Do Party Organizations Integrate Multi-level States?
The Case of the Norwegian Local Government Reform

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Abstract
Party organizations are often said to provide integrate the territorial levels in a multi-level political system, especially in a unitary state like Norway. However, even though earlier research has described such organizational linkage, we know less about how specific political issues are dealt with. There is also little research on unitary states, and on the municipal level. In this paper I explore how party organizations handled the current Norwegian Local Government Reform – a large-scale attempt to merge municipalities, initiated by the central government. I look into top-down coordination as well as bottom-up influence: To what extent were local and regional party branches tools for implementing the party’s national policy on the reform, and to what extent did local and regional party branches attempt to influence the party’s national policy? Based on qualitative interviews in five of the largest Norwegian parties, the analyses show that party organizations indeed provided linkage, but in quite different ways. In the two most united parties – the pro-reform Conservatives and the anti-reform Centre Party – the low level of internal disagreement enabled the party – at all levels – to promote its national policy. In the most divided parties – Labour and the Christian Democrats – the party organization functioned as an arena for competition between opposing views, and the outcome was a greater emphasis on local self-determination. Accordingly, these parties had less of a national policy to implement. The Progress Party falls between these extremes.

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Introduction

Party organizations are often said to provide linkage across territorial levels, and thus integrate the different levels in a multi-level political system. On the one hand, the literature on the nationalization of politics (e.g. Caramani 2004) describes the political integration of states, leading to a territorial homogenization of electoral behaviour. In this perspective, the party organizations ‘provide a linkage between [the] levels, presenting voters with easily identifiable labels and with a degree of programmatic cohesion across the polity’ (Fabre & Swenden 2013: 343).

However, the party literature has questioned the actual coherence between party organs at different levels. A common label does not necessarily imply much interaction. Some party scholars (e.g. Katz & Mair 1995; Carty 2004) describe a stratarchical model of party organizations, where the different elements of the party organization are relatively autonomous of each other.

There is a growing literature on multi-level party organizations (for overviews, see e.g. Deschouwer 2006; Fabre & Swenden 2013), and the extent to which these organizations provide linkage between the levels. In this paper, I aim to contribute to this field of research in three ways.

First, the literature on multi-level parties tends to focus on federal or regionalized states (with some exceptions, e.g. Bolleyer 2012; Feltenius 2016). Unitary states are somehow seen as less interesting. For example, Fabre and Swenden argue that it the regional level is important for understanding party politics in federal states, while ‘focusing on the national level may make sense for studying parties in quite centralized states such as Norway, Portugal or Japan’ (Fabre & Swenden 2013: 343). I therefore look into a unitary state – Norway – to see whether it actually is sufficient to study the national level.

Second, this literature tends to focus on the relationship between the national and regional level (again with exceptions, such as Copus 2004: ch. 5). Relations between the municipal branches on the one hand, and the national and regional level on the other, are rarely included in the studies. I therefore include municipal branches and their relations with other levels.

Third, earlier studies tend to map the general organizational structure and patterns of communication within parties. That is also the case in previous studies of Norwegian multi-level parties (Allern & Saglie 2012; Aarebrot & Saglie 2013). However, we know less about how such
organizational linkage works with regard to specific political issues: how do parties link and integrate policy across levels (cf. Fabre & Swenden 103: 352)? Studies of the party politics of territorial reform exist (e.g. Feltenius 2016; Toubeau & Massetti 2013), but they mainly deal with the regional level – not municipal reform. Research on the politics of municipal reform (e.g. Baldersheim & Rose 2010), on the other hand, tend to focus on other factors than party politics and party organizations.

The issue chosen here is the current Norwegian Local Government Reform (NGLR). This reform was a large-scale attempt to merge municipalities, initiated by the central government, and therefore important for the municipalities and municipal party branches. National parties and their local branches were central actors in the decision-making processes. The municipal councils should recommend whether their municipality should be merged, and – if so – with whom, whereas the Parliament should make the final decisions. Some parties were generally in favour of amalgamation, some were against, and some were internally divided – but these constellations varied between municipalities.

