Party democracy across local borders?
Party organisations in Norwegian urban regions

Erik Aarebrot
erik@urolighet.no

and

Jo Saglie
Institute for Social Research
P.O. Box 3233 Elisenberg
N–0208 Oslo
Norway
jo.saglie@socialresearch.no

Paper presented to workshop 21 ‘Promoting internal party democracy’, ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Lisbon, 14–19 April 2009
Research on the internal dynamics of political parties tends to focus on the national level. Party members, however, live – and participate – in the context of a local community. While some studies of local branches have been carried out, the relationship between the levels in a multi-level setting remains relatively unexplored. The paper aims at illuminating this aspect of internal party dynamics, by means of a study of parties in Norwegian urban regions.

Our starting point is the potential mismatch between civic engagement and party organisations in urban regions. The formal structure of party organisations follows administrative borders closely. Owing to commuting and geographical mobility, however, citizens (including party members) may take an interest in political issues outside of their own municipality. Political issues (e.g. development of public transport) often transcend municipal borders. How do local party branches in urban regions cope with the challenge of mobilising civic engagement across local borders?

According to the traditional structures of internal party democracy in Norway, the county (regional) party branches coordinate local branches, and deal with regional political issues and regional attempts to influence national policies. However, we lack knowledge on how county branches fulfil their role in internal party democracy – including recruiting and activating members. Do local branches make use of their county branches in any cross-border activities, or do societal developments bring local branches with common interests together, bypassing the county branch? Furthermore, which level initiates such activities – the county branch (including a full-time secretary) or the local branches?

The study comprises three Norwegian urban regions: Oslo, Bergen and Stavanger. In all three cases, the urban region includes several municipalities – but in contrast to the others, the Oslo region is also divided by a county line (which may create further challenges for cross-border party activities). The data consist of qualitative interviews with 16 county party secretaries (representing four parties in four counties).

In the next section of the paper, we discuss some theoretical perspectives on intra-party participation in urban regions. We then proceed to a short presentation of Norwegian party organisations and the structure of Norwegian local and regional government, as well as our data. Next we present our empirical findings. We first draw a ‘group portrait’ of our 16 county secretaries; their background and outlook. We then discuss their tasks in general: the roles they play in bottom-up and top-down communication and the challenges they face. In the final part, we look into geographical variations: differences between urban and rural areas, and between the Oslo region and the west coast cities Bergen and Stavanger.
Civic engagement in urban regions: what role do parties play?

Does civic engagement run into particular difficulties in urban regions? This hypothesis may be drawn from different fields of research. Studies of urban governance point to a divergence between the public problems that need to be solved on the one hand, and the administrative borders that divide metropolitan areas on the other. The consequences for democracy are not clear-cut. A pessimistic view is that various forms of network governance may increase administrative effectiveness, but create problems of accountability and legitimacy. A more optimistic view points to the possibility of active and direct involvement of citizens, across administrative borders (see, e.g., Kübler and Heinelt 2005).

The literature on political participation also describes particular problems in urban regions. Several mechanisms may cause a negative relationship between commuting and political participation. Commuting limits the time available for participation, and may reduce social ties to the community. Putnam (2000: 213–15) found that commuting was bad for civic involvement in the US. However, Lidström (2006) found that public participation in Swedish city regions was not hampered by commuting. On the contrary, commuting might even bring about a greater awareness of issues outside one’s own community.

Both the urban governance and the political participation perspectives point to problems for participation in urban areas, but neither discusses the role of party organisations. On the one hand, parties may be regarded as a part of the problem. Party structures follow administrative borders closely. When political issues cut across municipal borders, they also cut across divisions between party branches. On the other hand, parties may be a solution to the problems. Party organisations do not only follow administrative borders, they also transcend them. National political parties are represented at all levels of the administrative structure – local, regional, national – and thus connect the levels as well as units at the same level. Party organisations may, in short, function as a tool for communication and coordination in multi-level systems.

