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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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## VI. Conclusion

This book started with the question whether we have reached the end of the democratic membership party. This is the impression one can get from the alarmed analyses of the current mass media. In these worried reports, parties have become an endangered species worthy of protection. Like polar bears whose natural habitat is melting directly under their paws, parties have lost their traditional membership basis in specific social groups. Scholars have noted that parties experience decreasing membership numbers and might be transforming into institutions of the state.<sup>850</sup> The consequences of this development are hard to predict. But there is an overall consensus that the crisis of the party can be understood as a crisis of democracy. If parties no longer fulfil the mediating function between civil society and the state, democracy will be deprived of an important representative mechanism.<sup>851</sup> This idea that parties perform a key democratic function goes back to some of the very first party founders in the second half of the nineteenth century. Men like Bebel, Kuyper and Chamberlain justified their new model of political organization by claiming to provide the representation of ordinary people in national politics. They argued that the growing numbers of the working class, their improved education or need for religious education demanded the integration of the masses into the political process. This narrative was so appealing that it even shaped the later academic literature.<sup>852</sup> This teleological perspective made it seem as if party emergence was a logical, maybe even inevitable, consequence of the changing socio-economic structure and political institutions of the nineteenth century.

In this dissertation, I have approached party organizations from a different perspective. Instead of accepting party emergence as a natural development, the analysis started with the observation that party organizations were founded in the same period under different ideological banners in different circumstances in Germany, Britain and the Netherlands. The main research question was: why and how did the first party organizations emerge? In order to respond to this question, the dissertation analyzed the ideas and practices

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<sup>850</sup> This idea has been developed in detail in Seymour Martin Lipset, Stein Rokkan, and Robert R. Alford, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives* (New York: Free Press, 1967). Also see Biezen, "Political Parties as Public Utilities."

<sup>851</sup> This is the famous argument of Katz and Mair, "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy"; Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013). See also for a crisis of political parties and alternative institutional mechanisms. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*; Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy: Impartiality, Reflexivity, Proximity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). A more critical view can be found on the empirical and theoretical implications of membership decline in Ruud Koole, "Cadre, Catch-All or Cartel? A Comment on the Notion of the Cartel Party," *Party Politics* 2, no. 4 (January 10, 1996): 507–23; Kitschelt, "Citizens, Politicians, and Party Cartellization"; Biezen, "Political Parties as Public Utilities"; Enroth, "Cartelization versus Representation?"

<sup>852</sup> Duverger, for instance, mentions as influential for his classic work both Robert Michels and Mosei Ostrogorski.

of party founders. While today the diminishing size of party membership is a growing concern, early party leaders recruited a surprisingly small number of members. The reason for this was not a lack of appreciation of quantity. To the contrary, nineteenth-century party founders argued that members' role in the structure of their parties gave them the right to participate in the political process. And yet, the first party organizations reached only hundreds or thousands, instead of the envisioned hundreds of thousands. Moreover, the size of the membership party was not always a first priority. The founders of the National Liberal Federation (NLF) and the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) abstained from creating or publishing a central membership register, while the Social Democratic Workers' Party (SDAP) mainly used them to collect membership dues.

If the first modern parties did not conform to the ideal of large membership organization, what does this mean for their self-acclaimed status as democratic organizations? To understand the role of democracy in early party organizations, I have studied early party organizations through the lenses of rhetoric and practice. In this perspective, the emergence of the party was not a natural process, but actively supported by a small group of committed activists. In contrast to the conventional explanation for party emergence, parties' ability to reinterpret existing circumstances into a hopeful opportunity structure played an important role in the foundation process. Against the opposition of their peers, party founders created a narrative about a new system of representation as a pressing necessity and party organization as the proper course of action. Not only German Social Democrats, but also Dutch Anti-Revolutionaries and British Radical Liberals believed that the new organizations were powerful instruments, providing a sense of feasibility. Tailored to the nineteenth-century belief in the power of the masses, party founders promised their ordinary followers that a better society was possible. This narrative of the early party organization was not a deception. Like many myths, it was tied to a tangible experience in organizational practices. As the analysis of the three cases shows, party founders had important reasons to fulfil their promise of democracy. Not only had they mobilized their members with this narrative, they also needed to justify their actions to themselves.<sup>853</sup> At the same time, they were faced with the challenge of molding a geographically divided membership into a political organization with a broad political program. Their original conceptualizations of democracy in which ordinary members were directly represented in the decision-making process did not fit the reality of their large membership organization.

