

‘Nordic Party Members. Linkage in Troubled Times’ by Marie Demker, Knut Heidar and Karina Kosiara-Pedersen.

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Introduction

In the European model of ‘party democracy’, political parties play an essential role in allowing the preferences of citizens to be heard, aggregated and represented in the institutions in charge of the political decision-making. Parties build organized linkages between the voters and the political decision-makers through party members and membership organizations, which are intermediate actors that channel voters’ views into political institutions. These intermediate actors are involved through several intra-party democratic processes.

Yet, there is strong empirical evidence showing that a vast majority of European citizens do not participate in political parties, but also that the proportion of citizens involved in party organizations is declining over the last decades. Therefore, party membership decline is often taken as indicator of the weakening of the party linkage function and the erosion of European party democracies. Despite the fall in membership numbers, the present edited volume questions whether parties continue to generate ties between citizens and politics, and thereby (still) ensure a sustainable democracy. The empirical scope covers the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Iceland), while the book relies on analyses of party members and voters’ survey data which were gathered between 2012 and 2017. This piece of research contributes to address several salient issues in the current state of party membership studies.

About members’ recruitment and representativeness

Although Nordic countries are often depicted as exceptionally strong party democracies, they do not derogate to the general rule observed elsewhere in Europe: parties increasingly struggle to recruit new members, as well as to retain existing ones. Consequently, party membership figures are on the wane since the 1990s and the proportion of the population that is registered as traditional rank-and-file member, i.e. paying membership fees to a party organization, has much decreased, passing from 10 and 15% at the beginning of the 1980s to a range between 3 and 5% nowadays. The book points nonetheless toward one interesting exception (Iceland), where the current level raises to almost 40% of the electorate enlisted in a party. It would be explained by a more American-style of organization, a less-demanding type of affiliation, as well as the introduction of intra-party procedures (primaries), which mobilize members mainly to select party candidates and not to participate *per se* and more regularly in the life of the party. At the question ‘why’ Nordic citizens turn into party members, the book shows that ideology and political interest are the two main incentives. These motives appear all the more salient for joining smaller organizations, i.e. issue-based or niche parties.

When assessing the linkage function, ‘who’ is recruited in the process by the parties is a key issue. Indeed, the answer will inform on the representativeness of the members, enlightening thereby the anchorage of parties in the population, which is essential to assume the democratic link. Across parties, the book shows that there are large variations among the social profiles that are enrolled. Despite the fact that there is a gender and education bias (over-representation of males and higher education), the findings indicate that most parties tend nonetheless toward social congruence: their members are overall quite well representative of their voters. When looking at the political congruence between members and voters, the authors emphasize similarity in terms of ideological preferences, but more differences when

candidates and members are compared. For instance, Danish and Norwegian parties' candidates tend all to be more left-wing than their members. In addition, the book demonstrates that party members stress the same political issues than those that are owned by their party, but they can be more divided on other issues: social democrats are highly cohesive on economy, but not on immigration and environment; radical right parties are cohesive on immigration, but divided on left-right concerns. The book concludes the related section by insisting on the fact that Nordic parties are representative of their voters. Although "small" in quantity, party membership linkages are still qualitatively efficient in channelling preferences that are representative of the voters.

About the retention: activism and satisfaction

Besides the recruitment, the book deals also with the situation afterwards. Indeed, although party membership is often taken as a behavioural indicator of party participation, this crucially neglects the fact that not all members become active after their recruitment, and that, when they do, it may greatly vary in terms of intensity, the type of activities that are undertaken, or over time. The book shows that Nordic parties mobilize well their members, with four out five members that can be considered as active on average. Three regular patterns emerge from their analysis of party activism: party workers (participate in meetings, campaign activities, policy building, office holding), veterans (members who have held party or public office in the past) and ambassadors (more interested in party activities directed at voters).

Aside from participatory opportunities, an important aspect of retention relates to their satisfaction with the party and its functioning. Indeed, for the linkage to work, parties have to develop some intra-party democracy that will involve the members in the organization, and potentially boost also their satisfaction. The book indicates, first, that Norwegian party members are more satisfied than their Swedish or Danish counterparts, probably due to a higher level of formal intra-party democracy in Norway. Second, a member's demand for intra-party democracy is higher when (s)he adopts a minor view (disagree with candidates on ideology and policy issues), suggesting potential policy implications if party members are given more say. To conclude the section, the book points out that members seem sufficiently satisfied with the current level of intra-party democracy, implying that positive consideration can be raised regarding democratic state of Nordic parties.

Conclusion

Based on robust theoretical and empirical contributions, the present book actually proposes a positive reading of party decline: Nordic parties seem to adapt to the challenges posed by the erosion of their membership and are still capable of exerting their linkage function, ensuring the well functioning of the Nordic party democracy. The main conclusion is that quantity does not mean quality: although their grassroots is reduced, parties still link efficiently voters to political decision-making.

Yet, if the parties adapt themselves to make this linkage more efficient through the adoption of new forms of membership (less tackled in the book though) and activism (e.g. mainly Internet-based in Nordic parties), or through new IPD procedures that extent members' rights and may enhance their satisfaction, the book neglects to approach one current issue in party change/decline: the 'digitalization' of party organizations. The book might have gained insights with a greater discussion about how Nordic parties use (or not) digital tools to link with their citizens, i.e. either to reach potential voters and members that are (less) in line ideologically with the parties, or to mobilize, activate and make participate affiliated

members. Furthermore, are digital tools and activities only one additional resource in the repertoire of action of Nordic political parties or does it constitute an alternative channel that may challenge - and sometimes bypass - traditional intermediate structures within (e.g. membership organizations) and outside (e.g. traditional media) political parties? Do the online party supporters have the same profile of card-paying member or do they match with less usual profile? Do online party supporters matter? How do Nordic parties adapt to online transformation and how does that relates to their current membership and electoral trends? Do digital tools play a role in making the Nordic parties still so efficient in their linkage, helping them to face the offline shortage? These are a few inspiring questions that the book will raise but fails to answer for the party scholars interested in the recent evolution of parties and their grassroots.