If we turn to party research, the literature nevertheless tends to focus on either national organisations, or, in some cases, local party branches. The relationship between levels is less explored, but political parties in multi-layered systems have more recently become a subject for research (e.g. Deschouwer 2003, 2006; Thorlakson 2009; van Houten 2009). Processes of regional decentralisation, for instance in Scotland, Wales and the Spanish regions, have led to an increased interest in parties as multi-level organisations. Parts of this literature discuss electoral dynamics: to what extent do electoral competition and party systems vary between different levels? Another main topic is the pattern of influence and autonomy between the
levels, especially in federal states. This literature, however, limits the discussion to the relationship between the national and regional levels. The relationship between units further down in the multi-level system – *regional and local branches* – seems to receive less attention. Nevertheless, it is precisely this relationship that matters for parties as an *arena for civic participation*, as the regional party organisation may encourage, coordinate and facilitate activity in the local branches.

If cross-border issues, commuting and other factors create coordination problems for party activity in urban regions, we would expect the regional branch to step in and take the necessary measures to coordinate local activity. However, the nexus role of regional party branch raises a new question: Do the regional party branches play a special role in urban areas, as we would expect from the problems discussed in the urban governance literature? If we take the formal structure of political parties as our starting point, we might instead expect to find that the county branches coordinate local activity in rural areas as well as city regions. In other words: do urban areas really stand out as a special case?

**The case of Norway**

The political-administrative system in Norway consists of three levels of government: the national level, 19 counties (regions), and (at the time of writing) 430 municipalities. At all levels, decisions are made by a directly elected council (county councils and municipal councils). The city of Oslo is both a county and a municipality, but it is divided into 15 districts with directly elected district councils. Proportional electoral systems are used at all levels. Although the Norwegian state in some respects is decentralised, Norway is not a federal state. Since counties and municipalities also serve as bodies for implementation of national welfare state services, their freedom of action is limited by national regulations and nationally mandated programmes. There are, in other words, strong links between the levels.

Seven parties are the main actors of Norwegian party politics, with (almost) continuous representation in the Norwegian parliament. When our study was carried out, Norway was governed by a governed by a centre-left coalition, comprising the Labour Party (DnA), the Socialist Left Party (SV) and the Centre Party (Sp). The centre-right opposition consisted of the Conservative Party (H), the Christian People’s Party (KrF), the Liberal Party (V) and the Progress Party (FrP). Deeply rooted conflicts between the centre and the periphery (see, e.g., Rokkan 1967) have not led to different party systems in different regions – only regional differences in support for individual parties. Local lists compete with national parties – and constitute significant alternatives – in a number of municipalities (Aars and
Norwegian parties share a similar organisational structure, which corresponds to the administrative structure of the Norwegian state. Over time, the party organisations have become more similar – with Labour’s organisation as a model (Svåsand 1994:327). The parties have largely kept the formal structures of Duverger’s (1954) mass party model – where local branches are joined to the central organisation by regional structures – in spite of declining membership and low levels of activity (Heidar and Saglie 2003). All parties have municipal and county branches, in addition to the central level. A party may have several local branches within the largest municipalities, while smaller parties tend not to have branches in the smallest municipalities.

The principle of delegatory democracy is a central feature of Norwegian party organisations – and the organisational structures of the mass party enjoy high levels of legitimacy among party members and activists (Sagli and Heidar 2004). 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. Direct democracy has been discussed in the parties, but such procedures have not been much used (Heidar and Saglie 2003). Selection of parliamentary candidates takes place in a similar way. They are selected at nomination conventions in each of the 19 constituencies, which are identical to the 19 counties. These conventions are composed of delegates elected by the municipal branches (Valen et al. 2002).

In short, the organisational structures of Norwegian parties make the county branch a crucial nexus between the national party leadership and local party activity in Norway. However, this level has not been explored by party researchers. Party groups in county councils have been studied (Kvavik and Mydske 1997), but the county branches of the party organisations have received surprisingly little attention. One early exception is Valen and Katz’ (1964) study of parties in the Stavanger region, carried out in 1957. Their main focus was nevertheless on the local branches (and the national level), not on the county level or the interaction between levels.

Data: interviews with 16 county secretaries
We selected three urban regions for our study: the capital Oslo and the major west coast cities Bergen and Stavanger. These three urban regions belong to four counties. Bergen is the centre of Hordaland County, as Stavanger is in Rogaland County. The Oslo region is divided between two counties. The city of Oslo is a separate county, but the urban region also includes the surrounding Akershus County.