The aim of this paper is to explore whether party organizations functioned as arenas for coordination of party actors at different levels. More precisely, if such coordination took place, the question is whether this was top-down coordination, bottom-up influence, or both. To what extent were local and regional party branches tools for implementing the party’s national policy on the NLGR (either promoting or opposing the reform), and to what extent did local and regional party branches attempt to – and succeed in – influencing the party’s national policy?

In the next section of the paper, I discuss perspectives on linkage within multi-level party organizations in a unitary state. I then present Norwegian party organizations as well as the Norwegian Local Government Reform, before the data – qualitative interviews in five of the largest Norwegian parties – are described. In the analysis, the five parties are divided into three groups, on the basis of the extent of internal disagreement on the NLGR issue. In each of the three groups, I explore the extent of top-down and bottom-up influence.

**Vertical integration in a unitary state: top-down or bottom-up?**

There are both horizontal (between the party organization and the party in public office) and vertical links in party organizations. In this paper, I focus on the vertical links that connect the
national, regional and local party levels. There are different aspects of the concept of ‘vertical links’, and a specification is needed.

A basic dimension is the degree of vertical integration: to what extent are the different organizational layers independent of each other (Thorlakson 2009: 161)? In a unitary state, there is reason to believe that party organizations are tightly integrated. That is especially the case in a state like Norway, where the same parties compete at the national, county (regional) and municipal levels.

Another dimension deals with the direction of influence within the party: Unless the party is completely disintegrated, is it governed from above or below? It is possible to present a more fine-grained distinction between different aspects of this relationship (Thorlakson 2009: 162–163; Allern & Saglie 2012: 949–951). For this paper, however, the top-down versus bottom-up distinction is sufficient.

A similar distinction can be found in studies where the relationship between party actors is conceptualized as a ‘principal–agent’ relation. Van Houten (2009: 139–140) points out that party organizations can be conceptualized in different ways within a principal–agent framework: Who is the principal and who is the agent? Van Houten regards the national party leadership as the principal, who delegates tasks to the leadership of sub-national branches. However, he also discusses an alternative conceptualization where sub-national branches are principals and the national leadership their agent. As van Houten (2009: note 2) notes, this is a model where a single agent serves multiple principals. This makes agency control more complicated, and leaves us with the question what the agent should do when its principals disagree.

What, then, can we expect to find in a unitary state, with regard to the balance between top-down and bottom-up influence? First, as Bolleyer (2012: 330) argues, regional elections are less important in unitary states. The need for central interference to improve the party’s performance in the next national election may more readily be accepted. This is certainly plausible, but it should be noted that the centralization and tight integration of unitary states also may provide incentives for stronger bottom-up influence. In federal states, where major decisions are taken at the sub-national level, the sub-national branches can – to a greater extent – focus on influencing decisions at their own level. In unitary states, where many decisions are taken at the national level, it is vital for municipal and regional branches to influence their party’s national policies – and thereby decisions in the national parliament. In short, unitary states may provide
stronger incentives for both top-down coordination and bottom-up influence. It is therefore
difficult to present any expectations on the balance between the extent of governance from above
and below.

**The case of Norway**

*Norwegian party organizations*

There are three tiers of government in the Norwegian political-administrative system: the
national level, counties (regions) and municipalities. At each level, decisions are made by an
elected assembly (Parliament, county councils and municipal councils). The organizational
structure of the political parties follows the state structure closely, with a national organization,
county branches and municipal branches. National parties dominate local politics. Even though
local lists compete with national parties in several municipalities, they received less than 3 % of
the votes at the 2015 municipal election. Thus, the party alternatives are basically the same at all
three tiers of government.

