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The Making of the Democratic Party. The Emergence of the Party Organizations of the German Social Democratic Workers' Party, the British National Liberal Federation and the Dutch Anti-Revolutionary Party, 1860s-1880s

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III. Representation in the Making

1. Three Founding Assemblies

In early August 1869, the founding congress of the German Social Democratic Workers' Party took place in the inn *Goldener Löwe* in Eisenach. Most of the attendees had high hopes for this special meeting. No fewer than 262 delegates had come from every corner of the German-speaking states to finally agree on a plan to improve their political cooperation.³⁶⁵ Chairman August Geib enthusiastically greeted the meeting and expressed his hope that they would "induce the unity of the party (...) and thereby causing the enhancement and strengthening of the so far fragmented party."³⁶⁶ But it soon became clear that Geib's optimism was premature. The local daily *Eisenacher Tageblatt* (Eisenach Daily) was so appalled by chaotic assembly that it called the first assembly day "a totally failed one."³⁶⁷ The party's own report of the congress vividly described the aggressive atmosphere. At some point, the discussions became so loud that neither the chairman's voice nor his bell could penetrate the angry shouts of the furious delegates. When a group forcefully approached the desk of Geib, the entire hall started to tremble. Wine bottles that served as candle holders tipped over, threatening to burn down the inn. A fire could be prevented, but the congress remained divided. At the end of the day, a large group of delegates would march furiously into the August night to leave the assembly for good.

What were the reasons behind the conflict between of the delegates? How could the promising plan of unification end in such an agitated division? There are two ways to explain the escalation at the SDAP founding congress in Eisenach. Traditionally, there is the case-specific view of those scholars who specialize in German history and the early period of German Social Democracy. These studies have shown how the conflict of the early Social Democrats was charged with both disagreement about politics and deeply personal animosities between the proponents of different camps in the workers' movement. The fight in Eisenach emerged between two groups, known as *Eisenachers* and *Schweitzerians*. The *Eisenachers* were the organizers of the congress and received their name from the town of the meeting. Most of the *Eisenachers*, like August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, were associated with the Federation of German Workers' Associations (Vereinstag Deutscher Arbeitervereine), but some were former members of the General German Workers' Association (Allgemeine Deutscher Arbeiterverein). Their opponents were the *Schweitzerians* who were those members of the General German Workers' Association who had remained loyal to the at that time president of the organization Johann Baptiste von Schweitzer. The main political issue between *Eisenachers* and

³⁶⁵ This figure is from the official report. At the beginning of the congress there were probably a larger number of delegates present. Walsker et al., "Protokoll," 71.

³⁶⁶ "die Einheit der Partei herbeiführen, die Prinzipienklarheit befördert und damit Hebung und Stärkung der bisher zersplitterten Partei bewirken möge. Walsker et al., 8.

³⁶⁷ "eine total gescheiterde", "Umschau," *Eisenacher Tageblatt (reprint)*, August 10, 1869, 3 edition, 1.

Schweitzerians was the question of how German workers should respond to the expansive strategy of the Prussian state in the German unification process. As president of the Federation of German Workers' Associations, August Bebel had maintained his anti-Prussian position, which was further supported by the influential supporters of the South German People's Party (Volkspartei) in the organization.³⁶⁸ This solidified the conflict between his *Eisenachers* and the antagonistic *Schweitzerians* who embraced the Prussian unification plans for the German Empire.³⁶⁹

Politics was not the only reason for the tensions between the two organizations. Between Bebel and Liebknecht, on the one side, and Schweitzer on the other, personal animosities intensified the already existing conflict. Schweitzer, in particular, was known for his disreputable character and "moral flexibility, naivety in intrigue and gnawing ambition."³⁷⁰ The historiography also mentions the suspicious discrepancy between the ordinary working-class followers and the "wealthy man" who managed his organization in "an authoritarian way."³⁷¹ In contrast, Bebel and Liebknecht have been described as the sincere working-class representatives who selflessly prevented the Social Democratic movement from abandoning "the right path."³⁷² It can, however, not be denied that also these two activists contributed to the division of German Social Democracy when they used the annual General Assembly of the *Schweitzerians* in late March and early April 1869 to publicly humiliate Schweitzer. At the meeting, they accused von Schweitzer of the worst possible offense by suggesting that he acted as a covert Prussian "agent of government."³⁷³ The angry *Schweitzerians* responded by

³⁶⁸ For the VDAV's political position, see Fischer, *August Bebel und der Verband Deutscher Arbeitervereine 1867/68*; Herrmann, "Zur Vorgeschichte des Geraer Vereinstags 1867"; Schraepler, "Der Zwölfer-Ausschuss des Vereinstages Deutscher Arbeitervereine"; Runge, *Die Volkspartei in Württemberg*, 62:115–16; Gerteis, "Leopold Sonnemann."

³⁶⁹ Georg Eckert, "Die Konsolidierung der sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterbewegung zwischen Reichsgründung und Sozialistengesetz," in *Sozialdemokratie zwischen Klassenbewegung und Volkspartei: Verhandlungen der Sektion Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung des Deutschen Historikertages in Regensburg, Okt. 1972*, ed. Hans Mommsen (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1974), 45–48.

³⁷⁰ "Moralische Laxheit, Unbedenklichkeit in der Intrige und zehrenden Ehrgeiz" Gustav Mayer, *Johann Baptist von Schweitzer und die Sozialdemokratie: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1909), 182.

³⁷¹ "wohlhabender Mann" "autoritärere Weise" Carsten, *August Bebel*, 26. In particular, GDR historians have described Schweitzer as an opportunist who cooperated with supposedly dubious figures like Sophie von Hatzfeld against Wilhelm Liebknecht. Karl-Heinz Leidigkeit, *Wilhelm Liebknecht und August Bebel in der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung, 1862-1869*, 2nd ed., Schriftenreihe des Instituts für Deutsche Geschichte an der Karl-Marx-Universität Leipzig 3 (Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1958), 58–60.

³⁷² "den rechten Weg" in Eisner, *Wilhelm Liebknecht*, 65.

³⁷³ "Regierungsagent" Bebel, *Aus meinem Leben*, 227.

denouncing Bebel and Liebknecht as “villains, traitors, scallywags.” Bebel got even kicked in the hollow of his knee after he had finished his provocative speech.³⁷⁴

When placing the German case along side the British and Dutch ones, these conflicts appear typical for the early phase of party organization but do not necessarily provide a good account of the general process of party formation. Studies that describe the disagreements between early party founders are important contributions to our understanding of the developments behind the formation of individual party organizations.³⁷⁵ This dissertation, however, studies party formation as a social process that occurred in several European countries. For this purpose, I focus on party founders’ ability to make use of the changing discourse and practice of the nineteenth century. The founders of the three cases created their new parties with the promise to improve the political representation of the interests of ordinary people.³⁷⁶

Before the founding assemblies, August Bebel, Joseph Chamberlain and Abraham Kuyper had argued that a new sort of politics was needed to better include the interests of ordinary people into political institutions.³⁷⁷ When finally the time had come to translate these claims into organizational structure, party founders relied on representation as a means to implement their democratic promise. This chapter analyzes the founding assemblies of the three parties to provide a close reading of ideas and practices of democratic representation that were realized in the new organizational format of the political party. There were, of course, numerous differences in the way the delegates realized their claims, but what remains striking are the commonalities in the conceptualization of how to make mass politics work in large

³⁷⁴ “Schufte, Verräter, Lumpen” Bebel, 227.

³⁷⁵ Abraham Kuyper was much cherished as a “guide” as well as denounced as a manipulative “despot” by nineteenth-century contemporaries, and later historians. Koch, *Abraham Kuyper*, 13. Joseph Chamberlain’s biographer Marsh has described an “ambivalence” that inspired early favorable accounts to see him as a “democrat” while Ostrogorski presented him as the manipulative demagogue. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain*, xiii; Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, 1932, 1:vii. For example, see Ostrogorski’s discussion of the Liberal Association in Birmingham where “Mr. Chamberlain and his friends, far from clearing up this misunderstanding, tried to give currency to the idea that the Association was the source and the necessary instrument of the public prosperity.” Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organization*, 1:169. Ostrogorski’s interpretation was maintained by more recent scholars who noted that Chamberlain acted in a more authoritarian manner than one would expect from a nineteenth-century British Liberal. Balfour, *Britain and Joseph Chamberlain*, xiii.

³⁷⁶ The claim-making nature of representation has been discussed in detail by political theorist Saward, *The Representative Claim*, 2.

³⁷⁷ Whereas August Bebel’s definition of the working class was so broad that it included everybody “suffering from today’s circumstances,” Joseph Chamberlain frequently referred to “the great mass of the people” and Kuyper to the “Christian people” who needed better representation. “unter den heutigen Verhältnissen leidend” Bebel, *Unsere Ziele*, 10. Chamberlain, “The Liberal Party,” 291. “Christenvolk” “Publieke Eerbaarheid: I. (Ons Program L),” *De Standaard*, January 3, 1879, 1, Delpher.

membership organizations.³⁷⁸ The three assemblies not only chose a representative structure for their system, but also shared the idea that overly powerful leaders were the most prevalent threat to democratic politics. In this perspective, the conflict in Eisenach was caused not only by the competition between *Eisenachers* and *Schweitzerians*. Delegates also fought over the essential question of how to create a functioning and legitimate form of representation in a national and permanent political organization.