This selection of counties enables us to compare counties in three ways. First, the Oslo region – and therefore also its party organisations – is divided by a county line. This may hamper cross-border party activities in Oslo/Akershus, compared to Hordaland and Rogaland. Second, Oslo County is a geographically small area, covering only the city, whereas the three other counties include both urban and rural municipalities. Third, the party organisations in Oslo and Akershus are geographically close to the national party leadership. The county branch offices of these two counties are often located in the same building as the national party headquarters. This may tie these two counties closer to the national party organisation, whereas regional conflicts may cause tensions between the national organisation and the two west coast counties Hordaland and Rogaland.

We focus on the party branches in these counties. Each county branch has an elected leader, deputy leader(s) and an executive committee. In addition, there are party representatives in public office at the county level, such as county council members. As our main interest lies in how party organisations work, we concentrate on the county secretaries (hereafter referred to as secretaries). Most county branches has a secretary (some large branches have two). These are full-time employees. They are the focal point of their respective organisations, transmitting between the national and local levels of their organisation.

We selected four parties for our interviews. The Liberal Party has fewer full-time secretaries then the other parties, and the Centre Party is generally weak in urban regions. The Progress Party did not want researchers to interview employed staff (only elected politicians). We are therefore left with the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party, the Conservative Party and the Christian People’s Party. We thus have both large and smaller parties, as well as ideological variation, in our sample.

This gives us 16 county secretaries, representing four parties in four counties. We carried out qualitative interviews with these secretaries in 2008 (most of them in May). The interviews were conducted to examine how they perceive their organisations, how they work within them, and how they saw the effect of the development of larger urban areas in their regions.
The secretary types

While the organisational roles of the secretaries are at the centre of analysis, it is valuable to examine their background and their ways of thinking. All the secretaries showed a profound commitment to their party, however, there were some observable differences among them which allow us to roughly categorise them along two dimensions: 1) The Neophyte versus the Experienced and 2) The Wish to cope with reality versus the Wish to change reality. These two dimensions allows for a categorisation of secretary types, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Secretary types - classified by experience and organisational focus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivated to change the organisation</th>
<th>Established</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neophyte</td>
<td>Established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educated Lightweight:</strong> A secretary with an organisational education, but with no or limited experience from work within the party</td>
<td><strong>Capable Innovator:</strong> A secretary with considerable experience from other organisations that he/she seeks to apply to the party organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused on managing the organisation</td>
<td><strong>Party Activist:</strong> Secretaries with experience from campaigning and the party, but limited or no experience from other organisations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These secretary types can be used to describe how the secretaries go about managing and changing the organisation they are in charge of. The Educated Lightweight type would be an inexperienced secretary with a relevant educational background that would want to change the organisation. However, not being embedded in the organisation would make the task of changing the organisation an uphill struggle for this type of secretary. The Party Activist type has risen to the position as secretary through showing capacity and skill in party work. However, both being inexperienced and having mastered in the existing system ensures that this secretary is less willing to change the organisation. The Capable Innovator type has been recruited to the party from other organisations due to experience and skill. This secretary has both the experience and the skill to effectuate changes in the organisation. The Mature
Manager type has experience and skill, but the experience is limited to work for the party. For this type of secretary maintaining and managing the existing party order is a priority.

All the parties had a mix of ages that allowed for young secretaries, but with an emphasis on mature and experienced secretaries. The noteworthy exception of this was the Socialist Left Party, where 3 of the 4 secretaries interviewed were under 35 years old. In all the parties only 5 of the 16 secretaries were under the age of 35. The young Socialist Left secretaries all had been recruited to their positions through campaigning positions, as had the young secretaries in the other parties. These fit the Party Activist type. Among the experienced secretaries there were a fair number of both Capable Innovator types and Mature Manager types. The Capable Innovator types brought with them considerable experience from managerial positions in other organisations and businesses and seemed to have been recruited specifically to develop the organisation. Among the Mature Manager types there were some secretaries that seemed to have attained their positions through earlier achievements, such as being a Member of Parliament or long service to the party. There were no evident cases of the Educated Lightweight among the secretaries interviewed for this research.