## 1. Transnational Dimensions of Party Formation

The transnational dimension of party emergence becomes apparent when analyzing party founders as agents of a similar process in different national circumstances. At first sight, the

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<sup>853</sup> See this essay about leaders' commitment to legitimacy. Rodney Barker, *Legitimizing Identities: The Self-Presentations of Rulers and Subjects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

results of the approach seemed to be disappointing. With the exception of the example of Kuyper's report in *De Standaard* about the trial of Bebel and Liebknecht, there are no direct indications that the founders of the three cases knew about each other. But the reference to the two German Social Democrats by the Dutch Anti-Revolutionary newspaper suggests a more indirect connection. Indeed, party founders participated in a European intellectual sphere that shaped their understanding of the potential of organization. This is one of the main reasons why men like August Bebel, Joseph Chamberlain and Abraham Kuyper decided to use a pre-existing organizational structure outside of parliament for their mission to establish a more immediate link between ordinary people and parliamentary representatives.

The first chapter explored the reasons for this commonality by combining theoretical approaches with the historiography of the three parties. The emergence of party organizations in these different circumstances was part of a common phenomenon that had its roots in the nineteenth-century enthusiasm for organizing. Despite their different ideological settings and widely differing national backgrounds, the founders of the SDAP, NLF and ARP knew and admired the British Anti-Corn League that had impressed European contemporaries with its successful campaign against the import restriction on grain. The fact that a Tory government had complied in the face of extra-parliamentary pressure made the League a shining example of organizational power. While the political success of the League was in many aspects exceptional, its organizational model could not be applied to other circumstances without adjustment. In this sense, the League gave party founders a specific example of the power of organization, but its practices had to be adjusted to each movement's tradition and political culture.

The belief in the power of organization had also a much more concrete dimension in the personal lives of early party founders. As young men, Bebel, Chamberlain and Kuyper had become members of local associations like the Commercial Educational Workers' Association in Leipzig, the Debating Society in Birmingham or the Christian-Historical Debating Club in Utrecht. These local associations not only had a sociable function and provided an invigorating environment where motivated and disciplined young men could acquire essential leadership skills for future political offices. Public speaking was one aspect of local associational culture, but soon party founders accepted administrative responsibilities, after they had risen to the upper ranks of local associations. Moreover, local associations provided the opportunity to gain the respect of peers. For party founders, organization was both the abstract myth of the powerful yet unreachable Anti-Corn Law League, as well as the practices of local associations in the daily lives of party founders. Their experience of working together for a common goal gave the distant example of the Anti-Corn Law League a direct meaning in sociable routines.

## **2. Education as the Missing Link**

The first organizational experiences of party founders were not necessarily political in the strongest sense of the word. The second chapter shows that, even when party founders joined

national organizations that united local associations under a common organizational banner, they could not easily transform their organizational practices into political parties. First, not all organizations had a political agenda. The German Federation of German Workers' Associations was a non-political organization whose purpose was to prevent further radicalization of workers. Its founders hoped that the opportunity of social mobility could become an attractive alternative to political protest. The British National Education League was most explicit about its political mission to represent the interest of the religious minority of non-conformists. The Dutch Anti-School Law League was contested among Dutch Orthodox Protestants who were skeptical about the association mania of their time. The second important feature that distinguished the new parties from previous national organizations was their broad political agenda. This was a significant adjustment from the single-issue organizations of the Dutch Anti-School Law League and the British National Education League.