Although party membership has declined, Norwegian parties have made few changes in
their organizational structures. There is also little variation between the parties (Allern et al.
2016: 39–48). Comparative data show that Norwegian parties score highly with regard to
*assembly-based* intra-party democracy, with minimal party differences, but have notably lower
scores on *plebiscitary* (i.e. direct) intra-party democracy (Bolin et al. 2017: 171). The network of
local branches is more or less intact, and there is no general decline of the party in local public
office. The old parties maintain their presence in local politics, while new parties establish new
branches and run candidates in more municipalities (Aars & Christensen 2003: 157). The
activities of Norwegian local party branches seem to revolve around the municipal agenda and
the party’s local councillors (Offerdal & Ringkjøb 2002: 131). The network of local branches is
relatively fine-meshed also in a comparative perspective: the number of party members and
registered electors per basic unit is relatively low in Norway (Webb & Keith 2017: 47).

The municipal and regional levels also play a role in policy development. Party
programmes (manifestos), as well as various policy resolutions, are adopted by the national party
congress. These programmes are fairly detailed documents, containing specific policy positions
on a large number of issues. Municipal and county branches are involved in two ways. First,
there is a comprehensive hearing procedure in which drafts are sent to local branches. Second, a
majority of the congress delegates are local politicians, elected by the county branches (Allern et al. 2016: 46–47). Thus, the formal party structure implies a high level of bottom-up influence. However, party representatives at all levels are expected to be loyal to the party programme – which brings in an element of top-down control.

Although the structure of Norwegian parties mirrors the administrative structure of the country, the strength of the levels differs. The Norwegian state can be characterized as an ‘hourglass’ structure, with strong central and municipal levels and a weak county level. However, the county level is stronger within the party organizations than in the state. The county branch is a crucial nexus, coordinating political processes upwards from local branches and downward from the national party (Allern & Saglie 2012; Aarebrot & Saglie 2013). The county level controls candidate selection for parliamentary elections, as well as the election of delegates to the national party congress and the national council. This presumably increases its political weight. Moreover, the county level has full-time staff (county secretaries), which may increase its capacity for political influence.

*The Norwegian Local Government Reform*

The Solberg Government took office after the 2013 parliamentary election, as a right-wing coalition between the Conservative Party and the Progress Party. This was a minority government, but it was supported by two centrist parties: the Christian Democrats and the Liberals. The coalition’s relationship with its supporting parties was regulated by means of ‘contract parliamentarism’: the four parties entered a formal agreement.

One of the main ambitions of the Solberg Government was to implement a comprehensive local government reform, with amalgamation of municipalities as well as counties (see Klausen et al. 2016 for more information). The approach was a mixture of top-down and bottom-up. Although the process was initiated from above, each amalgamation should be locally anchored and the municipalities themselves should seek and find partners. The final decisions, however, were made by the Parliament in June 2017. The number of municipalities shall be reduced from 428 to 354, and the number of counties from 19 to 11. While a few mergers were implemented earlier, most of the mergers will take place in January 2020. Most of these mergers were voluntary, but some municipalities were merged against their will.
The NLGR issue can be regarded as three separate, but related questions. First, are fewer and larger municipalities good or bad? The government and other proponents of the reform argued that larger, more ‘robust’ municipalities would enable the municipalities to produce better services for its citizens. The opponents, among others the Centre Party, argued that local democracy would deteriorate, that the distance between citizens and local politicians would increase, and that local public services would be centralized.

Second, how should the citizens be heard during the process? The Local Government Boundaries Act (§ 10) states that ‘the municipal council should seek the view of the inhabitants on proposals for any boundary change’. The Ministry of Local Government recommended that such consultations should be carried out as citizen surveys (i.e. opinion polls). More than 200 municipalities, however, chose to hold a consultative referendum instead of, or in addition to, a citizen survey (see Folkestad et al. 2018). This is not just a procedural matter. Based on experience, it was reason to expect that a citizen survey more often would yield a pro-amalgamation result, compared with a referendum. It is therefore no surprise that the government and other pro-amalgamation politicians were against referendums, while anti-amalgamation politicians were in favour.