2. The Congress of the German SDAP

2.1 Turmoil in Eisenach

The founding congress in Eisenach was a crucial event in the history of German Social Democracy. The conflict between the two factions from the beginning of the chapter is relevant for this dissertation, because it shows how party founders justified decisions about organizational procedures in the framework of democratic representation. In this sense, the first day of the congress was a struggle over the right of delegates to speak for the working class. In fact, the discussion on the first day focused on two issues that were especially fitting to their argument about political legitimacy: the accuracy of mandates and the election of the board. In order to provide a close reading of the ideas and practices that accompanied the process of party formation of the SDAP, it is necessary to critically evaluate the main historical source: *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Allgemeinen Deutschen sozial-demokratischen Arbeiterkongresses* (Protocol of the Negotiations of the General German Social Democratic Workers' Congress). During the congress, the assembly was stenographically recorded, but Bebel, Liebknecht and Werner were in charge of the later editing process.³⁷⁹ As representatives of the *Eisenachers* they let their faction appear as honest, reasonable and orderly. In contrast, their adversaries, the faction of *Schweitzerians*, were charged with dishonest and improper behavior.

This simple dichotomy in the primary source should be treated with caution, because it diverts attention from the main frame of discussion. It is true that the *Schweitzerians* had no interest in furthering the foundation of a political workers' organization that would compete with their own General Assembly of German Workers. But the hostile attitude of the *Schweitzerians* was confirmed by the congress organizers' handling of the situation. Considering the immediate election of August Geib as chairman of the congress, the initial promises of fair cooperation appeared to be a rhetorical exercise with little practical consequences. For the

³⁷⁸ Meyer and Rowan have shown that organizations whose structure fits their mission are less efficient in keeping up their legitimacy, "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony," *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 2 (September 1, 1977): 340–63.

³⁷⁹ Bebel and Liebknecht determined the interpretation of the Eisenach events also in other publications. See for instance, Bebel's autobiography. Bebel, *Aus meinem Leben*.

Schweitzerians, Geib was a traitor, because he had abandoned the General Association of German Workers to join Bebel and Liebknecht in creating the new party in Eisenach. As newly elected chairman, Geib further escalated the situation when he offended his previous comrades. Confining his welcome address to the “former members” of the *Schweitzerian* organization, he excluded all delegates that still considered Schweitzer their natural leader.³⁸⁰

In response to this humiliation, the *Schweitzerians* started to aggressively question the legitimacy of the congress. Their first argument targeted the procedure regarding admission to the assembly. In general, the delegates of large workers’ meetings were selected in local associations that formalized their choice with a credential letter.³⁸¹ Upon arrival in Eisenach, the organizers of the congress had collected the credentials to determine whether they were valid or not. For the *Schweitzerians* this was a reason to loudly start asking whether truly all delegates had a mandate from a local workers’ association. Their main allegation was that the *Eisenachers* had abused their position as congress organizers to admit delegates without mandates. Their specific argument was that, instead of a proper credential letter, other documents had been accepted as well: “there are actually people in the hall who have been admitted due to their membership card!”³⁸²

Whether these accusations were accurate is difficult to establish from the sources. We do not know for certain if delegates were admitted without mandates. More important is, that, seen from a conceptual perspective, the *Schweitzerian* intervention was about more than the accuracy of mandates. In fact, the intensified discussion suggests that different types of procedure could fulfil previously abstract claims about better representation. In this sense, it is no surprise that also the *Eisenachers* addressed the validity of credentials, because they likewise did not trust the other faction. According to the *Eisenacher’s* version of the story, an unnamed *Schweitzerian* had artificially expanded the size of his local constituency. The fraud was discovered only because of amateurish execution: a digit had been added with “a pencil” to increase the size of the local branch from 129 to 1290 members.³⁸³

These statements contained serious allegations with the potential to delay the entire congress. The *Eisenachers*, who had an interest in finishing the discussion about political

³⁸⁰ “ehemaligen Mitgliedern” Walsker et al., “Protokoll,” 8.

³⁸¹ This was a procedure that was already applied in the Federation of German Workers’ Associations. Credential letters were signed by the secretary or board of local associations. In some cases, additional reliability was established when all local members signed the document, see e.g. “Vollmachten und Telegramme der verschiedenen Arbeitervereine für die Delegierten zum III. Vereinstag deutscher Arbeitervereine,” n.d., A10 - A13, Archiv der Sozialen Demokratie.

³⁸² “sich allerdings Personen hier im Saal befinden, die sind einfach zugelassen worden auf Grund ihrer Mitgliedskarten!” Walsker et al., “Protokoll,” 13.

³⁸³ “mit Bleistift” Walsker et al., 3. Bracke was a member of the General German Workers’ Association who challenged von Schweitzer’s presidency and became a supporter of Bebel and Liebknecht. Jutta Seidel, *Wilhelm Bracke: Vom Lassalleaner zum Marxisten* (Berlin: Dietz, 1966), 43–56.

legitimacy quickly, suggested to first elect the board of the congress to make the process more efficient. Afterwards, in a second step, the credentials could be reviewed by a committee selected by the assembly. For the *Schweitzerians* this was another attempt at manipulating the outcome of the congress. They demanded to reverse the order of procedure and first choose a committee to verify the mandates. This suggestion would have put a hold on all negotiations about the political program and the organizational structure of the new party. The *Eisenachers* had to respond to ensure that the congress could take place and facilitate the foundation of the new party organization. Instead of using practical arguments, however, arguments remained in the frame of proper representation. In fact, delegates on both sides resorted to abstract terms of representation like democracy and dictatorship to support their positions. The former had a positive connotation, referring to the fair representation of local interests, what delegates thought was “right and proper.”³⁸⁴ In contrast, dictatorial was associated with manipulative and unfair procedures. In this way, the *Schweitzerians* could accuse the congress organizers of deliberately enforcing the premature start of the congress. As the *Schweitzerian* Lehder remarked: “This entire approach is to me as if we actually proceed in an exact dictatorial way. Initially, a provisional chair has been mentioned, but it has not been considered at all whether the board is provisory or not. Gentlemen, you have treated the mandates as if you have pried them out of our hands!”³⁸⁵ Delegate Tauscher complained that “mandates were taken in a way, which I could truthfully not call democratic.”³⁸⁶ The only possible solution was to verify each individual mandate before the selection of the congress leadership: “I protest against every vote before the mandates have been reviewed.”³⁸⁷ In order to express their outrage about what they perceived as crude manipulation, the *Schweitzerians* then started shouting “[n]o dictatorship.”³⁸⁸

What this conflict on the first day of the congress tells us is that delegates on both sides did not see assembly procedures as simple practical matters. Rather the discussion was charged with the broader meaning of political legitimacy.³⁸⁹ In other words, the discussion in Eisenach

³⁸⁴ “recht und billig” Walsker et al., “Protokoll,” 9. For a history of ideas of Liberal democracy in the early years of German Social Democracy, see Bärbel Meurer, *Bürgerliche Kultur und Sozialdemokratie: eine politische Ideengeschichte der deutschen Sozialdemokratie von den Anfängen bis 1875*, Soziologische Schriften 50 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1988), 196–218.

³⁸⁵ “Dieses ganze Vorgehen ist mir derartig, als wenn man gerade recht diktatorisch verfährt. Zuerst ist gesprochen worden von einem provisorischen Vorsitz; es ist gar nicht in Betracht gezogen worden, ob das Büro provisorisch sein soll oder nicht. Meine Herren, Sie sind mit den Mandaten derartig umgegangen, Sie haben sie uns aus den Händen gerissen!” Walsker et al., “Protokoll,” 10.

³⁸⁶ “die ich wahrhaftig nicht demokratisch nennen kann” Walsker et al., 11.

³⁸⁷ “Ich protestiere gegen jede Abstimmung, ehe die Mandate geprüft sind”. Walsker et al., 13.

³⁸⁸ “[k]eine Diktatur” Walsker et al., 11.

³⁸⁹ Procedures as an instrument of legitimacy have been analyzed theoretically and empirically. See the works of Niklas Luhmann, *Legitimation durch Verfahren*, Soziologische Texte 66 (Neuwied am Rhein: Luchterhand, 1969); Tom R. Tyler, “Procedural Justice, Legitimacy, and the Effective Rule of Law,” *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research* 30 (2003): 283–358. Democratic procedures in assemblies had a longer

was not futile but addressed democratic representation as the key issue of party formation. The *Eisenachers* justified their political organization by its ability to unite the German working class. The *Schweitzerians* accepted this frame and responded by challenging the accuracy of the credentials. These accusations were serious, and the *Eisenachers* also came up with examples of mandate manipulation. In turn, the *Schweitzerians'* reaction was an even more serious allegation in which they questioned the way the leadership of the congress was elected. From these fundamentally antagonistic positions, it became impossible to reach a compromise. While the *Eisenachers* managed to found the Social Democratic Workers Party on the third day of the congress, they failed to integrate the *Schweitzerians* into the new organization. It took another six years before the founding congress of the Socialist Workers' Party (Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei) in Gotha managed to unite the scattered Social Democratic movement into a single party organization.

2.2 In Search of the Best Organizational Model

Now let's look at how the discussion at the party congress proceeded after the first congress day. After the *Schweitzerians* had left the congress, the *Eisenachers* continued their discussions on Sunday morning. The discussion about establishing representative structures was not limited to the issue of the procedures of the congress itself, but also focused on the organization of the future Social Democratic party. Bebel, who was the speaker for the first agenda item, initially appeared to set a conciliatory tone for the negotiations about the "program and organization."³⁹⁰ For him, the new organization had to unite two principles: "It prevents the abuse of power in the hand of a single person and enables coherent action at the same time."³⁹¹ Addressing the weaknesses of the *Schweizerian* and *Eisenacher* organization, Bebel justified his proposal as follows:

You know how one side accused the other that their organization (General German Workers' Association) was too strict, because according to it, all power lies in the hand of a single individual, which can easily lead to abuse. From the other side it was emphasized that through the abolition of the organization individual associations are granted too much power.³⁹²

tradition in the German states and were e.g. important in the club movement surrounding the 1848/9 revolutions. Sperber, *Rhineland Radicals*, 208–9; Waling, "1848 Clubkoorts en revolutie," 245–59.