How can we explain the transition from these earlier forms of national organization to the first party organizations? A comparison of the three organizations suggests that education was an important yet understudied link between previous associations and the first party organizations. In addition to organization (discussed in the first chapter), the idea and practices of education made party organization a thinkable practice. The three countries shared a strong nineteenth-century belief in the power of education to improve society not only to train workers, but also as a requirement for broader political participation. The nineteenth-century discussion about suffrage rights, for instance, focused on the question whether the new voters were educated enough to make a responsible decision.<sup>854</sup> In this and other ways, there was a dimension of social mobility inherent in discussions about education that inspired national organizational activities in the three countries. This was especially visible in the Federation of German Workers' Associations where most local associations were committed to workers' education. The German case also shows how education was not only a rhetorical frame, but also an actual experience, both on the individual as well as collective level. For German workers, membership in educational associations provided the possibility of social improvement, but discussions about education also cast light on their shared interest in working together for a common good. This combination of individual experience and collective discourse also shaped the missions of the British Liberals and the Dutch Anti-Revolutionaries. The two single-issue organizations united the national constituency of Orthodox Protestants and Radical Liberals behind their mission of school education to cater their religious convictions. Their struggle was not limited to local constituencies: the growing role of state authorities inspired activists to cooperate on a national scale. In addition, mass in the sense of quantity became a relevant argument that was directly tied to the movement's political legitimacy. The members of the Federation of German Workers' Associations, Anti-School League and National Education League believed that by working together they could improve the situation of German workers, Dutch Orthodox Protestants and British Liberals respectively. For this purpose, they needed to

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<sup>854</sup> Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote*.

reach a great number of people. The scale of the movement was an important indicator of their success.

In these large - though strictly speaking - not mass communities, party founders like Bebel, Kuyper and Chamberlain soon rose to the highest ranks of leadership. From their prominent positions, they argued that the organizations of their national communities constituted a move in the right direction, but had not reached their goal yet. If education, and more generally living conditions, were increasingly determined by state authorities, then it made sense for ordinary people to more directly influence the political decision-making process. Because the future of the nation was a popular concern, this argument could take different dimensions depending on the specific national context and ideological convictions. The British National Education League believed that state authorities should support public schools whereas the Dutch Anti-School Law League demanded independence from state control. In the Federation of German Workers' Associations there was an increasing demand to combine the social agenda of the organization with a more explicitly political one. At this moment, the foundation of early party organizations became a tangible possibility that would soon seem an imperative necessity.

### 3. The Founding Process of Early Party Organizations

For party founders, the social background of their followers was less important than their quantity. This essentially egalitarian notion distinguished the German SDAP, British NLF and Dutch ARP from traditional conceptions of representation and mobilized their followers. The third chapter analyzed how this representative claim was implemented in the organizations' practice. The inaugural assemblies of the three party organizations show that the emancipatory message of education was translated into a broader criticism of existing social and political structures. Ordinary men could not only rise above their social status in schools and associations, but also gain control of political institutions. The delegates at the founding assemblies were thrilled by the idea that the people could have more influence in the political process. Instead of focusing exclusively on the role of representatives, they also thought about the role of the represented. The first point of their discussion was: how to organize the decision-making procedure at the assembly itself? For the delegates of the SDAP in 1869, the conflict between *Schweitzerians* and *Eisenachers* escalated over the issue of representation when one side accused the other of dictatorship. But it was not only the German SDAP, famous in the literature for its organizational structure, that tried to implement representative structures.<sup>855</sup>

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<sup>855</sup> Largely uncontested, former generations of party scholars have argued that the "the technique of organizing mass parties was invented (...) by the socialist movement." Maurice Duverger, *Party Politics and Pressure Groups: A Comparative Introduction* (New York: Crowell, 1972). See also Nipperdey, *Die Organisation der deutschen Parteien vor 1918*.