Third, should the Parliament force municipalities to merge against their will? Voluntary mergers were preferred, but what should the Parliament do when municipalities rejected amalgamation? This is partly a matter of different views on local government: are municipalities regarded as independent polities, or just a part of the national public administration? It is also a question of giving priority: even if one is in favour of larger municipalities, is amalgamation important enough to set aside the principle of local self-determination?

While the choice of Norway – a unitary state – leads us to expect tight integration, the choice of issue – the NLGR – may point in the opposite direction. For local party activists, the future of the municipality was at stake. For the opponents, amalgamation meant that their municipality would disappear and, accordingly, that the interest of their local community would suffer. For the proponents, amalgamation meant a stronger basis for providing municipal services – and for wielding local political power. In any case, territorial interests could be expected to take precedence over party politics. Observers of Norwegian politics could also note that several mayors deviated from their party’s national policies, when it came to their own municipality. In other words, the NLGR case may be a ‘hard case’ – where stratcharchy seems more likely and
coordination less likely, compared with other issues. However, due to the lack of research in this field, I will not present any expectations or hypotheses. The aim of this study is more exploratory, but I hope it may serve as a basis for future studies.

**Data: Interviews with national and regional party employees**

The paper is based on qualitative interviews with employees in five of the largest Norwegian parties – two government parties (the Conservatives and the Progress Party), two opposition parties (Labour and the Centre Party), and one party supporting the minority government (the Christian Democrats). The two government parties were of course in favour of the amalgamation reform, but it should be noted that the minister in charge of the reform represented the Conservative Party. Therefore, more was at stake for the Conservatives. The Centre Party, which represents the periphery in Norwegian politics, was the staunchest opponent of municipal amalgamation. The two remaining parties, the Christian Democrats and Labour, were both – in principle – in favour of larger municipalities. Labour has traditionally been the strongest supporter of municipal amalgamation in Norwegian politics, and the municipal reform was included in the agreement between the government and its supporting parties. However, as we shall see, both parties came to increasingly emphasize the principle of voluntariness during the reform process.

14 interviews with party staff were carried out from November 2017 to January 2018, with one supplementary interview in June 2018. In each of the five parties, I interviewed one employee at the national headquarters. I asked the Secretary-General of each party to pick the interviewee, to make sure that it would be a well-informed person. At the regional level, I selected two counties and interviewed each party’s county secretary. These secretaries play important roles in bottom-up and top-down intra-party communication (Aarebrot & Saglie 2013), and should therefore be well informed about how their party handled the NLGR process.

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2 I intended to interview three persons in each of the five parties. However, only two interviews were carried out in the Progress Party (one at the central level and one in a county). At the Labour Party headquarters, the first interview was supplemented with an additional interview (with another person) in June 2018.

3 The counties are Vest-Agder and Sogn og Fjordane. This study is carried out within a larger research project, and these counties are chosen for the sake of coordination with other parts of the project.
The interviews were semi-structured with a fairly detailed list of open-ended questions, with room for follow-up questions when relevant. The questions dealt with both municipal and regional amalgamation, but I focus on the municipal part of the reform in this paper. Other sources, such as party programmes, are also used to some extent. When no other source is explicitly stated, the information comes from the interviews.

**Top-down and bottom-up processes in Norwegian parties**

*The Centre Party and the Conservatives: Bottom-up*

The Centre Party and the Conservative Party had diametrically opposite views on the NLGR. The Conservatives were in favour of amalgamation, against referendums and accepted enforced amalgamation, while the Centre Party took the opposite positions. There are nevertheless many parallels when we look at how the party organizations handled the issue. The reason is probably that both parties were fairly united on this issue.