³⁹⁰ "Programm und Organisation" Walsker et al., "Protokoll," 15.

³⁹¹ "Sie verhindert den Mißbrauch der Gewalt in der Hand einer einzelnen Person und ermöglicht zugleich einheitliches Handeln." Walsker et al., 15.

³⁹² "Sie wissen, wie man von der einen Seite der anderen (Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein) vorwarf, ihre Organisation sei zu stramm, weil danach alle Macht in der Hand eines Einzelnen liegt, was sehr leicht zu Mißbrauch verführe. Von der anderen Seite wurde hervorgehoben, daß man durch Aufhebung dieser Organisation den einzelnen Vereinen eine zu große Machtbefugniß einräume." Walsker et al., 15.

Bebel remarked that the organization of the *Schweizerians* had followed a centralized leadership model. But the Federation of German Workers' Associations under his leadership had also weaknesses like the independence of local branches that prevented coherent political action. In order to overcome these deficiencies, Bebel suggested "a third common way" so that the new party could meet "the challenges which can be posed to a good organization."³⁹³ This solution was meant to offer the *Schweizerians* a respectable compromise. Later, this topic was picked up by Liebknecht who also presented the new party as a level playing field for all German Social Democrats: "we enter jointly into a new organization, after we mutually found our old organization faulty."³⁹⁴

These statements cast the *Eisenachers* in a positive light, but the final organizational structure was not as appealing as they suggested. A first indication of an imbalance was Bebel's announcement that the new party would not be ruled by a single leader, because the "blind obedience, the cult of personality itself is undemocratic."³⁹⁵ This was an open attack on the organizational model of the *Schweizerians* as it criticized the office of the president whose powers were seen as undemocratic.³⁹⁶ Bebel also pointed again to the rumors about Schweitzer's cooperation with the Prussian state to delegitimize his organization.³⁹⁷ The consequence of these considerations was an organizational model that was essentially a modification of the structure of Bebel's late Federation of German Workers' Association. A board (Ausschuss) of five party members constituted the leadership of the party who decided on all party matters with a simple majority. As in his old organization, board members were required to be inhabitants of the same location (Vorort) and were elected by the members of the hosting local branch.³⁹⁸ Other selection procedures were rejected for practical reasons.³⁹⁹ Even the suggestion that the annual party congress elect the board officers did not find support among the delegates. Rather the congress agreed to give all party members the vote to elect their leaders in a general "popular vote of members." In addition, the congress installed a

³⁹³ "einen dritten gemeinsamen Weg" "den Anforderungen, welche man an eine gute Organisation stellen kann." Walsker et al., 15.

³⁹⁴ "wir treten gemeinschaftlich in eine neue Organisation, nachdem wir beiderseitig unsere alten Organisationen mangelhaft befunden haben" Walsker et al., 15.

³⁹⁵ "blinde Gehorsam, der Personenkultus ist an sich undemokratisch" Walsker et al., 16.

³⁹⁶ For a study of the working of the Schweizerian organisation, see Offermann, *Die erste deutsche Arbeiterpartei*; Resch and Murr, *Lassalles "südliche Avantgarde."*

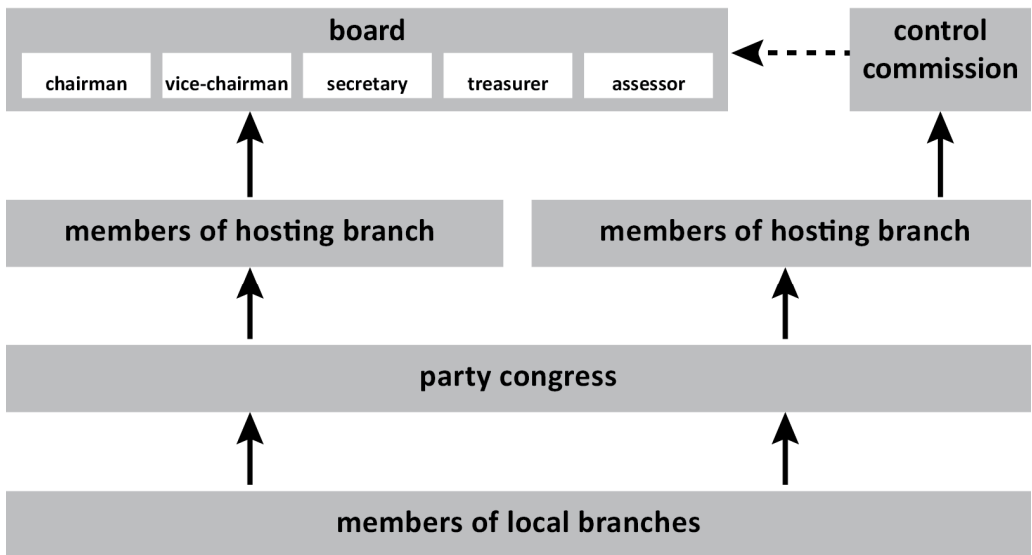
³⁹⁷ Gustav Mayer confirmed this argument, writing about the end of 1866 that "Und just aus diesen ersten Dezembertagen läßt sich nachweisen, daß Schweitzer den Versuch unternahm, mit Bismarck in persönliche Berührung zu kommen." Mayer, *Johann Baptist von Schweizer*, 180.

³⁹⁸ The geographically centralized board was introduced on the fourth meeting of the Federation of German Workers' Associations. Dowe, "Die Verhandlungen des vierten Vereinstages"; Fischer, *August Bebel und der Verband Deutscher Arbeitervereine 1867/68*. Also the South German People's Party (Volkspartei) adhered to this organizational model that required board members to be inhabitants of the same location. Gerteis, "Leopold Sonnemann," 146.

³⁹⁹ "Urabstimmung der Mitglieder" Walsker et al., "Protokoll," 46.

control commission (Kontrollkommission) that served as another measure to prevent a strong leader who was related to Schweitzer’s organization.⁴⁰⁰ Like the board, the hosting branch of the control commission was selected at the party congress, but its eleven members were elected by the members of the local branch. Its duties were “to review and investigate the management, files, books, finances etc of the board at least once quarterly, is authorized, if it has reasonable cause and the board refuses to relief the irregularities, to suspend individual members as well as the entire board (...).”⁴⁰¹ With these competencies, the control commission was a powerful institution within the SDAP. Eventually, however, the congress decided that the final arbiter between board and control commission was the party congress (Parteikongress), the annual assembly of delegates, for which each local branch could choose up to five delegates.⁴⁰² This representative body not only determined the hosting branch of the board, control commission and the next party congress, but also decided “on all party-related questions.”⁴⁰³

Graph 6: Organizational structure of the German SDAP



Bebel used a seemingly convincing argument to explain why this was the superior organizational model, referring to the associational laws in the German states. In Prussia, but

⁴⁰⁰ Dowe and Klotzbach, “Programm und Statuten,” 177.

⁴⁰¹ “die Geschäftsführung, Akten, Bücher, Kasse usw des Ausschusses mindestens einmal vierteljährlich zu prüfen und zu untersuchen, und ist berechtigt, falls sie begründet Ursache hat und der Ausschuss die Abhilfe der Unregelmäßigkeiten verweigert, einzelne Mitglieder wie den gesamten Ausschuss zu suspendieren (...).” Dowe and Klotzbach, 177.

⁴⁰² Dowe and Klotzbach, 176.

⁴⁰³ “der Vorort der Partei sowie der Sitz der Kontrollkommission und den Ort für den nächsten Parteikongreß” “über alle die Partei berührenden Fragen” Dowe and Klotzbach, 176.

also in other states, for instance, Bavaria, the cooperation of local associations in larger unions was prohibited and workers' associations for "political, socialist or communist" purposes were banned after the 1850s.⁴⁰⁴ According to Bebel this was a valid reason to reject the centralized structure of the *Schweitzerian* organization

I am willing to admit that if we would have an exemplary state in Germany, as we wish for, the proposal for the organization would have turned out differently. But because we have in Germany very different laws of association, it is necessary (...) that we seek to create an organization that is protected against these laws as much as possible; because you know well that in most German states laws exist, which cannot even be called liberal, let alone democratic.⁴⁰⁵

The example of the prohibited Schleswig Holsteinian Electoral Association (Schleswig Holsteinische Wahlverein) demonstrated the practical application of these considerations. The authorities had prohibited the association because its regional organization was considered illegal. This was an illustrative example, but the delegates remained doubtful about its applicability to the new party. Delegate Ellner remarked that Bebel's suggestion could not guarantee that the new party would not be pursued by the courts. It was naïve to assume that the decentralized structure would prevent prohibition. It was instead likely that the authorities would prohibit each individual local association, leading to a quick "massive dissolution."⁴⁰⁶

In the end, legal arguments did not suffice to win the support of the congress. Rather, Bebel had to invoke the arguments from the beginning of the assembly: the SDAP had to adhere to "the requirements of a Social Democratic organization."⁴⁰⁷ This vague normative frame convinced many delegates. An attendee remarked that when the congress wanted to reform the existing political system, their organization had to adhere to their own political principles, because "every honest worker will acquiesce in a democratic organization."⁴⁰⁸ In their response to Bebel's proposal, delegates returned to their criticism of the *Schweitzerian* organization as an example of unrepresentative organizational structures. Rüdts from Heidelberg welcomed the new organization and announced the return of his mandates from the association of Worms and Mannheim that tied him to the *Schweitzerians*. In contrast, Ellner remained loyal to von

⁴⁰⁴ Katrin Stein, "Parteiverbote in der deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte vom Vormärz bis zum Ende der Weimarer Republik," *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen* 32, no. 3 (2001): 540.