Also at the meetings of the British NLF and the Dutch ARP establishing a representative organization was the issue that mattered most to delegates.

When it came to implementing this proud commitment, party founders turned to the organizational tradition of their political ideologies. The three inaugural assemblies agreed that for the new system of representation to function properly, they needed to protect their members from the manipulation of powerful leaders. German Social Democrats used a thorough political program that tied its leadership board to the decisions at the annual congress. Congress delegates were directly elected by the members of the local organizations. In contrast to the *Schweitzerian* General German Workers' Association, the *Eisenacher* SDAP was not ruled by a single and powerful political leader. The board of the party consisted of five members whose hosting branch was determined by annual congresses and whose officers were elected by local members. In the early years of the SDAP, the board was replaced in an annual rhythm. It was also controlled by the control commission, whose location was likewise determined at the annual congress.

The NLF delegates in Birmingham in 1877 developed a different procedure to realize their representative ideals. They saw themselves as the avant-garde of democratic renewal when they optimistically welcomed the popular character of their organization. The general principle was similar to the SDAP's commitment to avoid powerful leaders, but they approached leadership from the liberal tradition of political autonomy. Instead of binding their leaders to a political program, they formally stipulated that local branches were independent from the political decisions of the general committee. Local autonomy was also an important topic at the party congress of the ARP in Utrecht in 1879, where Abraham Kuyper announced that local associations would remain independent from the party's leading central committee. At the same time, the ARP also incorporated a mechanism that was similar to German Social Democracy. Years before the inaugural assembly, Kuyper drafted an extensive political program that was much more authoritative than that of the German SDAP. Kuyper used this political manifesto as a pretext to directly intervene in local party chapters. He demanded that electoral candidates publicly commit themselves to the political principles of the ARP. In this case, political representation of ordinary people meant that the aristocratic elite of the ARP had to follow the instructions of the new party leader.

#### **4. Three Models of Representation**

These different representative principles were continued in the specific organizational practices of the three parties after the inaugural assemblies. The fourth chapter discussed how the idea of representation was implemented in organizational routine. Using Max Weber's three categories of legitimacy: tradition, charisma and procedure, different ways to implement democratic promises of representation were shown. While these three categories are ideal types and do not completely resemble the experience of the three party organizations, they

give an overall impression of their representative practices. Here as well, tradition provided orientation to develop practices of political representation. Differences emerged in the categories of charisma and procedures that dominated the representative structure of ARP, SDAP and NLF. Protestant minister Kuyper was, from the beginning, the most visible representative of the religious ARP. His first period as an MP (1874-1877) was a personal disappointment. Hence, he did not strive for parliamentary office, but focused on ruling the party organization. His preferred instrument for that was his newspaper *De Standaard*, published six days a week. The role of prominent editor allowed Kuyper to embody the religious convictions of ARP members in his private persona. His emotional language appealed to them and provided them with the feeling that their interests were represented in politics.

While the ARP's charismatic form of representation might seem like a mockery of current conceptions of democracy, the procedural model of the SDAP could look like the most democratic organizational structure. In contrast to the Anti-Revolutionary leadership, where a small elite around Kuyper made all important decisions, the group of Social Democratic members, which directly influenced the decision-making process, was more extensive. This had the advantage that the pressured party organization could rely on a wide range of motivated and prepared members when the national authorities started their imprisonment campaign. Direct participation not only inspired loyalty, but also prepared many members for leadership duties. When military and civil forces targeted Social Democratic leaders, other party members were ready to take over administrative responsibilities. In theory, each ordinary member of the party had the opportunity to become a political leader after his local association was elected as the hosting location of the board. But in practice this representative model was also based on a comparatively small group of members. When in the following decades the membership of the SDAP grew, its leadership circle became more exclusive. Michel's famous iron law of oligarchy is an early account of this process.<sup>856</sup> In this sense, German Social Democracy approached the model of the ARP in its later years. While Kuyper's critics argued that he did not include ordinary followers in the procedures of the organization, his politics reached a larger constituency of ordinary people outside of his party organization than Bebel and Liebknecht in the early phase of their political career.