The secretaries’ responses on how organisational change could be organised or conducted varied considerably. The experienced secretaries that had been recruited from outside the party seemed more willing to examine organisational changes and experiment in order to create a stable or growing organisation. As such the Capable Innovators are organisational capacities, with ideas on how to stem the development of the 1990s, with its steady decline in party membership (see Heidar and Saglie 2003). While the Mature Managers match and even surpass the Capable Innovators in experience they do not show the same organisational capacity, as their ample experience stem from political, rather than organisational, work. That opens for the possibility that the secretary role is used by some of the parties as a boon for long and true dedication to the party. In this light it is possible to lump the inexperienced secretaries together with some of the experienced ones, seeing that they both lay claim to their positions through dedication to the party rather than through specific organisational experience.

These observations relate to how the secretaries view the development of their organisations. What view a given secretary takes seem to be influenced by their organisational experience. Some strike a position, almost defeatist, that one has to accept the changing realities of society and that party membership is not en vogue at the moment. The other stance is a more active one, seeking to adapt the organisation to the new reality, changing the party
structure to a more competitive environment, where parties need to ‘outbid’ other activities through better solutions, such as ‘light memberships’. That would for instance entail that party sympathisers could have, as one secretary put it, ‘a one-to-one relationship with the party, without the commitment of a full membership.’ Seeing ways to wrest out new possibilities for commitment, beyond the obvious impact of internet, is a major difference between the secretaries. However, even the secretaries bent on changing their organisations lament the fact that they are increasingly becoming motivators rather than harnessers of creativity.

The younger secretaries, while dynamic and capable, seem to be wound up in managing the organisation and are not so focused on how to change it. The secretaries that have been recruited from outside the party, who have a diverse organisational experience, fare best in this comparison. While a secretary who is experienced seems to be a necessary for a motivation to change the organisation, it is not sufficient. It seems that the combination of age and diverse experience that are the necessary prerequisites for this.

The roles of the secretaries
Regardless of the secretaries’ outlook and experience they all answered fairly similarly when asked what they considered to be their most important responsibilities as county secretary. Their exact role varies with the tasks. One secretary likened her role to a balancing act between the mundane and the extraordinary; being both a potato and a superhero. All of them were interested in the development of their organisations and they saw their jobs as primarily divided between two functions; 1) manager of the day-to-day business of the party and 2) election campaign manager. Some secretaries prompted that while they considered these two functions to be the most important in their job they considered other assignments to be more ‘enjoyable’. What they considered the most enjoyable mostly revolved around recruitment of new political talent to their party and allowing for these to grow and evolve within the organisation.

Both these functions – managing day-to day business and elections campaigns – can be analysed as both internal and external processes. Internal processes here are meant as the issues that have little or no interest to people outside the party (such as changes in party facilities) whereas external processes are issues that have become interesting for the media and others outside the party (such as public statements or political blunders). These two classifications are combined in Table 2.

---

1 It can be noted that the most commonly asked question after the conclusion of the interview was how the secretaries could partake in the findings from the research project.
Table 2: The roles of the party secretaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>External</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day-to-day business</td>
<td><strong>Shoulder:</strong> Secretaries as a resource for the local branches</td>
<td><strong>Information bank:</strong> Secretaries the extended eyes and ears of the national organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign management</td>
<td><strong>Keeper:</strong> Secretaries as continuity bearers and party conscience</td>
<td><strong>Enabler:</strong> Secretaries as facilitator and mediators of organisational change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conducting the day-to-day business of managing the party ranges from keeping budgets through planning of meetings to, as one secretary put it, ‘being a shoulder to cry on’. In this perspective most of the secretaries took on a managerial outlook, meaning how to make the organisation work optimally. Regarding the internal work the secretaries saw themselves as an employee of the party at large and expressed a reluctance to engage in intra-party politics. They saw themselves as a resource that the local branches could seek when they needed a point of view, help or just some backing-up. In this view the secretary is a blank position that should be filled by the needs of the local branches, i.e. a fundamentally bottom-up approach to the organisational work.