⁴⁰⁵ "Ich will zugeben, daß wenn wir in Deutschland einen Musterstaat hätten, wie wir ihn wünschen, die Vorlage für die Organisation anders ausgefallen wäre. Da wir aber in Deutschland sehr verschiedene Vereinsgesetze haben, so ist es notwendig, (...) daß wir eine Organisation zu schaffen suchen, die diesen Gesetzen gegenüber möglichst geschützt ist; denn Sie wissen ja, daß in den meisten deutschen Ländern Gesetze bestehen, die nicht einmal liberal geschweige demokratisch genannt werden können." Walsker et al., "Protokoll," 17.

⁴⁰⁶ "Massenauflösung" Walsker et al., 23.

⁴⁰⁷ "den Ansprüchen einer sozialdemokratischen Organisation" Walsker et al., 16.

⁴⁰⁸ "einer demokratischen Organisation wird sich jeder ehrliche Arbeiter fügen" Walsker et al., 23.

Schweitzer and argued that his organization “is the best which exists at all.”⁴⁰⁹ Likewise Reichelt from Hannover came to the defense: “[t]hat the General German Workers’ Association is against the Zeitgeist has to be decisively contested.”⁴¹⁰ These organizational arguments were connected to the belief in the powerful role of organizational structure. There was a sense that the new party prepared the future society in which workers ruled themselves. Schilling from Leipzig summarized this optimistic feeling among delegates by announcing that this “day of today’s congress” would be “the most beautiful day of my life.”⁴¹¹ These hopeful sentiments and democratic discourse were shared among the delegates of different political orientations. The inaugural assembly of the British National Liberal Federation also committed its new organization to representation, even though its practical implementation approached representation from a different angle.

3. The Conference of the British NLF

3.1 *Celebratory Gathering in Birmingham*

National historiographies have emphasized the uniqueness of specific cases of party emergence. The German historian Nipperdey argued that the “problem of organization” was a feature typical for the leaders of German Social Democracy.⁴¹² According to Nipperdey, the comrades around Bebel were committed to organizational structure because they needed to “first create a starting point and power position.”⁴¹³ Yet, in different circumstances party founders also engaged in long discussions about organization. In the political environment of Britain where political campaigns were less restricted, the question of organizational structure dominated the founding assembly of the political organization of the National Liberal Federation.⁴¹⁴ Like their German counterparts, the Liberals around Chamberlain aimed at creating an organization that would implement their agenda of improving political representation. Although the British party founders avoided the word “democratic,” their language was as radical as that of German Social Democrats.⁴¹⁵ Especially the term “popular”

⁴⁰⁹ “die beste ist, die es überhaupt nur gibt.” Walsker et al., 23.

⁴¹⁰ “Daß der Allgemeine Deutsche Arbeiterverein dem Zeitgeist entgegen sei, muß ich entschieden bestreiten” Walsker et al., 27.

⁴¹¹ “Tag des heutigen Congresses” “schönsten meines ganzen Lebens” Walsker et al., 23.

⁴¹² Nipperdey, *Die Organisation der deutschen Parteien vor 1918*, 293. The same argument is made in Peter Molt, *Der Reichstag vor der improvisierten Revolution* (Köln: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1963), 222–28.

⁴¹³ “Ausgangs- und Machtpositionen erst schaffen” Nipperdey, *Die Organisation der deutschen Parteien vor 1918*, 293.

⁴¹⁴ For a critical history of the liberal British state, see Joyce, *The State of Freedom*.

⁴¹⁵ In 1880, Chamberlain referred to the “democratic machinery” of the NLF in a letter to the *Times*. Quoted in Hanham, *Elections and Party Management*, 1978, 143.

was used to describe organizational structure and procedures.⁴¹⁶ The founding congress in Birmingham became known for its popular character. The public figure of the day was the distinguished Liberal leader William Gladstone who was greeted by a cheerful crowd at Birmingham railway station.⁴¹⁷ Before Gladstone's arrival, the public had already listened to a band playing festive music. The attending ladies wore blue ribbons to express their support for Birmingham Liberalism. Young people sold beer to the waiting audience in streets decorated with colorful banners. When Gladstone's carriage finally moved towards the city center, the masses were "on their tiptoe, both literally and figuratively, to catch if but a glance of the illustrious visitor."⁴¹⁸ After this impressive procession, Gladstone spoke in front of a "Great Meeting" in Bingley Hall that usually served as an exhibition space.⁴¹⁹ Hosting everything from cattle shows to political rallies, this center of social and political life was the considered the appropriate place for the mass audience of an estimated 30,000 people.⁴²⁰

In contrast, the assembly during the first half of the day was much more exclusive with more than 350 delegates from 93 locations nominated to attend the meeting.⁴²¹ Just as their German counterparts had done, the organizers in Birmingham used a protected setting to ensure the success of their inaugural congress. Here, too, the political mission of the new party was directly connected to its organizational structure. As main organizer, Joseph Chamberlain welcomed the delegates and reminded them of the rapid transformation of British society.

[t]hanks to the increased intelligence of the people, or, at all events, to their increased education – thanks to the greater interest which, owing to the cheap press, is felt in political affairs – and thanks, above all, to the extension of the franchise, it has now become necessary, as indeed it was always desirable, that the people at large should have a share in its control and management.⁴²²

⁴¹⁶ The controversial term "democratic" was associated with the revolutions on the European and American continents. See Innes and Philp, *Re-Imagining Democracy*; Saunders, "Democracy"; Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote*.

⁴¹⁷ Gladstone's rhetorical style has been often compared to that of the German workers' leaders August Bebel and Ferdinand Lassalle. Velde, "Ervaring en zingeving in de politiek," 519; Velde, *Stijlen van leiderschap*, chap. 2; Eugenio F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), chap. 7. For an analysis of the religious roots of Gladstone's political style see Parry, *Democracy and Religion*; Hoekstra, "De kracht van het gesproken woord." See also Gladstone's biography by H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809-1898* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁴¹⁸ "Mr. Gladstone at Birmingham," *Leeds Mercury*, June 1, 1877, 7, British Library Newspapers, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/4XmE25>.

⁴¹⁹ Russia's war with Turkey explains the exact timing of the foundation conference in 1877. See Owen, *Labour and the Caucus*, 92–93.

⁴²⁰ "Mr. Gladstone at Birmingham," 7. Bingley Hall had served before as a place for a populist form of activism, even for the evangelical preachers Moody and Sankey in 1875 see Coffey, "Moody and Sankey's Mission to Britain, 1873-1875," 115.

⁴²¹ "Proceedings," 9–13.

⁴²² "Proceedings," 14.

The justification for this proposal had been made earlier in the *Fortnightly Review* – the journal of Chamberlain’s friend and later biographer of William Gladstone, John Morley. In his article on the *The Liberal Party and Its Leaders*, Chamberlain had connected normative with practical arguments to demand a new organization for politics. For him, excluding the majority of the British people from the decision-making process was morally wrong. The growing size of the working class required an adjustment of Liberal politics: “The last census shows that nearly three-fourths of the people belong to the wage-earning class, and this great majority is possessed with a deep sense of injustice and wrong, and with a belief that it is the victim of class legislation of an aggravated kind.”⁴²³

Chamberlain was not the first commentator to notice the social changes of his time, but he was remarkably successful in using them as a justification for his plans.⁴²⁴ Reflecting the general feeling of many delegates at the conference, he pointed towards their feeling that the British political system had a serious problem with representation. An increasing number of citizens had the education and the political means to make reasoned political decisions. Yet, to Chamberlain’s disappointment, displayed in his typically dramatic style, the political elite had failed to respond to the changing size and social composition of the people.⁴²⁵ After years of miscalculated political campaigns, “the time is coming when we must again trust to the popular initiative.”⁴²⁶ The newly founded party organization would establish a new approach to politics based on an advanced form of representation. In short, the practical aim of the conference was “to secure local representative associations, and then to wield them together into a central organization, itself representative in its turn of these popular associations, and forming what I may call a national convention to promote Liberal objects.”⁴²⁷ Using the word convention, Chamberlain connected his new organization to the British tradition of political gatherings, probably also hinting at the controversial party meetings in the United States or the convention during the French Revolution.⁴²⁸ The delegates supported Chamberlain’s promise of

⁴²³ Chamberlain, “The Liberal Party,” 292.

⁴²⁴ Political protests were widely covered in British newspapers, accommodating the Victorian hunger for sensation. Michael Diamond, *Victorian Sensation, or, the Spectacular, the Shocking and the Scandalous in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Anthem Press, 2003), 2. On the discussion about electoral reform, see Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote*. For an example of a philanthropic response to the changing circumstances of the nineteenth century, see Roberts, “Head versus Heart?”

⁴²⁵ For the history of the parliamentary Liberal Party, see Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party*; Rossi, *The Transformation of the British Liberal Party*; Parry, *The Rise and Fall*, 7–12.

⁴²⁶ “Proceedings,” 17.

⁴²⁷ “Proceedings,” 16.