The British NLF shows that a large group of followers could also be mobilized with a more thorough incorporation of procedures and charisma. Historians have noted that the electoral success of the NLF was less substantial than most nineteenth-century contemporaries believed. But the charismatic persona of Joseph Chamberlain provided the controversial party organization with the reputation of electoral influence. After only a few years, Chamberlain became president of the Board of Trade in Gladstone's cabinet in 1882. At the same time, the party organization of the NLF increasingly walked a path independent of its famous founder. Already at the inaugural meeting, the party had presented itself as an organization that

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<sup>856</sup> Michels, *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie*.

incorporated the interests of activists outside of Birmingham. When the heads of Liberal branches extended their influence over the organization, they made use of formal procedures. In a dramatic showdown, a general assembly in London adjusted the motion of the former NLF president to support Gladstone's Home Rule. The defeated party founder Chamberlain was forced to leave his party organization, making room for a new and increasingly diverse group of political leaders.

What can we learn from the comparison of the representative model of the three party organizations? First of all, there are different ways to implement representative claims in the organizational model of the democratic party. For early party founders, translating their democratic promise into organizational practice was a difficult task. The interests of the communities of German Social Democrats, British Radical Liberals and Dutch Anti-Revolutionaries were divided. In this sense, the idea that a single organization could represent these different interests was an appealing promise for the myth of mass participation.<sup>857</sup> In this impossible situation, party founders developed different strategies to incorporate their followers into the political behavior of their organization. Despite all limitations, they made democracy work in a time where there was no experience of involving ordinary people in national political institutions. Studying their practices in connection with their ideas shows that the mythical element in democratic procedures was present in parties from the beginning. At the same time, party founders managed to involve in the political process a considerable group of those formerly excluded, decisively contributing to democratization.

## 5. The Functions of Elections

In the traditional literature, the extension of suffrage rights is seen as the foremost explanatory factor for party emergence. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that elections were more means than an end. In the context of the 1860s and 1870s, electoral campaign was not necessarily attractive for party founders because of possible political influence. In Britain and the Netherlands, suffrage rights were limited. In addition, a comparison of the political histories of the two countries shows that the direct link to electoral reform did not always exist. Although the British NLF benefited from the discussions around the Second Reform Act, there was no electoral reform in the Netherlands that could explain the rise of the ARP. In Germany, where suffrage rights had been granted to the entire male population, the SDAP could not hope to influence politics. The German *Reichstag* was powerless in the face of an authoritarian political executive appointed by the Emperor.

Against the background of these different conditions, the dissertation suggests a more nuanced analysis of the influence of elections on the emergence of early party organizations. Party founders' commitment to establishing a new system of mass participation within their

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<sup>857</sup> See Saward for a more theoretical discussion of representation Saward, *The Representative Claim*.

organization was sincere, at least to a certain extent. In this sense, elections were important because they contributed to the consolidation of organizational structures in multiple ways. The British party leader Chamberlain presented the NLF as the powerful electoral machine. He actively contributed to the public fear that he could command, possibly manipulate, ordinary voters to the advantage of the parliamentary Liberal Party. This impression was further strengthened by his frequent references to the untamed side of popular politics that, ironically, helped Chamberlain to gain an even more prominent position in established British politics. This belief in electoral power provided the NLF with actual political influence, but it also forced him out of the organization, once his cabinet duties became too demanding.

Political office was less attractive to the Dutch party founder Abraham Kuyper. After an early and disappointing experience with parliament, he focused on consolidating the power balance in the ARP. For this purpose, Kuyper downplayed the electoral success of his party and argued that the organization's electoral performance was insufficient. In his newspaper *De Standaard*, he promoted the idea that in order to reach its true potential, ARP needed to unify its two sides: the party in the country needed to be consolidated with the party in parliament. In practice, this interpretation meant that Kuyper claimed complete hegemony over the party's political course, including its parliamentary activities. In other words, elections provided an argument to consolidate the ARP's internal balance of power.