To what extent were there bottom-up processes in these two parties? The high degree of party unity makes it difficult to assess the degree of influence from below. As one of the Centre Party interviewees remarked: ‘There were few discrepancies between the attitudes in the local branches and the policy of the central party. It is therefore difficult to measure their influence.’ Even though local Centre Party branches had no reason to try to change the party’s policy, the NLGR seems to have activated the party grass roots. Decentralization is a core issue for the party, and the amalgamation of municipalities (combined with other administrative reforms that also entailed centralization, e.g. of police services) mobilized party activists.

Whereas the Centre Party’s position has been stable over time, the Conservative Party has changed its policy. In 1995, the Centre Party put forward a parliamentary motion that stated that changes in the municipal structure should not take place if the municipal council, or the citizens in a referendum, was against it. A majority – including the Conservatives – voted for this motion, and the ‘voluntariness principle’ was thus established. The Conservative party programmes document a clear shift during the early 2000s. The 1993 programme stated that the municipal structure should ‘develop naturally, on the basis of local considerations […]’. The 1997 programme said nothing about municipal structure. In 2001, however, the programme argued in

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4 The interviews were transcribed, and sent to the interviewees for corrections.

favour of larger municipalities, and that there should be incentives for amalgamation. In 2005, the voluntariness principle was definitely abandoned. Even though voluntariness was preferred, the ‘Parliament must […] be able to make decisions on municipal amalgamation’. I have not studied the processes during this period in detail, but according to one of the Conservative Party interviewees, this change was a result of pressure from below. A smaller number of municipal amalgamations had been carried out in the 1980s and early 1990s, and local protests had led the Conservative leadership to take a cautious view. Local branches, on the other hand, were less cautious.

The Centre Party and the Conservatives: Top-down
With regard to top-down coordination, there was much activity in both parties. They had both taken a clear stand on the issue. The central level provided information, facts and arguments for local politicians, who should take a stand on amalgamation of their own municipality, fight a local election campaign in 2015 – and in many cases also fight a local referendum campaign. The parties also provided training for local politicians on this issue, and the Centre Party even had local study groups. When the central party organizations arranged conferences for local politicians, the NLGR was an important topic. The central organization and parliamentary party group distributed information throughout the organization. MPs – especially the parties’ members of the Standing Committee on Local Government and Public Administration – also travelled around the country and kept in touch with local and regional branches. In the case of the Conservatives, the Conservative Minister of Local Government and his political staff played a central role.

The Centre Party headquarters could also help local branches to find speakers for local meetings. One party activist, for example, had held speeches at more than 80 open meetings on amalgamations in different municipalities all over the country. The fight against involuntary mergers also became a campaign issue for the Centre Party in the 2015 local elections and the 2017 parliamentary election.

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7 https://www.nrk.no/nordland/reiser-landet-rundt-for-a-stanse-sammenslaing-av-kommuner-1.12971747, accessed 23.7.2018. At the time of this interview, Per Gunnar Stensvaag had held 77 speeches – and this was before the process had ended.
The two parties mirror each other also regarding the use of local referendums. In both cases, the central party provided advice for the municipal branches. The Centre Party clearly advised its branches to advocate a local referendum in their municipality. In line with government policy, the Conservative Party advised against it and pointed at citizen surveys as a better tool for consulting the citizens.

In both parties, there was nevertheless a minority who disagreed with the official party line. To be precise, the opposition did not challenge their party’s national policy as such, but the implementation of this policy in their own municipality. A number of Conservative mayors were strongly against amalgamation of their municipality. Likewise, there were Centre Party mayors who advocated amalgamation. This was tolerated in both parties. One Conservative interviewee remarked that the party had a bottom-up culture, and that the central party leadership could not decide what people at the local level should think. Similar attitudes were found in the Centre Party.

