potential of party organizations is not limited to membership figures. Participatory democrats emphasize how the extension of democratic rights from the state to other institutions may increase political integration of the masses. Thus, in a participatory perspective the tendency of more direct democratic procedures within some party organizations – through formal empowerment of rank-and-file members at the expense of party activists – may balance the negative evaluation
of decreasing membership numbers. The delegate democracy practiced in traditional mass parties, as pointed out a long time ago by Michels (1915), have by no means assured a true democratic practice (Scarrow et al. 2000: 150).

On the other hand, if the empowerment of rank-and-file members is limited to ballots and the like, its value is rather limited. Regular members are within the participatory model supposed to be involved in policy debates and development. Particularly in a democracy based on a deliberative model, internal party decisions should rather be taken on the basis of deliberation, not simply by the way of ballots. The recent introduction of postal ballots among individual rank-and-file members is therefore not a significant improvement from a deliberative point of view. Rather, the emphasis on debate and discussion pushes for a negative assessment of the disempowerment of party activists (see, e.g., Lipow and Seyd 1996). Within a deliberative democracy, the aim is rather to establish deliberative procedures for exchange of arguments between leaders and those who actually want to spend time on politics. Consequently, the possible formal empowerment of regular members is not a positive tendency. In some sense, party activists are to be favoured within a deliberative model.

Yet, other changes may have more positive impacts. The primary organizational innovation in political parties during the 1990s is the employment of new information and communication technologies. The effects are limited during the early 2000s (see, e.g., Pedersen and Saglie 2005; Gibson and Ward 1998) but it is expected to have increased since then. The new technologies provide new means for achieving deliberation within party organizations by way of debate forums on the web page or intra-net, or by enabling debate via emailing lists. Whether these options will be applied primarily by the already engaged or whether they may renew the deliberation within parties remains to be seen. Nevertheless, the parallel tendency towards opening of the internal process to the external milieu – for instance through Internet – is a change for the better. Since political decisions are to be taken through rational debate, communication with the environment is obviously important.

**Activities and representativeness of party members and activists**

The emphasis on popular involvement implies that party democracy cannot be reduced to formal rights and structures. Truly participatory and deliberative parties are characterized by intensive membership participation in party decisions. An equal right to self-development – or deliberation – can only be achieved in a society which fosters, among other things, concern for collective problems and a knowledgeable citizenry. Thus, special attention should be paid to the specific features of membership activities when considering the significance of party
organizational development for democracy. Declining membership figures do not necessarily reduce the qualitative aspects of participation within parties; this depends on the type of activities (if any) engaged in by the remaining members. The over-all aim of political integration call for popular involvement in policy debates, not only or primarily final decisions.

Membership figures, in contrast, cover everything from the passive ‘credit-card membership’ (Seyd and Whiteley 2002: 77) to active, continuous engagement with the party. Participation in parties is a multi-dimensional phenomenon – it varies in degree, type and quality (Parry 1972; Heidar 1994). As was elaborated above, empirical research points in different directions with respect to whether decreasing membership figures is equivalent to general decline of party activism. It is not evident whether there is a stable, positive or negative relationship between the development of membership figures and the activist ratio. Thus, in this sense parties have not necessarily changed despite declining membership numbers.

Nonetheless, the contemporary level of activism is obviously of relevance per se. A more specific indicator of the intensiveness of political activism within parties is meeting attendance. The extent to which present party members participate in meetings varies among parties – from a little less than a third to more than three quarters of the members have participated in a party meeting/event within the last year (Heidar and Saglie 2003: 766; Cross and Young 2004; Pedersen 2003: 375; Gallagher and Marsh 2004). However, defining activism as attending one or two meetings annually does not capture the polymorphic nature of party membership. On the basis of a number of case studies it could easily be argued that the extent to which political deliberation is a characteristic of contemporary party organizations is limited. Discussion of policy matters comes in only fourth on branch secretaries’ ranking of the role of Fine Gael branches – after campaigning, support work for the local candidate and membership recruitment (Gallagher and Marsh 2002: 106). In Canada a quarter of the overall party membership has attended a policy convention (Cross and Young 2004: 440). In Denmark, a similar figure has participated in formulating political proposals (Pedersen 2003: 398). All together, far from all party members are active in political debates. A large number of party members do not spend any time on their party membership in an average month (Pedersen 2003; Seyd and Whiteley 2002; Whiteley et al. 1994). Yet, the fact that deliberation does take place supports the argument that membership parties should rather be developed than neglected in a deliberative democracy.
Inherent in party organizations as deliberative and participatory arenas, however, is a potential dilemma between the extensiveness and quality of participation. As already mentioned, deliberation entails a certain exclusiveness. In theory, the participatory norm of mass participation encourages the application of postal ballots since they probably lower the threshold of participation (see, e.g., Pedersen 2003). Plebiscitary measures thus seem to increase the actual level of participation (Scarrow 1999). However, as indicated by Michels (1915/1999), there is not necessarily a positive relationship between organization size and degree of internal democracy. In mass organizations the way to the national leadership is probably longer than in smaller organizations. Hence, parties of few members may in fact enhance the possibility for actual grass root influence on policy decisions.