When looking at the external work of the day-to-day business of party management, the picture changes somewhat. In containing and managing the occasional political crisis the secretaries opted for a distinctively more top-down approach. This is particularly evident in the information flow. The secretaries reported that they absorbed the local news in order to report to the national organisations at an early stage if problems emerged. When discussing crisis management situations the local branches took a secondary role, even if the crises happened locally. The damage that could be done to the party was perceived as most important at the national level, thus it became crucial to also ensure containment at the national level. An information flow geared to facilitate information from local level to the national level emphasises this.
The extension of the day-to-day business becomes management of the campaign during elections, where the secretaries take on the operative leadership of the party for the purpose of ‘winning’ the election. As a campaign manager there are also distinctively internal and external roles for the secretary to fill. Internally many of the secretaries note a dwindling interest in the organisational processes of the parties. Traditionally the members were divided between those with an organisational focus and those with a political focus, and these would complement each other. However, the number of people with an organisational focus is decreasing. New recruits are mostly interested in the political side of party membership. The secretaries therefore become increasingly important as the organisational continuity bearer. One secretary expressed that they, the secretaries, had become the ‘keeper of [the party’s] virtue’. This internal work is perhaps the most challenging to categorise. While most secretaries have a strong identity connection with their county, it is clear that the more the county party has to rely on the secretary’s organisational capacity the more susceptible it might be to his or her own considerations. Whether the secretary in the internal campaign work is a proponent for a top-down or a bottom-up approach may depend on the secretary’s disposition.

In the external role they saw themselves as mediators and enablers for the organisation, with a focus on the local branches. In a political reality where politicians have to address increasing policy and organisational challenges, many local representatives simply cannot keep up the pace. How the parties coped with the emergence of various internet-based social networks and YouTube aptly illustrates this. While the national party organisations have been relatively quick to pounce on these possibilities, many local representatives did not see the necessity or indeed have the time or skill to utilise these tools. For many secretaries an important role thus has become to facilitate and coach the local branches on how to use these tools. While this seemingly has its focus on the local branches, these processes are usually initiated by the national organisations and thus can be said to represent a top-down process. The form and function of local party branch internet pages are also easy to monitor.

In many ways there is a clear difference in reported behaviour between external and internal functions. When fulfilling the internal functions the secretaries report on bottom-up processes, with the local party branches seeking the secretaries’ help and points of view. However, regarding the external roles the reported behaviour is a clear cut top-down approach. There is therefore a duality in the secretaries’ responses. The secretaries’ self-conceptualization of their roles is a bottom-up one, while their reported behaviour indicates that they employ a top-down strategy in cases where the national organisation is involved.
The gap between the secretaries’ self-conceptualization and their actual behaviour is often pointed out by the secretaries of the other parties. The views of how the internal mechanics work in the other parties is almost charmingly consistent, with all secretaries emphasising the how the other parties allow for top-down party management while their own party has no ‘culture for that type of behaviour’, maintaining that their party is fundamentally a bottom-up organisation. This is consistent with all the secretaries claiming that the fundamental power in the organisation resides in the local branches.

However, all the secretaries also report on identical strains on time and resources, where an increasing number of tasks are executed with decreasing resources. This strain affects the organisation with reverse effect; the municipal levels are struck hardest, seeing that they are the parts of the organisation that lack resources the most (with mostly voluntary work). This is repeated on the county level, in effect strengthening the national organisation at the expense of the local and county levels. All the organisations suffer from the same capacity strain, on all levels. But the impact of this strain is cushioned at the national level, with its full-time employees. This strain is, if not directly linked to, closely related to the pressures the secretaries report with regard to membership development and party activity. The capacity strain could be indicating that organisational capacities are moving towards the national level in the parties. This, in effect, renders the organisations with an increasingly top-down approach regardless of the secretaries’ self-conceptualization.

Looking at the four roles of the secretaries, all but one of them, the shoulder role, have changed considerably over the last years. When talking about their roles the secretaries report that there has been an increase in activity, while at the same time there has been a decrease in resources and time. The role as the party’s information bank is challenged by the increasing number of actors at the media stage (more local TV, blogs, citizen’s internet pages etc.). The enabler role is challenged by the same processes, but in reverse, seeing that the parties seek to provide their own services that they are met with by media and internet. The role as the keeper also seems to become more and more important as organisational talent seemingly is drained from the organisation. The need for a shoulder to cry on seems to be relatively constant.