⁴²⁸ For the British tradition of conventions and debating societies, see T. M. Parssinen, “Association, Convention and Anti-Parliament in British Radical Politics, 1771-1848,” *The English Historical Review* 88, no. 348 (July 1, 1973): 504–33; Miller, “Petition! Petition!! Petition!!!”; van Rijn, *De eeuw van het debat*. In the American context, the term convention was related to party politics, see e.g. Reeve Hudson, “Can ‘The People’ Speak? Popular Meetings and the Ambiguities of Popular Sovereignty in the United States, 1816–1828 63,” in *Organizing Democracy: Reflections on the Rise of Political Organizations in the*

organizational innovation with cheerful acclamations of approval. William Harris, vice-president of the Birmingham Liberal Association, embraced Chamberlain's interpretation that their political orientation needed internal reform, arguing that "it was not that Liberalism was weak."⁴²⁹ The true problem was that they were "disorganized, and required some new measures of organizing its forces which would be sufficient to control it."⁴³⁰

Harris' comment points to the position of Liberals in the political system of Britain. As proponents of the Radical branch of the Liberal movement, they intended to extend their share in the powerful parliamentary Liberal Party. In contrast to the German Social Democrats who had no hope to form a government in the near future, Chamberlain and his peers had a realistic chance of becoming part of a Liberal government. But, despite this different relationship with political power, the Radical Liberals shared Social Democrats' commitment to representation. An important component was establishing proper representative decision-making procedures at the conference in Birmingham. In this context, there was less focus on the accuracy of mandates. British Liberals generally accepted that the presidents of Liberal associations were the natural representatives of their constituencies' interests. Great attention was given to ensuring that delegates had enough time to make their argument. The delegates quickly established that the assembly should vote separately on each resolution so that each of them could make a nuanced decision, rather than credulously voting on the resolutions "in block."⁴³¹ Moreover, when delegates thought that the proposed organizational structure did not match the intentions of their constituency, they had the right to propose changes. If these proposals were seconded by another delegate, they had to be discussed at the conference. This was not an empty promise; the report of the meeting shows that this principle was taken seriously. Only after a thorough discussion did the delegates cast their votes.

It is important to note that these formal procedures did not mean that the outcome of the Birmingham conference was completely open. In the literature we find numerous references to the dominance of the Birmingham delegation at the conference. Before the inaugural meeting, Chamberlain had instructed his friend and co-founder Jesse Collings to prevent Manchester and Leeds "to join Birmingham in starting the Federation."⁴³² Although Collings had partially disregarded this suggestion by making Leeds (and Sheffield and Newcastle) co-invited to the assembly, Chamberlain did his best to control the admission procedure.⁴³³ Participation in the conference was restricted to delegates who represented associations that adhered to the principles of "popular basis" developed by the Birmingham

Nineteenth Century, ed. Henk te Velde and Maartje Janse (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 63–84.

⁴²⁹ "Proceedings," 21.

⁴³⁰ "Proceedings," 21.

⁴³¹ "Proceedings," 34.

⁴³² Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, 1932, 1:259.

⁴³³ Hanham, *Elections and Party Management*, 1978, 148.

Liberal Association under Chamberlain's leadership.⁴³⁴ The implementation of this vague criterion was administered by the conference organizers of the Birmingham group around Chamberlain, who used it to exclude unwelcome associations.⁴³⁵ Nevertheless, comparison reveals that these sorts of exclusionary measures were not limited to British Liberalism and can even be found in the case of German Social Democrats. In the period before the Eisenach congress, more than sixty Social Democratic activists had signed the call for a unified party.⁴³⁶ Not all of them were equally involved in the composition of its organizational structure. Bebel was the main initiator and responsible for explaining the new organization to the congress. Together with Liebknrecht he had rejected competing drafts like the one proposed by the secretary of the International Workers' Association Johann Philipp Becker.⁴³⁷ Despite their attempts to control the outcome of the congress, the discussions at the assemblies of the two party organizations show that their founders believed that representation was the most important frame of justification for a political party, but they also acknowledged that its implementation required a functioning organization.⁴³⁸ To guarantee a successful assembly party founders like Chamberlain and Bebel used their leading role in the movement to channel delegates' debates according to their plans.

3.2 The Danger of Manipulation

Does this mean that the promise of improved representation was only a pretext to achieve political power? The paramount role of the representative frame in Eisenach and Birmingham suggests otherwise. The extensive, serious discussions were necessary, because delegates had internalized the idea that only a representative organization could help reform their political system. This can be also seen in their attempt to implement advanced procedures of representation in the structures of their party organizations. As we will see, there was a general concern about how to regulate the relationship between the central leadership and local branches. The Birmingham assembly, too, feared that powerful leaders could abuse their influence over ordinary members. This concern was rooted in a broader nineteenth-century discussion about the ability of populist leaders to control and manipulate ordinary followers.⁴³⁹ In the National Liberal Federation this was a pressing issue in regard to the political mission of

⁴³⁴ "Proceedings," 7.

⁴³⁵ Owen, *Labour and the Caucus*, 93–95.

⁴³⁶ Leidigkeit, *Wilhelm Liebknrecht und August Bebel*, 185–87.

⁴³⁷ Dominick, *Wilhelm Liebknrecht*, 153–54.

⁴³⁸ Anne Heyer, "Manipulation or Participation? Membership Inclusion in the Party Organizations of the German Social Democratic Workers' Party and the British National Liberal Federation," in *Organizing Democracy - Reflections on the Rise of Political Organizations in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Henk te Velde and Maartje Janse (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 185–210.

⁴³⁹ Biagini, *Currents of Radicalism*, chap. 7; Velde, *Stijlen van leiderschap*; Welskopp, *Das Banner der Brüderlichkeit*, 300–306.

the organization. Chamberlain had justified the conference by citing the need to empower common Liberals within the parliamentary party. The NLF president had promised that “the candidates and the policy of the party should be acceptable” to ordinary followers who “should take part in the discussions by which (...) candidates are selected and (...) policy is settled.”⁴⁴⁰ Most attendees of the conference responded to this proposal of improved representation with great enthusiasm. There was a strong element of populism in their understanding of representation. Instead of trusting the political elites, they emphasized the right and the ability of ordinary people to make their own political decisions.⁴⁴¹ Delegate Clark, president of the Leeds Liberal Association, followed Chamberlain in pointing to previous Liberal achievements that “had been accomplished by agitation out of doors, which had forced upon the Government (...) carrying those measures that the people demanded.”⁴⁴² Following the Radical discourse of this period, for him this strategy was the right one - the people could function as a healthy correction to elitist politics.⁴⁴³ Other delegates shared Clarke’s enthusiasm and praised popular judgment as superior to the decisions of selfish parliamentarians in the House of Commons. Like Chamberlain, they expected that this re-orientation of Liberal politics could change the power balance in parliament to the advantage of Liberals. The delegate Blake told the conference that he won his parliamentary office by embracing popular politics. His electoral campaign was built on “simply trusting the people.”⁴⁴⁴ This made only one conclusion possible: “[i]n nine cases out of ten the people were right, and they would not trust in the people in vain.”⁴⁴⁵ When Reverend O’Connor from Manchester offered his support, the conference even secured theological approval. In his enthusiasm, O’Connor told the assembly that “he prayed that the will of the people might be done, because he believed that the will of the people was the will of God.”⁴⁴⁶ The delegates welcomed this bold statement with loud applause. They shared the general feeling that they stood on the right side of history. Listening to the people brought moral superiority and, hopefully, also parliamentary majority. Yet, the assembly in Birmingham also had to find ways to implement procedures that would enable the participation of ordinary members in the decision-making process. For this purpose, they focused on

⁴⁴⁰ “Proceedings,” 15.

⁴⁴¹ In the extensive discussion on populism, this is an essential component of every definition. See, for instance, Margaret Canovan, “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy,” *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (March 1999): 2–16.

⁴⁴² “Proceedings,” 23.

⁴⁴³ Saunders, “Democracy.”

⁴⁴⁴ “Proceedings,” 26.

⁴⁴⁵ “Proceedings,” 26. This sort of populist rhetoric where the people were in the focus of justification could be also found in the Dutch ARP and the German SDAP. For the ambivalent role of populism in democracies, see Canovan, “Trust the People!”

⁴⁴⁶ “Proceedings,” 35. The phrase *Vox populi vox dei* originates from an eighteenth-century pamphlet whose authorship is unknown. J. P. Kenyon, *Revolution Principles: The Politics of Party, 1689-1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 209–10.

restricting powerful leaders in order to prevent the dominance of a demagogically skilled individual.

In the practical implementation of this principle the delegates in Birmingham differed remarkably from their German counterparts. In Eisenach delegates had also expressed concern about the harmful consequences of an authoritarian president, embodied in the persona of Schweitzer. Rooted in the long tradition of Social Democratic people's assemblies, they intended to make sure that every ordinary member had the opportunity to climb up on the stage and become a leader.⁴⁴⁷ Applied to the organizational structure of the new party, this meant that leadership power was shared between different offices in the SDAP board. Additional measures like the instalment of the control commission further manifested the division of power within the future party organization.

The delegates in Birmingham preferred another solution to the problem of powerful leaders that better fit the organizational tradition of Liberalism.⁴⁴⁸ This meant that instead of three leading institutions, the NLF relied on two major bodies. The first one was the general committee, which was the body for "any questions" that emerged in the daily routine of the organization.⁴⁴⁹ Its members met at least once a year. The general committee included the offices of "a President, Vice-Presidents, a Treasurer and an Honorary Secretary" and could add up to 25 members to its body.⁴⁵⁰ This general committee could be extended by appointing one of those men "who still would help the federation by their knowledge, or sympathy, or purse."⁴⁵¹ The formal functions of the general committee were described by these three rather general points:

1. To aid in the formation of new Liberal Associations based on popular representation, and generally to promote the objects of the Federation.
2. To summon the annual meeting of the Council, or any other general meeting of Council which it may deem proper.
3. To submit to the Federated Associations political questions and measures upon which united action may be considered desirable.⁴⁵²

At the conference in Birmingham, the president of the Birmingham Liberal Association J. S. Wright focused on the third point and argued that the general committee was limited to "initiative powers," but the authority to decide on political actions was with the "general body

⁴⁴⁷ Welskopp, *Das Banner der Brüderlichkeit*, 300–306.

