Social Movements and Political Parties

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1 Introduction

The study of political parties constitutes one of the largest and most fruitful fields in comparative politics but it is rarely in dialogue with the social movements literature. The literature at the nexus of the two fields has focused mostly on trajectories of New Social Movements and little work has sought to integrate new insights from those fields or examine how changes in both type of political organizations and in political conditions have impacted the strategies of movement-born parties. It also does not consider whether the revolution in communication technology can solve or change the nature of the traditional dilemmas between internal democracy and decisive action even though research on recent protests has emphasized the role of new media, novel forms of collective action and its multimodal character (Castells, 2014; Shirky, 2008; Castells, 2011).

H. Kitschelt (2006) has argued that movement parties that attempt grassroots democratic and participatory coordination among activists often suffer from volatility and internal contradictions because they do not invest in organizational structures. However, he also acknowledged that technology and modes of communication might shape what kind of investments in organizational structure are possible and necessary. It is worth considering whether technology might allow new parties that emerged out of social mobilization to maintain horizontal networks that have proven so useful in protest organization without leading to fragmentation that could make constructive policy-making impossible. For instance, because

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voters prefer parties, which are predictable and have a coherent program (H. Kitschelt, 2006), they often penalize movement parties plagued by internal discord. But if the creation of a coherent political program is in part “outsourced” to the membership base and done online\(^1\) or at least publicly available and discussed at all stages, then those parties are both publicly committing to a broad range of policies and closing the gap between proposed policies and member preferences. This way, technology might facilitate “staying close to the heartbeat of their constituencies” by regularly taking a pulse check, also in-between elections.

Although few parties ignore building an organization on the ground\(^2\), technology might allow party leadership to bypass activists by focusing less on building the “party on the ground” (Mair, 1994) and more on direct contact with ordinary members. McAdam & Tarrow (2010) claims that “movement and electoral scholars are close to pooling their resources to examine how the Internet may be erasing the boundary between movement activism and electoral politics.” Yet there are still many opportunities for productive dialogue and debate whether technology might allow movement parties to preserve their social movements characteristics without risking electoral failure and whether those type of parties might actually be better positioned to apply technological innovations in for example, digital democracy, than traditional parties, either because of their past experience with it or because the ideals of deliberative democracy and transparency are more in line with their ideological profile.

Moreover, the context around both types of organizations has also changed. The decline of the labor unions and the weakening of party identifications, as well as the deep mistrust of established institutions (Krastev, 2014), has limited the availability of institutional actors perceived as effective partners in pursuit of policy. This has either left protest as the only viable strategy or created an opportunity for the formation of party organizations that operate on different principles, emphasizing transparency and accountability not just in ends

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\(^1\)The new Spanish party Podemos for example, allows proposals to the program to be made online, and then discussed and voted on on the online forum. The Pirate Party in Germany used a non-binding software called Liquid Feedback to include members in decision-making, including on programmatic choices.

\(^2\)Podemos, for example, is focusing on building assemblies - so called circles - in neighborhoods and much of the feedback from activists and members stems from face-to-face meetings.
but also in means. Changes in both party structures and social movement organizations have blurred the boundary between the two organizations. Party structures have evolved and adapted, first towards catch-all parties and away from mass parties, then away from a hierarchical and towards a “stratarchcal” structure (H. P. Kitschelt, 1988; Mair, 1994). Some parties endorsed the unconventional, disruptive tactics usually associated with social movements, adopting anti-institutional stances despite participation in formal politics (Szabo, 2015). Meanwhile, in the realm of social movements, analysts have noted the growth in professionalized social movement organizations (SMOs), which rely on hired experts and professionals instead of volunteer labor.\(^3\) Even if the moment of institutionalization of a social movement is conceptualized as registration of a political party,\(^4\) we should expect much more fluidity between organization and structure of both movements and parties and each of them to exhibit the characteristics of the other. In this memo, I review what we know about the interface between social movements and political parties in democratic regimes and propose some preliminary ideas about potentially productive areas for future research.

2 Institutionalization of Social Movements

Robert Michels’ (1915) classic argument posits that, because democracy requires organization, mass movements face pressure to create formal organizations to successfully advance their goals. Similarly, Panebianco & Silver (1988) argues that electoral competition induces politicians in movement parties to opt for organizational forms that maximize votes. H. Kitschelt (2006) claims that political entrepreneurs make investments in organizational structures and incur transaction costs of organizing compliance if their collective objectives cannot be met through a one-time decision (e.g. policy change) but require a sustained mobilization of constituencies for multiple, interconnected, objectives. Movement parties are

\(^3\)For a review of literature on implications of SMO professionalization and formalization see Clemens & Minkoff (2004).

\(^4\)Some scholars distinguish between formalization and institutionalization when discussing trajectories of social movements, see for example Aminzade (1995) and Irvin (1999).
likely to emerge in the presence of a large constituency willing to articulate their demands through disruptive, extrainstitutional activities, whose collective interests are not being represented by established parties for fear of dividing their own electoral constituency, and in the context of a permissive institutional environment - when formal and informal thresholds of political representation are low.