Organisational change
All the secretaries reported on efforts to renew and change their organisations to meet with new demands regarding dwindling membership, member participation and member
recruitment (see also Heidar and Saglie 2003). All the secretaries reported to have halted the downward spiral of membership.

1. New media

   All the organisations show a keen interest for new media, devoting considerable amounts of resources to developing internet based communication platforms. They all report on a massive change towards internet based recruitment solutions. However, it is still very much in the open how new media will impact the long-term organisation of the parties. While all the secretaries report that the internet has made information distribution easier, it is not clear how they can – or will – use the internet as a channel to motivate and engage members.

2. Interest driven recruitment

   All the organisations attempt to stretch the content of party membership. An overarching concern is that membership numbers have dropped, apparently because people get more and more work combined with other activities. The secretaries’ suspicion is that a party membership for a modern member competes with all other activities that are available for a given person. Therefore the parties are experimenting with alternative membership, allowing semi-memberships where members are allowed to devote all their time to a specific topic.

3. Multiple fora

   As the organisations seek to expand the appeal of membership, and thus participation, they try to allow for multiple fora for engagement. They seek to dissolve a traditional membership for something where members are allowed to participate in specific focus groups inside the parties, such as a Foreign Policy Group.

The outlook and the roles of the secretaries can be held up against this development. The secretaries that had considerable experience from organisations other than political parties here saw these new arenas as fruitful recruiting grounds, easing the stress for members between an increasingly hectic reality and membership in a party. They also tried to use these new arenas as possibilities to try and look beyond what parties have used to be, and imagine what they might become with nurture.
County secretaries in urban areas

However, the main focus for this analysis is how parties manage their role in growing cities, the hypothesis being that major cities provide increasingly insurmountable obstacles for citizens to participate in politics. To examine this hypothesis the secretaries were confronted with a range of questions regarding the effect of urbanisation on participation, revolving around the physical circumstances of city growth, the changing roles of parties and the entfremdung of modern life. Especially we wanted to know how the secretaries functioned in this reality as a coordinator and organiser.

When asked to take the pulse on their party's organisation, all the secretaries had what can best be described as an organisational blues. The mature secretaries described how the organisations had functioned before and how the parties increasingly has to compete with recreational activities, whereas the younger secretaries seemed to have picked up on this blue note through their respective organisations.

When asked about how they perceived their organisation with regard to activity in the local branches, all reported on huge variations. Some branches were very active and productive both with regard to policy development and member activities. Others were almost non-existent in both respects, to the level that the secretaries could even have difficulties getting them to send in annual reports. Prompted to deliberate on why these differences occurred none of the secretaries had any ready answer, except that it depends on the people who choose to engage themselves in the party. Unlikely places could be very active as long as they had one or more people who wanted activities in the local branch. None of the secretaries volunteered major city problems as a possible reason. However, when asked to assess party activity as a function of population size, i.e. whether the larger amount of members in the city branches also merited increased activity, all the secretaries saw their city members as less active per member head.

As mentioned above the secretaries saw themselves as motivators and support rather than harnessers of creativity. In general they emphasised a top-down organisational direction, where local branches seemed to rely on input from the national level and not the other way around. All the secretaries stressed that local branches did have systematic access to influence the national organisation through the manifesto processes, but they perceived that initiative from ground levels of the organisations outside these processes were random and far between, although the secretaries were quick to point out their successes in the cases that were successful, such as when all the secretaries in Rogaland gave their party credit for achieving a governmental re-evaluation of the Jåttå case. The case concerns the relocation of the
Norwegian military HQ from outside Stavanger to another part of Norway and is a very important issue for the Rogaland.

When asked to assess the impact on the clustering effect of cities, i.e. people living in one community, but working or going to school in another, the secretaries did not recognise the question as relevant. They asserted that all members channelled their membership geographically, i.e. through the community in which they lived. The secretaries, consistently and across party lines, concluded that their city size in itself does not change participation. Rather the declining participation should be viewed as ‘part of the general trends in the development of society, which we need to relate to, and not because of the specific challenges of city life.’