All the more important is the social and political composition of party members. Aggregation of the various interests, values and perspectives of voters in general is to a certain extent also a part of the deliberative concept of democracy. Pluralism of values and interests are increasingly taken account of. Since political preferences are to be developed by deliberation in due course, it is of paramount importance that party members represent diverse social segments. As shown above party members are not necessarily socio-demographic representative of the party voters or of the electorate at large. This strengthens the argument that the opinions of party members should by no means be sacrosanct. On the other hand, as opinion should be developed through deliberation, the discrepancy between members’ and voters opinion at particular points in time is not that relevant. View points are continuously to be moderated.

In Sum

Based on the normative tradition which considers democratic politics to be primarily about popular sovereignty and intensive mass participation, the decline of membership figures and increased leadership dominance at the national level is certainly negative. With fewer members parties are weakened as promoters for self-development and education of the citizenry. However, the tendency towards empowerment of the regular members at the expense of the mid-level elite does compensate, although the limitation to ballots is questionable. To what extent individual parties actually function as participatory arenas also depend on the level and type of party activism among the remaining party members. So far, it is not clear to what extent decline of membership figures means decline of party activism.

If less emphasis is put on the quantitative aspects of participation and more on the quality of public debate, however, the conclusion is somewhat different. In a deliberative
democracy, parties need members in order to make deliberation among the grass roots possible and linkage to the elites probable. Hence, the reduction of party members is seen as a challenge but members do not have primacy. Party change in the direction of more elite dominance will most likely strengthen the free deliberation at the national level. Thus, formal empowerment of rank-and-file members through regular ballots is not necessarily an improvement although it increases the number of active members. Parties should rather develop better deliberative procedures for true party activists and continue to open up to the party environment. Party decision-making is supposed to be based on rational debate, not primarily accountability and control.

**Concluding Remarks**

In this paper we have attempted to shed some more light on the significance for democracy at large of recent party organizational developments. We have demonstrated that as a result of fundamental disagreement about the basic concept of democracy, scholars’ expectations of parties significantly differ as do their preferable type of party organization in general. Consequently, the subsequent analysis to a certain extent supports the view that how one evaluates the decline or change of mass parties depends on the normative lenses applied. Decline of the mass party model alone does not necessarily indicate general failure of party organizations in a democracy perspective. At the outset proponents of an aggregative, competitive model will assess positively the organizational development of Western political parties whereas the integrative, participatory model calls for a more negative assessment. The old mass parties promoted a system based on popular sovereignty and participation. Contemporary parties reflect more economic, pluralist models of democracy.

However, the initial conclusions based on the archetypal competitive and participatory models may indeed be questioned if the relationship is examined more closely. By calling attention to the limitation of actual party competition, it has been argued that real-world parties in practice perform better with members than without. Thus decline of membership numbers and increased elite dominance weaken the popular aspect of democracy, or parties’ significance herein. In a certain sense, we have argued that recent party developments challenge democracy across normative distinctions. In order to have free and fair elections, parties do not need to have members. However, the quality of the democratic process might be improved by parties both according to the aggregative and integrative models. In systems based on institutionalized parties, recent party developments make it reasonable to ask whether parties may transform into something too elitist to make governments significantly
anchored among the people. From an integrative perspective, the realism of classic participatory expectations is, however, contested. Following a revised, deliberative model, the emphasis is on the qualitative aspect of membership organizations. Increased autonomy of the national leadership, therefore, is favourable for deliberation at the system level. Hence, the final assessments of the actual party organizational development are less diverging than first hinted by the general normative views on traditional intra-party democracy.

Furthermore, we have shown that in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of parties as institutions in democracy, the analysis cannot be limited to membership figures and leadership dominance. The review of the theoretical debate revealed that the general arguments include more specific organizational characteristics. Aspects like formal structure and rights, decision-making procedures, the actual level of activism and representativeness of party members have to be taken into account as well. For instance, it is of vital importance that party organizations are not ‘closed institutions’ for competitive democrats who prefer intra-party democracy. For participatory and deliberative democrats the qualitative aspects of party activism are crucial, not only membership figures. Most likely, valuable participation in this model has to be for a limited number of members at the time. In other words, not all organizational trends among Western extra-parliamentary parties point in the same direction in regard to parties’ performance in a democracy perspective. Parties do not seem to change uniformly from membership parties to elite parties. In some respects, the development is about what kind of intra-party democracy dominates.

In addition, the analysis demonstrates that many arguments are based on descriptive premises about the relationship between functions and organizational make-up, which are still open to empirical examination. We do not have all the necessary information about today’s party organizations to draw a definite conclusion. Still, we lack systematic data describing the general development of party activism, there is not yet a final verdict on how special party members are compared to voters and more knowledge about how parties develop policies is needed. In this sense, the paper has made the case for more research on party organizations. In future studies more attention must be paid to the interaction between organizational features and the party environment in this context. Political institutions only create opportunities for realization of abstract norms, and might for instance be limited by national constraints. For those European party organizations that actually aim at preventing transformation into elite parties, the major question is probably how to mobilize contemporary voters to spend time and resources on parties within the framework of modern media politics, weakened collective identities and so forth. Most likely, political parties cannot support the same democratic
values as they used to without making at least some organizational changes. For instance, the voters’ preferences for other types of political participation increase the need for openness towards social movements, interest organizations, citizens’ initiatives and the like.

In conclusion, the relationship between party organizational development and democracy is less clear-cut than sometimes suggested. The conclusion partly depends on the definition of democracy but also on the organizational dimension focused upon. However, it should be noted that in a certain sense both aggregative and integrative aspects of democracy seems to be challenged by major organizational trends among contemporary parties.

References


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