A more extreme version of a careful electoral strategy was developed by early German Social Democrats. The activists around Bebel saw parliamentary participation as a compromise with the authoritarian Imperial State and a fundamental betrayal of their ideological principles. Yet, in less than a decade, these initial concerns were abandoned and the SDAP became an eager participant in the electoral system. As the examples of the electoral campaign of Wilhelm Bracke and Johann Jacoby show, elections allowed the party leadership to intervene in local matters according to its own discretion. The most prominent argument was that the *Reichstag* enabled German Social Democrats to reach a larger audience. In this sense, cooperation with the despised authorities became an acceptable course of action in the light of broadening the support for the future Socialist People's State.

## **6. The Crisis of the Democratic Party?**

In the historical circumstances of the nineteenth century, the idea of the mass party organization could be adjusted to different political circumstances. Depending on what suited their political agenda, party founders referred to democratic ideals to justify their course of action. Yet, party founders could not ignore the narrative of the democratic party, even if they implemented it only to a certain extent. In other words, the myth of a better form of popular politics could become so powerful because it corresponded with real-life experiences. This also explains how in this period quantity could become a legitimizing argument for party foundation. Not only was the mass organization of the party a goal that could be achieved in the long-term future. Early party members also saw themselves as participants in a broad community of national scale.

Reading their newspapers as well as joining in local and national meetings, they experienced the scope of their movement. These early cases remind us that the exact size of party organization might be less important than the current discussion on membership decline suggests. Maybe the current situation should be studied as a crisis of ideas rather than as a crisis of functions. The myth of the party has lost most of its mobilizing effect. At the beginning, it was the dream of creating a tool for a better world that convinced ordinary members. With their innovative methods and broad political agenda, early party organizations established a monopoly over political participation and representation of the masses. In the difficult circumstances of the nineteenth-century, where democracy was a distant utopia with little perspective of realization, they made an attractive and sincere offer to many activists. While political influence in national organizations was restricted, they could become participants in a more representative political system within the early party organizations.

Today, this powerful appeal seems to have vanished. Not necessarily because party organizations have lost a share of their still comparatively extensive membership. From a nineteenth-century perspective, the more problematic aspect is that the promise of a better future has lost its basis in the rigid structure of today's parties. Instead of functioning as inclusionary organizations that empower the formerly unprivileged, parties today are increasingly seen as an instrument of the elite or the state.<sup>858</sup> In contrast, for nineteenth-century activists, membership in a political organization was already a powerful political experience. The actual influence of a single member was less important than the prospect of a more representative political system. Because most citizens today have voting rights and are eligible for political offices, party membership might be less attractive in terms of political participation.

This is not only a negative development, but also indicates that party organizations have achieved to a large extent what their early founders had promised. Despite all the limitations in their implementation of their democratic ideals, men like Bebel, Kuyper and Chamberlain believed that ordinary people could participate in politics. The nineteenth-century discussion about what this promise meant in practice was perceived by many contemporaries as a sign of crisis. But this study has shown that the discussion about crisis was an essential catalyst of the democratization in Western Europe. In other words, the myth of the democratic mass party became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Today's concerns about decreasing membership numbers are also an indication of the strength of our commitment to democratic ideas and practices. If we were to follow the very first party founders, one could think about the current discussions about the democratic nature of parties not only in terms of preservation, but also as an opportunity for innovation. For these founding fathers of the membership party, their

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<sup>858</sup> Katz and Mair's cartel-party thesis provided the theoretical account of this perspective. "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy." See also Biezen, "Political Parties as Public Utilities."

contemporary perception of crisis provided the necessary incentive to push the boundaries of politics in the direction of the development of democratic ideas and practices.