⁴⁴⁸ See Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism*, 174. Concerns about independence were also known to Conservative Party politicians. Vernon, *Politics and the People*, 172–77.

⁴⁴⁹ "Proceedings," 33.

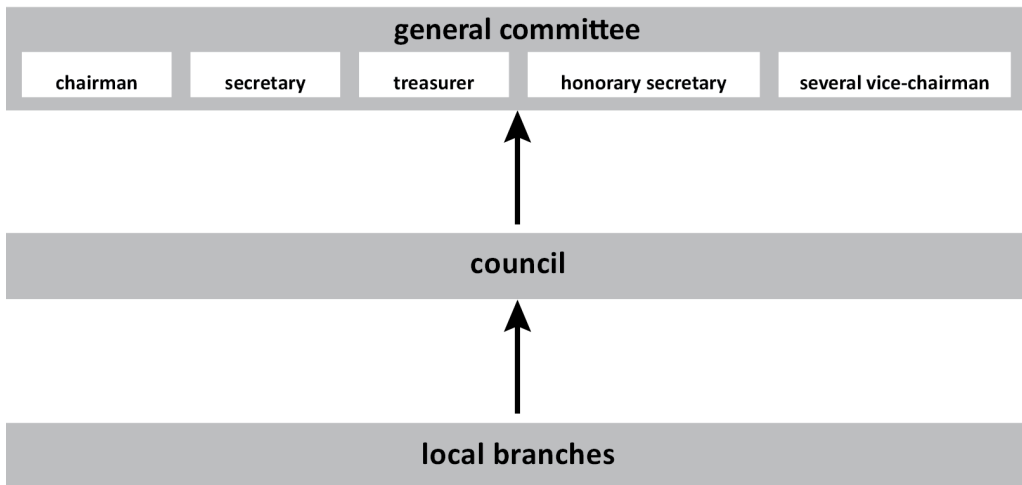
⁴⁵⁰ "Proceedings," 4. In 1877, the NLF appointed at its first congress 15 vice-presidents. "Proceedings," 2.

⁴⁵¹ "Proceedings," 33.

⁴⁵² "Proceedings," 4–5.

of representatives of different associations.”⁴⁵³ All important matters of the organization were to be determined by the delegates of local associations. The organizational body that brought together the delegates of local associations was called the council. This second important institution was the most comprehensive one, bringing the delegates of the local branches and the officers of the institution together. In one national assembly, this “general body” was supposed to make the fundamental decisions about the actions of local branches at its annual gathering.⁴⁵⁴ The council also played the major role in determining the leadership of the organization as its delegates elected the officers of the NLF.

Graph 7: Organizational structure of the British NLF



At the beginning of the conference, Chamberlain had announced that his organization guaranteed independence of local branches and would not interfere with their political orientation. Although the president had earlier written about a new Liberal program, he abandoned this idea for the new organization.⁴⁵⁵ For the delegates this commitment to local political autonomy was an important prerequisite of support. Spence Watson, delegate for the Liberal Association in Newcastle-on-Tyne, was relieved when he heard that the NLF granted local association political freedom: “[a]t first he had some fear, when this thing was mentioned to him, lest it should be allowed in any way to interfere with the independence of their local associations. That fear had been very much dissipated.”⁴⁵⁶ The chairman of the Liberal Association in Portsmouth, Alderman Baker, agreed to “the course now proposed” for the new organization with independent local branches. In fact, his support was “the more heartily

⁴⁵³ “Proceedings,” 33.

⁴⁵⁴ “Proceedings,” 33.

⁴⁵⁵ Chamberlain, “The Liberal Party”; Chamberlain, “The next Page.”

⁴⁵⁶ “Proceedings,” 28.

because (...) they were not under the obligation of accepting a particular programme. (Hear, hear).⁴⁵⁷

In practice, there was a certain amount of flexibility in the independence of local branches. At the conference, Chamberlain introduced three general political principles to clarify what their approach to Liberalism meant: “the right of every man to participate in the government of the country, on the impartial administration of justice, or the assertion of complete religious equality.”⁴⁵⁸ These points were not considered an official program, but they can be seen as a means to prescribe the political agenda of the NLF. Chamberlain described their status by announcing that he did not “believe that there is any difference of opinion amongst Liberals in the country upon simple elementary questions of Liberal policy.”⁴⁵⁹ Not all delegates were willing to accept this argument for their formally independent associations. Davies from Greenwich remarked that “[h]e could not agree altogether with the very admirable speech (...) by their esteemed friend Mr. Chamberlain.”⁴⁶⁰ The reason for his opposition was that “the principal object of this section was universal suffrage.”⁴⁶¹

Davies’ intervention was not successful, and the congress sided with Chamberlain and responded aggressively to Davies’ comment with “[c]ries of “No, no.”⁴⁶² Another delegate immediately intervened and “rose to a point of order” to remind the assembly that “[i]f they were to consider general principles of Liberal policy there would be no end to the Conference.”⁴⁶³ Although applause followed this intervention, Davis made another attempt to express his concerns about the political agenda. But the leaders of the conference were determined to prevent further obstruction and discussion about the highly contested topic of suffrage. After Davis had made his second attempt to express his concerns, we learn from the protocol that Chamberlain as “chairman ruled Mr. Davis out of order, and he sat down.”⁴⁶⁴ The discussion over the political mission of the NLF was terminated.

Despite its paramount role in Birmingham, independence of local branches was not the only possible tool party organizations had to restrain their political leaders. The diversity of nineteenth-century party organizations becomes apparent if one looks again briefly at the case of the German Social Democrats. For the comrades around Bebel, the political program was a means to strengthen membership influence on the strategy of the party. In Eisenach, Bebel explained that exactly because the SDAP program impeded single-handed leadership decisions,

⁴⁵⁷ “Proceedings,” 25.

⁴⁵⁸ “Proceedings,” 17.

⁴⁵⁹ “Proceedings,” 16–17.

⁴⁶⁰ “Proceedings,” 34.

⁴⁶¹ “Proceedings,” 34. Universal suffrage was a contested issue throughout the nineteenth century, see Saunders, “Democracy.”

⁴⁶² “Proceedings,” 34.

⁴⁶³ “Proceedings,” 34.

⁴⁶⁴ “Proceedings,” 34.

the congress needed to formalize its political agenda in a written program: “But, my gentlemen, it is equally also necessary, if we want to found a new organization today, that we speak out clearly and certainly about the direction in which our party should be let, that we speak out clearly and certainly about the goals that our party should and must follow.”⁴⁶⁵ A formally written and detailed political manifesto tied Social Democratic leaders to the decisions of the representative party congress. Delegates had the power to make political decisions. They were the ones to discuss and vote about the specific points of the party’s political manifesto. Whereas in Birmingham the NLF delegates embraced their local independence, in Eisenach the existence of a formal Social Democratic program guaranteed the power of local branches and was, therefore, never questioned.

4. The Gathering of the Preliminary Central Committee of the ARP

4.1 *Democrats against Aristocrats in Utrecht*

Did these considerations about organizational procedures also matter in the Dutch Anti-Revolutionary Party? In the previous chapter, I showed that the emergence of the ARP was related to a struggle over the mass mobilization of the Orthodox Protestant movement in the 1870s. Before the foundation of the party in the year 1879, the leader of the Anti-Revolutionary movement, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, distanced himself from the members of the small parliamentary group of Anti-Revolutionaries. In Groen’s view, these parliamentarians did not sufficiently agitate on the most pressing political topic of the time: education. This conflict made coordinated parliamentary action difficult among Anti-Revolutionaries and eventually contributed to the foundation of the party organization.⁴⁶⁶ Like their colleagues abroad, Dutch historians have suggested different explanations for the conflict among Dutch Anti-Revolutionaries. Disagreement about the political course was accompanied by a personal dimension, driven by miscommunication, disappointed trust and inflated egos. In particular, Groen van Prinsterer interpreted his former allies’ reservations in the school question as a personal betrayal.⁴⁶⁷ The father of the Anti-Revolutionary ideology could not accept that his parliamentary faction repeatedly failed to achieve policy change. In response to this growing frustration, but without the direct support of Groen, the younger Abraham Kuiper developed a new approach to politics outside of the traditional elite, campaigning for a political program and a formal membership organization. After Groen’s death in 1876, Kuiper used extra-

⁴⁶⁵ “Aber, meine Herren, es ist, wenn wir heute eine neue Organisation gründen wollen, auch zugleich notwendig, daß wir uns klar und bestimmt über die Richtung, in welcher die Partei geleitet werden soll, daß wir uns klar und bestimmt über die Zielpunkte aussprechen, die die Partei verfolgen soll und muß.” Walsker et al., “Protokoll,” 16.

⁴⁶⁶ For an overview of the early phase of the ARP, see e.g. Kuiper, *Herenmuiterij*; Deursen, “Van antirevolutionaire richting”; Janssens, *opbouw*.