Social movements literature, on the other hand, in discussing cycles of contention, predicts that mobilization will stabilize when actors no longer have incentives to raise the levels of contention and protest declines, replaced by more routinized forms of interaction (Koopmans, 2004; Smelser, 2011). Often, this stabilization takes a form of institutionalization and a choice by the movement to pursue an electoral strategy. In the tradition of Weber and Michels, many social movement theorists see anti-institutional stances and formal organizations as irreconcilable (Piven & Cloward, 1979) because of “an inherent tension between the logic of movement activism and the logic of electoral politics” (McAdam & Tarrow, 2010). For the resource mobilization theorists, however, resources represented by formal organization might actually facilitate mobilization; an organization is conceptualized as a tool, not a sign of an accommodationist stance (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Zald & Ash, 1966). Scholars also disagree about the consequences of institutionalization and whether it allows for greater legitimacy and access to political resources and influence (Clemens & Minkoff, 2004; McAdam, 2010) or necessarily leads to co-optation and conservatism in goals and methods (Michels, 1915).

Most of the empirical work on institutionalization of social movements is based on the case of Greens and left-libertarian movements (H. P. Kitschelt, 1988; H. Kitschelt, 1988, 1989). Relatively little attention has been paid to the form and organization of political parties that emerge out of right-leaning movements as contrasted with the more researched movements on the left. Although social movements research has shown that left- and right-wing mobilizations, even within the same political opportunity structure, build distinct organizations (Della Porta, 2000), whether movements-turned parties on the opposite sides of

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5By suppressing the capacity for disruption that threatens elites and extracts concessions, formal organization makes mobilization impossible.
the spectrum approach dilemmas differently or whether previous experience and resources are decisive, has not been explored despite a large body of scholarship on right-wing parties. Although arguably right-wing parties should not be conceptualized as movement parties as they usually do not grow out of movements, they often instigate protest events as part of their mobilization strategy and suffer from similar internal discord problems, though reliance on charismatic leadership, not bottom-up participatory politics, is at the root of this volatility (H. Kitschelt, 2006).

3 Movement Influence on Parties

3.1 Party Use of Social Movement Tactics and Rhetoric

One of the under-explored topics related to the interface between social movements and parties is the adoption of forms of collective action from the contentious into the institutionalized realm, for instance for the purposes of electoral campaigns. As McAdam & Tarrow (2010) puts it: “lacking commitments to voting blocs or institutional responsibilities to tie them down to the existing repertoire of contention, social movements are free to use innovative methods. These innovations can then be adopted by party campaign organizations - often in more institutionalized forms - as electoral tools. In fact, electoral campaigns often provide umbrellas under which social movements legitimately mobilize and apply collective action forms and frames that have grown out of more contentious interactions.” For instance, in East-Central Europe, during transition to democracy, as movements institutionalized, new democratic institutions were infused with contentious practices inherited from social movement legacies (Ekiert, 2015). Sometimes, parties that emerged out of pro-democracy movements took different paths. For instance, though both SDSZ and FIDESZ in Hungary had origins in the dissident movements and both professionalized, pushing out the political culture of clandestine underground movements, in SZDSZ, the generation of founders was pushed out of the leadership and replaced with more professional technocrats without under-
ground background, while in FIDESZ founders remained in core leadership but transformed themselves into professional politicians and technocrats. Interestingly though, years later, following defeat, FIDESZ developed a new image and organizational structure, opening up to citizen initiatives, and creating a mobilization strategy reliant on accommodating civil society and a populist rhetoric, in many ways returning to its mobilizing roots (Szabo, 2015).

In South Korea, the democracy movement institutionalized into government sponsored organizations meant to consolidate democracy such as Korea Democracy Foundation and National Human Rights Commission, but it also found its way into party politics since many activists were elected into the National Assembly persons or became government officials. In fact, participants in the democracy movement discovered that their activist pasts translated into political capital, providing moral legitimacy, and the “activist past” (for example, “1 star”, “2 star” for the number of times arrested) rhetoric constituted a central campaign theme for democracy activists (Shin & Chang, 2011). Even in the US, “candidates for office are now as likely to come from movement backgrounds as from recruitment through normal party channels, and public officials increasingly appear in traditional venues for protest demonstrations” (McAdam & Tarrow, 2010) or embrace the rhetoric of social movements on the campaign trail. As H. Kitschelt (2006) notes, “in terms of external political practice, movement parties attempt a dual track by combining activities within the arenas of formal democratic competition with extra-institutional mobilization” and politicians often try to mobilize supports both in institutional and informal spheres: “one day, legislators of such parties may debate bills in parliamentary committees, but the next day, they participate in disruptive demonstrations or the non-violent occupation of government sites” (H. Kitschelt, 2006). A new exciting research agenda could look at structural and strategic conditions under which these tactics are effective and the social categories of voters with whom they resonate.