**Cooperation across municipal borders**

Interestingly a number of the secretaries offered that they employed an alternative way of organising political work. In Akershus, Hordaland and Rogaland the secretaries had been experimenting with sub-county meeting arenas. Roughly these meeting arenas were organised by adjoining a number of adjacent municipalities into a sub-county. These sub-counties would then attend joint political meetings and arrangements from time to time. The secretaries saw these new sub-counties as functional in three ways; 1) to ensure a peer-to-peer contact between related municipalities, 2) to ensure attendance at arrangements and finally 3) to ease the travelling time for the municipal representatives.

In this context it is important to point out that the counties of Norway cover substantial areas. Some municipalities in our cases have some 3-4 hours of travel time before reaching the county centre. In Akershus there is the additional challenge of Oslo dividing the county in two. Needless to say this provides additional challenges for the parties when planning meetings in the three counties other than Oslo.

While the secretaries do not perceive any special challenges related to the development of major cities they do reflect on the challenges that are connected to time consumption and party membership. Apparently the same challenges face rural and city party members alike. It might seem that the ‘general trends in the development of society’ transcend the thought of the urban area. While urbanisation is perhaps the most visible change in modern societies the general trends hit with equal force. The secretaries seem to adapt to this challenge without relating it directly to cities and metropolitan areas. This does, however, open for a discussion on what challenges the general trends pose, rather than the specific metropolitan ones.
Variations between counties: national centre versus regional centres

The special case of Oslo

The county party organisations in Oslo are different from the others, seeing that the county coincides with the city of Oslo. This anomaly is quickly recognisable when interviewing the party secretaries, and is even pointed out by them.

All the Oslo secretaries readily admit that they have convenient access to ‘power’, meaning that they can physically reach many of their party’s leading representatives, both in parliament and in government. This access in turn leads to increased influence over political processes. On the other hand, most of the secretaries report that the other county organisations of the party have a tendency to ‘overplay’ this advantage. This in turn leads to many and prolonged battles between the Oslo organisation and the other counties, which the Oslo secretaries feel Oslo usually lose, seeing that the peripheral counties work together against Oslo.

Akershus

Only one of the parties had their Oslo and Akershus secretaries located in different buildings. In all the cases where the secretaries were located in the same building it was reported to be an advantage. However, they were careful to emphasise that it was mainly an informal contact of a social character. None of them considered this contact to be improper or qualitatively different from contact with the other county offices. However, some yielded that information exchanges were facilitated by having offices facilities in each others proximity. The Akershus secretaries nevertheless do see themselves as different from the Oslo organisations in the sense that they invoke the same argumentation as the peripheral county secretaries regarding Oslo influence in politics. This is paradoxical, seeing that the Akershus organisations have the same ready access to politicians and ‘power’ as their counterparts in Oslo.

Hordaland and Rogaland

Not surprisingly the party secretaries in the peripheral counties have a different take on this situation. They consistently, and across party borders, insist that the Oslo branches of their respective parties have to much sway over decision-making in the party. Indeed, the perception of the Oslo branches might be the one issue that transcends the county barriers in the parties. In their quest for influence in the party the county branches are sometimes
inclined to seek support and across county borders. However, the Hordaland and Rogaland secretaries entertain the opposite evaluation of the Oslo view of their influence in their parties, i.e. that they do not have a disproportionate amount of success in bending the party to their will, rather that they enjoy the few occasions when it does happen, but that the Oslo branch usually does win in these battles.

Conclusions
The scholarly debate on political parties has revolved around the ‘crisis of party’ (see, e.g., Daalder 1992), and especially the declining party membership (Mair and van Biezen 2001). These debates are echoed in the stories of the Norwegian county secretaries – as what we term the ‘organisational blues’. We also know from previous research how parties try to fight the alleged ‘crisis of party’ and revitalise their organisations. Norwegian party organisers worry about declining membership and widespread passivity, and discuss how membership and activity might be made more attractive (Heidar and Saglie 2003). Previous research has been based on interviews with people at the national party headquarters, but to what extent are these nationally formulated strategies implemented at the party grass roots?