⁴⁶⁷ Hartogh, “Groen van Prinsterer”; Kuiper, *Herenmuiterij*, 16–17.

parliamentary agitation to push for a new approach to political representation - a strategy that was similar to that used by the German Social Democrats. The comrades around Bebel also relied on membership organization to make their voices heard in politics. There was also an important connection between the conflict of Anti-Revolutionaries and Joseph Chamberlain's opposition to the parliamentary leaders of the Liberal Party. The fact that Kuyper was the son of an ordinary Protestant minister and his opponents were primarily aristocrats further escalated the dispute, not unlike the entrepreneurial Chamberlain's struggle with the Whigs in the parliamentary Liberal Party. In all three cases, the disagreement was about the proper form of political representation. The political newcomers demanded from the traditional parliamentary elite a stronger role for ordinary people.⁴⁶⁸ Like his German and British counterparts, Kuyper used controversial terminology to emphasize the innovative aspect of his organization. In a *De Standaard* article in 1875, he argued "that no government authority can be held, if it is not carried by the belief in authority by the people," but emphasized that this did not mean that "the popular will" was "the source" of government authority.⁴⁶⁹ Even the contested term "democratic" was incorporated into his language, when he wrote as early as in 1874 that "if Europe has a future, then it will be one of democracy."⁴⁷⁰ After the foundation of the ARP, he would defend a "Christian-democratic development" of politics against the conservative aristocrats of the party.⁴⁷¹

Despite this democratic rhetoric, at the ARP inaugural assembly in Utrecht, the delegates were not as committed as British Radical Liberals or German Social Democrats to rigid assembly procedures. The "assembly of the preliminary central committee of Anti-Revolutionary electoral associations" lasted only an afternoon, limiting the discussions to Kuyper's most important agenda items.⁴⁷² The ambitious Protestant minister had spent years working towards this meeting at the cost of great personal sacrifices, including a nervous breakdown.⁴⁷³ His discipline and hard work made Kuyper appear to be the ideal chairman (voorzitter) for the meeting. In this capacity, Kuyper not only offered the obligatory prayer to start the meeting but also delivered the opening speech to the meeting. Like Bebel and Chamberlain, Kuyper justified the new organization by citing the historic struggle of his political community for emancipation. Groen van Prinsterer had been the ideological leader of the Anti-Revolutionaries, but his political mission could not be completed because of a lack of support

⁴⁶⁸ Already Chamberlain's first biographer Garvin remarked that in the party founder's life "democracy [had] to become nearly all" in comparison to other lesser issues like religious dissent. Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, 1932, 1:148.

⁴⁶⁹ "dat geen regeeringsgezag stand kan houden, tenzij het gedragen wordt door geloof aan gezag bij het volk", "de volkswil" "de bron" "Volkszin," *De Standaard*, August 23, 1875, 1, Delpher.

⁴⁷⁰ "zoo Europa een toekomst heeft, dan wacht het die van de Democratie" quoted in Velde, "De domesticatie van democratie," 14.

⁴⁷¹ "christelijk-democratische ontwikkeling" Quoted in Koch, *Abraham Kuyper*, 362.

⁴⁷² Kuyper, "Vergadering van het Voorlopig Centraal Comité," 1.

⁴⁷³ Koch, *Abraham Kuyper*, 156-69.

and staff. In Kuyper's words, Groen "lacked a corps of officers who could spread his ideas and make them productive among the people."⁴⁷⁴ After Kuyper had explained how the gathering stood in the tradition of the Anti-Revolutionary parliamentary politics, the delegates moved to debating the organizational structure of the future party.⁴⁷⁵ In this situation, the delegates discussed how to establish fair procedures for discussion to honor their duty to represent their constituency. When Esser suggested voting for the draft of the regulations (concept-reglement) "in bloc", his suggestion was criticized by the other delegates.⁴⁷⁶ Fabius from Amsterdam reminded the assembly of their duty to speak for their constituencies; this mandate surely "includes specific discussion of some points."⁴⁷⁷

This was the moment when Kuyper intervened to prevent a detailed and time-consuming debate. As chairman, he proposed a "middle way" between Esser and Fabius that was "to raise the issue not article after article, but free discussion of points mentioned – whose main principles govern the regulations."⁴⁷⁸ In order to avoid a detailed debate, Kuyper suggested focusing on the essential points of the program. While in Eisenach or Birmingham delegates would have protested against the considerable restriction of debating rights, the Utrecht assembly accepted the suggestion, not even discussing the possible side effects. To obstruct any opposition, Kuyper had included the various Anti-Revolutionary interests in his proposal, making it easy for delegates to agree to his three points.

1. all political powers are represented: electoral associations, press, dignitaries.
2. no governing, but serving committee! With autonomy of districts.
3. leadership by a small committee: with a smaller one for urgent and secret business.⁴⁷⁹

The first point established a compromise between the electoral associations and the traditional elite of aristocratic parliamentarians. The status of the press as one of the three political powers not only strengthened Kuyper's own position as editor of *De Standaard*. Editors of Protestant newspapers were also an important group within the Anti-Revolutionary

⁴⁷⁴ "miste een Corps van Officieren, dat zijne denkbeelden verbreidde en vruchtbaar maakte onder het volk" Kuyper, "Vergadering van het Voorlopig Centraal Comité," 1.

⁴⁷⁵ The sociologist Max Weber established three forms of legitimacy: rational, traditional and charismatic. Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Hauptwerke der großen Denker (Paderborn: Voltmedia, n.a.), 218.

⁴⁷⁶ "en bloc" Kuyper, "Vergadering van het Voorlopig Centraal Comité," 3.

⁴⁷⁷ "houdt in bepaalde bespreking van sommige punten" Kuyper, 3.

⁴⁷⁸ "middenweg", "niet articeel na articeel aan de orde stellen, maar vrije bespreking van opgenoemde punten – diens hoofdbeginselen beheerschen het reglement" Kuyper, 3.

⁴⁷⁹ "1. alle politieke machten worden vertegenwoordigd: kiesverenigingen, pers, waardigheid bekleedend. 2. geen heerschend, maar dienend comité! Met autonomie der districten. 3. leiding door een klein comité: met een kleiner voor spoedeisende en geheime zaken." Kuyper, 3.

movement. Already in the early 1870s, Kuyper had arranged several meetings for them, where the possibility of a political program was discussed and the decision was made to publish Kuyper's proposal in 1871.⁴⁸⁰ More problematic were the other two points. The third point of Kuyper's proposal provided the ARP's leadership with unusual privileges by granting them decision-making power in the vaguely formulated cases of "urgent and secret business."⁴⁸¹ The relevance of the second point becomes apparent in comparison to the other two party organizations. Evidently, the Anti-Revolutionaries shared their concerns about the manipulation of ordinary people with British Radical Leaders. The Dutch version of leadership restriction was to restrain the central committee to a serving, instead of a ruling, function. In this way, the delegates in Utrecht adhered to an approach similar to that of the NLF in Birmingham. They decided that local associations were independent from central leaders' decisions. The statutes of the ARP demanded that the "affiliation with the central committee" could "never" mean that local electoral associations were expected "to give up a single piece of their autonomy."⁴⁸² The regulations further clarified that "Neither the central committee, nor the deputy assembly possess relative to the electoral associations anything else than advisory or contractual competency."⁴⁸³ For delegates, this proposal provided the appropriate balance of freedom and efficiency. As stated in points two and three local chapters were granted political independence, but the central leadership could respond swiftly in cases of urgency. Immediately after Kuyper had presented these points to the delegates, they were "generally accepted."⁴⁸⁴

4.2 The "Sensitive" Party Leader

Kuyper himself was aware of the explosive potential of his dominant personality and leadership style. In Utrecht, not all delegates were satisfied with the limiting of general discussions. Fabius, who would later be one of the opponents of Kuyper's leadership style, criticized the proposal and demanded clarification about the regulations. Three other men followed his example and suggested some changes. They inquired about the size of the central committee, the specific status of local branches and the number of local constituencies in the deputy assembly. Kuyper had actually triggered this discussion when he argued that only the ARP enabled local followers to be heard in national politics. In the organization of the ARP, this promise was related to the establishment of a representative organizational structure. Like the German SDAP and the

⁴⁸⁰ Janssens, *opbouw*, 79–80; Kuiper, *Herenmuiterij*, 18–19.

⁴⁸¹ "voor spoedeisende en geheime zaken." Kuyper, "Vergadering van het Voorlopig Centraal Comité," 3.

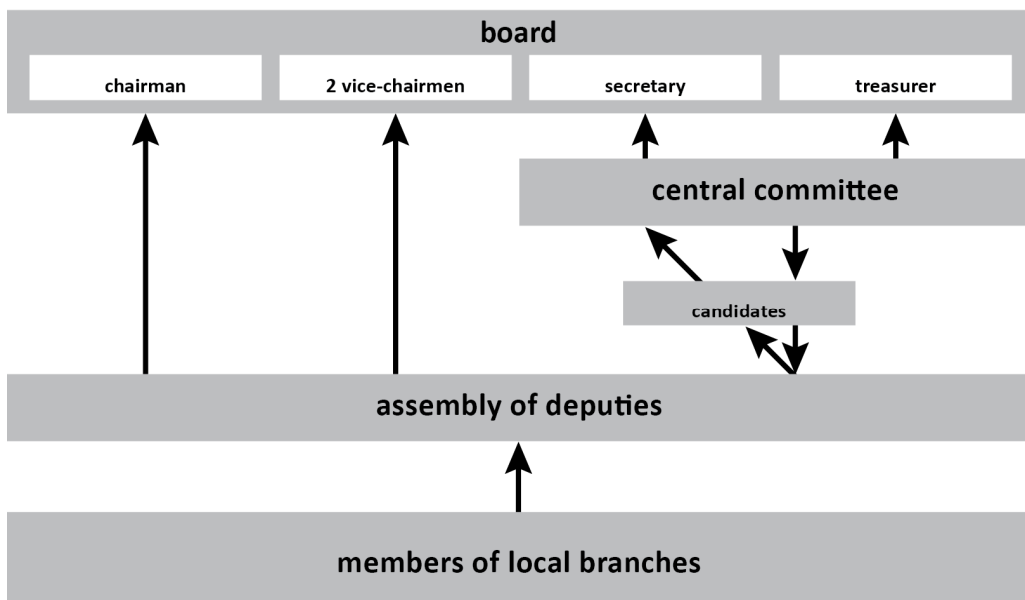
⁴⁸² "aansluiting aan het Central Comité" "nooit" "eenig stuk of deel van hare autonomie te hebben prijs gegeven" "Statuten," 5.