Labour and the Christian Democrats: Bottom-up

Both Labour and the Christian Democrats were, in principle, in favour of larger municipalities. In both cases, however, the voluntariness principle was a matter of contention. In the case of the Labour Party, it should be noted that the party voted against the voluntariness principle in the above-mentioned parliamentary vote in 1995. The party programme for the 2013–17 parliamentary term, adopted at the 2013 party congress, stated that changes in the municipal structure generally should be based on local preferences. However, individual municipalities ‘should not be able to stop changes that are appropriate from a regional perspective’. In other words, the party was to some extent willing to merge municipalities against their will.

The Christian Democratic programme for the 2013–17 term took a similar position. Whereas the 2009 programme had established the voluntariness principle (‘Voluntariness must be the basis for municipal amalgamations’), a narrow majority at the 2013 party congress rejected it. According to the 2013 party programme, municipal amalgamation should be based on good local processes, but the Parliament should also contribute to bringing about amalgamation.

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‘The greatest possible extent of agreement from the local level is a large advantage’, according to the programme.\textsuperscript{10} In other words, local agreement was an advantage – but not a requirement. One interviewee described this change as somewhat surprising – at least to some party members – in light of the party’s traditional view.

Both parties soon adjusted their policies. The interviewees from the Labour Party point to the 2015 party congress as the turning point. There was disagreement at the congress, but the delegates agreed on a unanimous resolution that, among other things, stated that ‘Amalgamation of municipalities shall be based on voluntariness.’\textsuperscript{11} The 2017 party programme had a similar wording: ‘Changes shall be based on voluntariness and good local processes’.\textsuperscript{12} The draft programme for 2017 was less categorical; this sentence included the reservation ‘as a main rule’. A majority at the 2017 party congress, however, chose to delete this reservation when the final programme was adopted.\textsuperscript{13}

The changes in the Christian Democratic policy came later, and more gradually. The 2015 Christian Democratic party congress adopted a resolution that stated that ‘Good, voluntary local processes shall be the fundament of the local government reform’, but with a reservation similar to Labour’s 2013 programme: ‘However, one single municipality must not be able to block good solutions’.\textsuperscript{14} An alternative wording that embraced the voluntariness principle was rejected by the congress majority.\textsuperscript{15} Two years later, however, the party joined Labour’s position and chose to support the voluntariness principle.\textsuperscript{16} When the Parliament voted on the amalgamations in June 2017, the Christian Democrats voted against the involuntary mergers.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Sterke kommuner. Uttalelse nr 4 fra Arbeiderpartiets landsmøte 2015. \url{https://res.cloudinary.com/arbeiderpartiet/image/upload/v1/ievv_filestore/19638b0c79ce47aea62b2f977d6a81775ae41bd9d841f88c9690544fa19c3f}, accessed 20.7.2018.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Alle skal med. Partiprogram 2017–2021, p. 75. \url{https://res.cloudinary.com/arbeiderpartiet/image/upload/v1/ievv_filestore/712bd5b874e24958b84c14f5be5b1a98afbc8ae1e464 cac9bcad06f24f2a85f}, accessed 20.7.2018.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Stavanger Aftenblad. 9.5.2015. \url{https://www.aftenbladet.no/lokal/t/QPnRV/KrF-stotter-tyunget-kommunesammenslengn}, accessed 24.7.2018.
\item \textsuperscript{16} KrF sier nei til å tvangssammenslå kommuner. \url{https://www.krf.no/nyheter/nyheter-fra-krf/nei-til-a- tyungssammensla-kommuner/}, accessed 20.7.2018.
\item \textsuperscript{17} This did not affect the outcome of the vote, since the Conservative, Progress and Liberal parties had a parliamentary majority.
\end{itemize}
It is worth noting that the Conservative Party and Labour Party had swapped positions between 1995 and 2015. The Conservatives had left the voluntariness principle, while Labour had embraced it. It may be tempting to see this as a case of rivalry between government and opposition (cf. Toubeau & Massetti 2013: 305–306): in both cases the opposition party supported voluntariness. However, the interviews clearly indicate that influence from below played a major part in both Labour and the Christian Democrats. Both parties were divided with regard to the voluntariness principle, and shifting positions may have been caused by shifting opinion at the local level.