As we have shown in this paper, the county secretaries play an important role in the attempt to revitalise the party organisations. Or more precisely, they play several roles in bottom-up as well as top-down communication. They assist the national headquarters in implementing organisational changes, they try to contain local crises and inform the national level about developments, they pass grass-roots concerns on to the national party, they help local branches with practical tasks (such as using internet-based communication platforms), and they provide ‘a shoulder to cry on’ for local politicians. In short: the full-time employed county secretaries are crucial links in the Norwegian multi-level party organisations.

Direct democracy has become a much-debated alternative procedure for party decision-making. Membership ballots have been introduced, or at least discussed, in many parties. The ‘cartel party thesis’ (Katz and Mair 1995) interprets these reforms as indications of enhanced leadership autonomy. The national leadership may communicate directly with its members, bypassing the local organisation. ‘Indeed, it becomes possible to imagine a party that manages all of its business from a single central headquarters, and which simply subdivides its mailing list by constituency, region or town’ (Katz and Mair 1995: 21). As we have seen, this prediction is very far from the current state of Norwegian party organisations. There is definitely a search for new and inclusive party concepts, but within a multi-layered organisation. We may ask whether Norway is a special case. The mass party model and the
principles of delegatory democracy characterise Norwegian parties, perhaps more than parties in many other countries. We lack, however, comparative studies of these kinds of intermediary party structures.

As mentioned above, the growing literature on parties as multi-level organisations focus on the relationship between the national and regional level. The links down to the local branches has been less explored, but the interaction between the local and regional levels deserves more research. Parties are supposed to function as arenas for civic engagement. As members live their daily lives in a community, participation takes place in local branches. These branches are often small, and lack the necessary resources to facilitate party activity. Therefore, the interaction between the local branches and the regional level may be essential to intra-party participation.

Moreover, the literature on parties as multi-level organisations concentrates on federal states, or states that move in a federal direction. Nevertheless, multi-level challenges are not exclusive to federal states. Unitary states may be equally interesting, since the interdependence between levels may bring about more interaction than in loosely coupled federal states.

Finally, let us turn to our starting point: the special challenges of urban regions. Norwegian party membership is most widespread in the smaller municipalities, where a larger share of the electorate is members (Saglie 2002: 181). This is a part of a more general pattern, as the rates of participation in several political activities are higher in small than in large municipalities (see, e.g., Rose 2002). This difference between urban and rural areas is acknowledged by the county secretaries. However, they do not blame any mismatch between party organisations and civic engagement in urban regions. Instead, they describe general trends where parties lose the competition for people’s spare time. Nor do they propose special arrangements in urban areas, in order to deal with issues that transcend municipal borders. To be sure, cross-border cooperation takes place – but in rural as well as urban areas. The ideas from the literature on urban governance were not met with any response from our informants. Instead, they insisted that party membership should be geographically based and anchored in the place where people live.

Why, then, have party organisational structures not been adapted to mobilise civic engagement across municipal borders – as we might expect on the basis of the urban governance literature? One explanation is sheer institutional conservatism. However, the correspondence between the party branch structure and the administrative structure of the Norwegian state is also functional. Political parties differ from other voluntary organisations –
such as sports or cultural associations – as parties seek to elect office-holders at the national, county and municipal levels. A network structure that crosscuts administrative borders will be less efficient in election campaigns. Between elections, work in local party branches revolves around the issues on the municipal council’s agenda. Local party meetings are often joint meetings for the party group in the municipal council and the party branch (Offerdal and Ringkjøb 2002: 125–8).

Neighbouring municipalities often cooperate to solve specific tasks, such as garbage collection or fire protection. Such inter-municipal cooperation may bring about cooperation between political parties in the involved municipalities. This kind of cooperation, however, is more widespread in the periphery, where many municipalities are too small to take on these tasks alone. This may actually give rise to more cross-border activity in rural areas than in the urban regions. In short, there is no reason to expect any changes in the party organisational structures and activities on the basis of changes in Norwegian urban regions. The possible changes will most likely take place in the rural periphery and urban areas alike. The only event that in all likelihood would cause major changes in the structure of Norwegian parties would be a comprehensive reform of the structure of Norwegian local government.

References