⁴⁸³ "Het Centraal Comité, noch ook de Deputaten-vergadering, bezit ten opzichte der Kiesverenigingen eenige andere dan louter raadgevende of contractueele bevoegdheid." "Statuten," 5.

⁴⁸⁴ "algemeen aangenomen" Kuyper, "Vergadering van het Voorlopig Centraal Comité," 3.

British NLF, Anti-Revolutionaries were governed by a general assembly of delegates. This assembly of deputies (deputaten-vergadering) was constituted by the “representatives with voting power” of local associations.⁴⁸⁵ In addition, representatives of the press who agreed with the program of the party could participate “with an advisory vote.”⁴⁸⁶ The deputy assembly was of particular relevance in national election years. In order to conduct a successful electoral campaign, it was supposed to convene “at least four weeks before the day of the elections.”⁴⁸⁷ The statutes of the ARP determined that these meetings did not select electoral candidates to run under the party’s banner. In principle, local associations chose their own candidates. Only when they had problems finding a proper candidate would the central committee be “authorized to recommend candidate”⁴⁸⁸

Graph 8: Organizational structure of the Dutch ARP



Under closer scrutiny, however, it appears that the leading institution of the ARP, the central committee (centraal comité), had exceptional power. Five members of the central committee formed the board (moderamen), they were named after the synodal board of the Protestant church. The officers were the chairman (praeses), two vice-chairmen (assessoren), the secretary (secretaries) and the treasurer (thesaurier).⁴⁸⁹ The selection of the members of the central committee was characterized by the idea of centralization. In a biannual rhythm,

⁴⁸⁵ “stemhebbende afgevaardigden” “Statuten,” 5.

⁴⁸⁶ “met adviseerende stem” “Statuten.”

⁴⁸⁷ “minstens vier weken vóór den dag der verkiezingen” “Statuten,” 1.

⁴⁸⁸ “bevoegd (...) kandidaten aan te bevelen” “Statuten,” 6.

⁴⁸⁹ “Statuten,” 2.

four members left the committee, following a complicated procedure according to the year of their election. The new members of the committee were not elected by the deputy assembly whose choice was limited to the “pairs nominated by the central committee.”⁴⁹⁰ Moreover, of the five board members, secretary and treasurer were determined by the members of the central committee themselves. Only chairman and vice-chairmen were chosen by the deputy assembly. The officers of the board together with the other eight members of the central committee had “a conclusive vote” at the deputy assembly.⁴⁹¹ They also had the task of negotiating with other political parties in parliament.⁴⁹² This means that, in contrast to Kuyper’s full-hearted promise of local independence, the parliamentary strategy was determined by the central committee, in particular the board. In fact, the chairman and the two vice-chairmen formed the permanent advisory commission (*vaste commissie van advies*) that was responsible for “the political leadership of the party.”⁴⁹³ For Kuyper this meant that he had control over the ARP’s daily business “under supervision and according to the information of the central committee.”⁴⁹⁴

Taking the other two cases of this study into consideration, there are several ways to interpret the inaugural assembly of the ARP. The procedures in Utrecht demonstrate Kuyper’s abilities in maneuvering strategically. The Protestant minister had prepared for years to become the leader of Anti-Revolutionaries.⁴⁹⁵ Still, at the meeting in Utrecht, Kuyper felt compelled to ask the delegates to approve his leadership. When Esser proposed him as chairman of the new party, Kuyper used the opportunity to publicly display humble restraint. The future party leader dramatically refused the office, demanding the formal confirmation by all attendees. After De Savornin Lohman supported Esser’s proposal, the congress elected Kuyper as chairman. Only now Kuyper did accept the vote, but he asked the assembly for a “statement in the minutes that he came to it only after unfruitful resistance.”⁴⁹⁶ With this event written into the official minutes of the meeting, Kuyper ensured that not only the attendees, but also later generations could learn about his seemingly modest approach to leadership. This procedural approach provided him with legitimacy, even if his election was already decided before the gathering.

Was Kuyper’s concern about fair selection procedures a well-orchestrated theatrical performance or a genuine attempt to introduce democratic representation? If we look at his appointment in isolation, the vote of the influential delegates seemed staged, almost like a

⁴⁹⁰ “tweetalen, door het Centraal Comité voorgedragen.” “Statuten,” 1.

⁴⁹¹ “een concludeerende stem” “Statuten,” 2.

⁴⁹² “Statuten,” 1. “Statuten,” 7.

⁴⁹³ ‘politieke leiding van de partij’ “Statuten,” 2.

⁴⁹⁴ “onder toezicht en volgens informatie van het Centraal Comité.” “Statuten,” 2.

⁴⁹⁵ See, for instance, Koch who shows that already in 1869 Kuyper argued for a political party in his correspondence with Groen van Prinsterer Koch, *Abraham Kuyper*, 118–19.

⁴⁹⁶ “verklaring in de notulen dat hij eerst na vruchteloos verzet daartoe kwam.” Kuyper, “Vergadering van het Voorlopig Centraal Comité,” 5.

performance of theatrical proportions, devised to legitimize Kuyper's office as chairman. His reluctant response made his candidacy appear as the consequence of his followers' request. Moreover, his three-point proposal fit the scholarly characterization of a manipulative leader who cleverly obstructed any discussion at the inaugural gathering.⁴⁹⁷ In this chapter, however, a more nuanced perspective on the role of representative procedures was proposed. Instead of debating the implementation of such claims according to current understanding of democracy, their importance for the discussion at the inaugural meetings has been shown. In this sense, Kuyper's appointment – like the fight about organizational procedures between *Eisenachers* and *Schweitzerians* – was about the best method to organize ordinary people. In Britain, the delegates at the inaugural conference in Birmingham were similarly devoted to their “popular” organization. Chamberlain, who had been a committed mayor of Birmingham, was a man whose “whole sympathy was with the working class.”⁴⁹⁸ Even if this was only one side of Chamberlain's motives for party foundation, his political ideology did promote the implementation of representative structures. Likewise, from Kuyper's personal correspondence, we know that he was very much aware of his impression on others. The future leader of the ARP sought the respect of his followers, asking for their approval to make his nomination successful. This need for recognition also influenced Kuyper's leadership style. The brilliant political operator was, as a historian wrote, “always very sensitive (...) for the voice of the people.”⁴⁹⁹

5. The Meaning of Representative Procedures

In conclusion, men like Kuyper, Chamberlain and Bebel acted according to what they thought was most appropriate in their historical context. For the self-acclaimed representatives of the people this meant that the organizational structure of the party was the manifestation of their promise to improve political representation. At the founding assembly, other topics like efficiency or legal restrictions were mentioned, but most important in the discussions were representation and the various possibilities of its implementation in organizational procedures. In order to understand how party founders justified the structure of their organization, this chapter has identified common discourses that connect party founders in very different circumstances. While the discussions started immediately at the beginning of the SDAP congress, also the assemblies of the British NLF and the Dutch ARP elaborated on the best way to speak for their members. A reoccurring element was that the party should function as the representative organization of the respective community of ordinary people, embodied by

⁴⁹⁷ Koch, *Abraham Kuyper*.

⁴⁹⁸ James Louis Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain* (London: Macmillan, 1932), 148.

⁴⁹⁹ Kuiper, *Herenmuiterij*, 64. The populist rhetoric of Kuyper has been repeatedly described in the literature, for a study of his political style, see Velde, *Stijlen van leiderschap*, chap. 2. For an international perspective, see Hoekstra, “De kracht van het gesproken woord.”

German workers, British Radical Liberals and Dutch Orthodox Protestants. Although the specific implementation of this idea differed, depending on ideological conviction and the specific situation of party founders, great emphasis was given to the establishment of fair procedures of discussion at the gatherings.

This approach was also applied to the organizational structure of the three parties. It is remarkable how much time was spent discussing the question which organizational procedures were suited best to ensure proper representation. For delegates the most imminent threat to representation was a powerful political leader who could manipulate ordinary members according to his own selfish agenda. In the case of the German Social Democratic Workers' Party, the example of the president of the General German Assembly of Workers Schweitzer gave actual relevance to this concern, but also British Liberals and Dutch Anti-Revolutionaries referred to this threat. While at the founding conference in Birmingham, there were concerns about the dominance of the group around Joseph Chamberlain, in Utrecht Kuyper had to show modesty to convince the attendees that he was a suitable leader. Comparing the discourse in three party organizations, we note different ways to approach the problem of dominant leadership. On the one hand, there was the German Social Democratic approach that relied on strongly formalized procedures and a detailed political program to prevent the leadership of the party from gaining too much power. The founders of the British National Liberal Federation and Dutch Anti-Revolutionary Party, on the other hand, consolidated the independence of local associations to make sure that the influence of leaders was restricted to an administrative role. Despite the many difficulties in the early years of party organizations, it is important to note that the foundation process of these three cases was dominated by the principles of representation. Remarkably, this early commitment has shaped the literature on early parties that often uncritically accepted the nineteenth-century discourse on representativeness without precisely understanding its contested nature and compelling effects. As the next chapter will show, in the first years after foundation, the commitment to representation developed its own dynamic. There was a constant need to balance the desire to uphold the representative principles of the founding congress against the necessity of maintaining a functioning organization.