In both parties, the local branches had widely differing views on amalgamation. Some local branches were strongly in favour of amalgamation of their own municipality, others were equally strong opponents. This is partly related to municipal size. A Labour interviewee pointed out that branches in small municipalities were more likely to resist amalgamation. The ‘junior partners’ in the merged municipality may end up with little influence in the merged municipality, and perhaps lose municipal jobs. A Christian Democratic interviewee, on the other hand, observed that this was an insufficient explanation. Municipal branches that were similar with regard to many relevant variables could nevertheless end up with diametrically opposite views on amalgamation.

Whatever the reasons were, the municipal branches were deeply divided. Thus, the principle of local self-determination stood out as a solution that could satisfy many branches (but not those who wanted to merge with an unwilling partner). Some of the interviewees at the county level pointed out that the voluntariness principle was important for their county branches. In the Labour Party, the mobilization for voluntariness was successful at the 2015 party congress. The corresponding mobilization was less successful at the Christian Democratic Party’s 2015 congress and failed to reach a majority, but the party nevertheless ended up with unequivocal support for voluntariness in 2017.

A question remains: why did this mobilization for voluntariness gain momentum in 2015, after the process had started? Why not earlier, before positions became entrenched? One of the Labour interviewees offered an explanation: Many people within the party thought that there was a need for fewer and larger municipalities – in principle. When the reform proceeded from general principles to discussions of specific municipalities, and people saw the actual
consequences for their own municipality, demands for an explicit voluntariness principle increased.

*Labour and the Christian Democrats: Top-down*

The division between pro- and anti-amalgamation branches was conducive to bottom-up influence, but seems to have weakened top-down coordination. To be sure, Labour’s and the Christian Democrats’ central party organizations and parliamentary party groups also produced much information directed at the county and municipal branches, MPs travelled around the country, and so on. This was a comprehensive reform process that affected most municipalities, and the local branches certainly had a need for information. Nevertheless, there seems to be less argument production in these two parties, compared with the Conservatives and Centre Party. In the two latter parties, the central party organization had a *cause* to promote.

In Labour, and to some extent also the Christian Democrats, the voluntariness principle increasingly became a cornerstone of the NLGR policy. Accordingly, the central party organization was left with less of a cause to campaign for. Instead, it aimed to enable local branches to reach their own objectives. One of Labour’s county secretaries described the situation in this way: ‘If the Labour Party has very many municipal branches that are negative to the municipal reform, and very many that are positive, it is important […] to be of assistance for both camps.’

These two parties’ view on local referendums point in the same direction. In contrast to the Centre and Conservative parties, the central party organization did not offer any categorical advice on whether the branch should support or oppose a local referendum. The local branches should consider the local situation, and make its own assessment. To the extent that such advice was given (as was the case in the Christian Democratic Party), it was less definite and seemed to be promoted less strongly.

*The Progress Party*

To some extent, the Progress Party falls between the Conservatives and Centre Party on the one hand, and Labour and the Christian Democrats on the other. As the Conservative Party’s coalition partner, the Progress Party had committed itself to municipal amalgamation, and it supported the government’s policy loyalty. Nevertheless, the amalgamation reform work was led
by a Conservative minister, and the Conservatives were more strongly involved in this work that its coalition partner.

To be sure, there was both bottom-up and top-down activity in the Progress Party. The role of local referendums was a tricky question for the party, which traditionally had been a strong supporter of binding local referendums. The 2009 party programme, for example, stated that ‘We want a system where the people, via referendums, gets direct decision-making power, as well as the right to veto decisions made by political organs.’ Regarding local government, the programme argued in favour of a ‘democracy reform based on voluntary municipal amalgamation’. This strong support for local referendums was difficult to reconcile with the party’s ambition to get fewer and larger municipalities, and the 2013 congress changed this policy. The party still regarded referendums as important (although the wording was somewhat toned down), but stated that ‘The municipal structure shall be decided by the Parliament’.