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63-8-6 generation activists constituted 30% of National Assembly.
3.2 Influence on program, extremeness

One of the debates in the literature at the nexus of social movements and political parties concerns the impact of past involvement in social movements on political behavior. Some scholars argue that movements lead to radicalization of political beliefs on a personal level (Abramowitz & Nassi, 1981; McAdam, 1989) or even on the party-level when movements polarize political parties internally (in so-called “movement-inflected party polarization”) (McAdam & Tarrow, 2010). For instance, in the US, “movements have challenged the centrist electoral logic that defined the parties in the postwar period, injecting extreme partisan ideologies and a concern for single issues into electoral politics” (McAdam & Tarrow, 2010).

Another strand of scholarship, however, argues that radical ideologies become weakened in institutionalized politics and rather than bringing extreme views into electoral politics, movements themselves moderate as they begin to operate mainly through formal channels (Michels, 1915; Piven & Cloward, 1979).

Movement parties do face a number of challenges in charting the policy course and composing a political program as they try to position themselves in relation to other parties. On one hand, movement parties must distance themselves from their core constituencies and from their activist pasts in order to pursue larger, more diverse, electoral constituencies (Przeworski & Sprague, 1986). However, in some cases, for instance for parties with communitarian roots, they need to “credibly maintain the image of the political ‘outsider’ in order to retain the loyalty of their core sympathizers” (Tossutti, 1996). These problems are exacerbated by the limited investment of movement parties in organizational solutions to overcoming collective action and social choice problems and collective preference schedules (party programs) that other parties develop (H. Kitschelt, 2006). For this reason, movement parties suffer from lack of internal coordination which can prompt voter defection, as well as exit of members, and leaders, even the initial founders. For example, the German Pirate Party suffered such member, voter, and candidate loss over heavy infighting, in part caused by disagreements over extensions of the program into economic policy (e.g. in the debate
over instituting a basic income) and in part over lack of successful mechanisms for decision-making and conflict resolution. Since coordinated, predictable parties are more attractive to voters, after winning a first round of elections on an issue-specific ‘movement partisan appeal’ appeal, movement party politicians need to create a broader and coherent program. However, while such parties enjoy consensus on the initial issue that brought it together, the membership base is often divided on economic, social, or foreign policy questions, and likely to disintegrate, or change dramatically, once the party clarifies its positions on a broader set of issues.

3.3 Success and Survival

Additionally, research shows that support of social movements can also influence electoral fate of political parties (Dalton & Kuechler, 1990; Koopmans, 1995) or make parties more responsive to social groups (Clemens, 1997). Work on new parties provides evidence that capacity to rely on ties to “promoter organizations,” social groups which pre-date a newcomer’s foundation, increases newcomer’s chances of survival after an initial breakthrough (Bolleyer & Bytzek, 2013). In this sense, party sustainability may be aided by roots in social movements, which can serve as such promoter organizations if they developed extensive organizational structures and engaged in sustained mobilization as opposed to just brief episodes of contention.

Of course party systems and institutions of the state also influence whether a movement emerges and succeeds. Alliance possibilities are an integral part of the political opportunity structure, which determine if social movements mobilize and the form that they take. Particularly the configuration of power on the left and the presence or absence of the left in government, as well as fragmentation of the party system has been shown to influence development and shape of movements (Kriesi, 1995). The stance taken by institutionalized parties in response to mobilization can also determine fate of social movements (della Porta & Rucht, 1995); for example, the Italian peace movement was organizationally and finan-
cially dependent on the Italian Communist Party (Maguire, 1995). Future research could look at those mutual influences - the effect of party system configuration and party strategic behavior on the duration and success of social movements, as well as the impact of social movements on the electoral fate and sustainability of parties both supported and opposed by movements.

4 Conclusion

The literature on the interface between movements and parties, mostly inspired by the environmental parties in Western Europe, has generated a number of insights into the process of institutionalization and moderation, as well as the choices of organizational forms, and challenges faced by the so-called movement parties. However, too often the literature has assumed the processes to be linear, inevitably in the oligarchic direction, instead of contingent on structural and strategic incentives. Under what conditions are parties incentivized to return to organizational patterns of a movement party or the movement itself? Are protest tactics and contentious rhetoric effective as electoral tools? Future research could focus on investigating why movement parties sometimes return to their mobilizing roots, take an anti-institutional stance, and recall traditions from their extra-institutional phase, as well as incentives that might keep new movement parties from institutionalizing fully.

The current strong anti-party and anti-establishment sentiment in Europe might reward novel organizational forms and emphasis on activism and achievements outside of institutions that the publics in many countries no longer trusts. What kind of hybrid organizational forms emerge in times of crisis and what accounts for their success or failure? And do they incentivize also the established party actors to reach for some of the innovative tactics from the protest realm or open up to civic initiatives to improve their electoral chances when faced with new competition? Changes in technology and communications might have also created conditions in which parties no longer need to make costly organizational investments to
solve collective action and social choice problems. Can successful electoral mobilization and a coherent program be created through reliance on online deliberation, crowdfunding, and crowdsourcing? Can parties be run more like horizontal, internally democratic, movements? These and many other questions could be asked to deepen our understanding of social and political change through mobilization at the boundary of institutional and non-institutional politics.
References