Accordingly, the party committee for local politics stated that the Progress Party did not demand local referendums on municipal amalgamation. In its recommendation to the local branches, the committee stated that it was up to the party’s municipal council groups to decide whether they wanted a local referendum or not, and emphasized that such a referendum in any case was consultative – not binding.

There remained an internal opposition in favour of voluntariness. At the 2017 party congress, for example, a minority within the National Council proposed to reintroduce the voluntariness principle in the 2017 party programme, and delete a sentence that emphasized the Parliament’s responsibility to adopt a ‘modern and appropriate’ municipal structure. 96 of the 232 delegates voted in favour of this proposal.

Thus, there were two differences between the Conservative and Progress parties in this respect. First, unlike its coalition partner, the Progress Party did not advise its branches against

20 Råd om enkelte forhold i behandlingen av kommune- og regionsreformen. Note from the Progress Party committee on local politics, 11 May 2016.
local referendums. Second, the general impression is that there was less activity in the Progress Party’s organization with regard to the NLGR.

Conclusions
The analyses show that party organizations indeed provided linkage between the national and local levels, but in quite different ways. On the one hand we find the two most united parties: the pro-reform Conservatives and the anti-reform Centre Party. In both cases, the level of internal disagreement was relatively low, and local branches could promote the national policy. Both parties nevertheless had local branches that disagreed with this national policy, and this was tolerated by the national leadership. On the other hand we find the most divided parties, Labour and the Christian Democrats. In these cases, the party organization functioned as an arena for competition between opposing views, and the outcome was a greater emphasis on local self-determination. Accordingly, these parties had less of a national policy to implement. Finally, the Progress Party falls between these extremes. These party differences are not found in earlier studies of multi-level parties in Norway, which focused on the general organizational structure (Allern & Saglie 2012; Aarebrot & Saglie 2013). There is nothing that suggests that, for example, the Conservatives and the Centre Party generally are governed in a top-down-fashion. The difference between parties seems to be an effect of the degree of party unity on this specific issue, and to what extent party unity allowed the leadership to promote a specific position.

This case study thus illustrates the multi-level dynamics within parties in unitary states where parties dominate local politics. The centralization leads to a strong interdependence between the local and central level. The local branches need to influence party decisions at the central level, because they are affected by these decisions. National party organs need cooperation from local branches to implement their policies. This certainly applies to the issue of territorial reform, but also education, care for the elderly, and other welfare services that the municipalities provide. Earlier, I suggested that the NLGR could be a ‘hard case’ where stratarchy was more likely than integration. That does not seem to be the case, however. Much was at stake for both the local and national party level, and neither part could afford to leave decision-making and other activity to another level.

In any case, we can safely conclude that although the national level is important, focusing on the national level is not sufficient to understand political parties – even in unitary
states. Ignoring the influence of local and regional branches can lead to an exaggerated focus on national-level factors, and thus misleading conclusions on why parties adopt their policies. The role of local branches should therefore be explored, also in a comparative perspective. Is there, for example, any clear difference between unitary and federal states in this respect? Moreover, the interaction with national-level factors needs to be studied. Is there, for example, more room for influence from below in opposition parties than in government parties (cf. Fabre & Swenden 2013: 349)?

The research fields of party politics and regional politics have gradually grown closer to each other. However, a similar rapprochement between party research and local government studies has not taken place. This is unfortunate if we are interested in parties as an arena for civic participation, since the municipal level is the primary locus for grass-roots party activity. A stronger focus on the municipal level in party politics could also improve our understanding of the regional party level. The regional level is of course important in its own right, but also as coordinator of bottom-up influence from local branches, and as instruments for party elites who want to influence local politics.

References


