

Review Article: Scandinavian Parties in the Internal and External Arena

Jan Sundberg*

Party research lived a relatively quiet life during the 1970s and 1980s in the western world, and to some degree also in Scandinavia, although the central role of parties in the Scandinavian democracies made it impossible for political scientists to completely ignore political parties in their research. However, from the end of 1980s, political party research has been revitalized, and the number of publications has increased substantially. The three books reviewed here are part of the upswing during 1997, which, of course, includes other books and publications from that particular year. Why this renewed interest in studying political parties? For a long period after World War II, Scandinavian political parties were characterized as stable mass organizations. In 1973, the established Danish political system suffered an electoral backlash, and the shock waves gave fuel to speculations of party decline in electoral behavior studies. At the same time, similar trends were visible in Finland and Norway. Much later, interest focused on finding the same signs of decline in the internal party arena. The discussion is still alive, and during this process students of political science have gained new knowledge about parties and their organizations in Scandinavia.

Anders Widfeldt, 1997, *Linking Parties with People? Party Membership in Sweden 1960-1994*, Göteborg, Göteborg Studies in Politics 46.

Knut Heidar and Lars Svåsand, eds., 1997, *Partier uten grenser?* Oslo, Tano Aschehoug.

Jørgen Elklit and Roger Buch Jensen, eds., 1997, *Kommunalvalg*, Odense, Odense Universitetsforlag

The Declining Role of Party Membership

Widfeldt's book *Linking Parties with People?* is an attempt to shed light on the size and activity of Swedish party members from 1960 to 1994. The Swedish party system remained stable when the established parties were challenged in Denmark, Finland and Norway in the 1970s. The first visible change came in the 1988 election when the Greens managed to cross the four percent threshold, later followed by the Christian Democrats and the

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populist New Democracy. In 1990, the Swedish Social Democrats made a radical move and abolished collective membership which weakened the party's mass membership profile. After this change, the organizational profile of the Social Democrats came closer to the common standard of the non-socialist parties in Sweden.

Very few of these substantial changes, which took place during the late 1980s and the early 1990s, are discussed and problematized in the book, although the main theme is to analyze how parties are linked with people. Instead, the discussion is focused entirely on the internal party arena, i.e., membership change, social structure, activity and membership influence. These elements are well documented and they are good indicators of how the size and conditions of membership have changed since the 1960s. The link to the voters is more problematic, since media and opinion polls have replaced some of the main party member functions. Party membership is declining, and polls show that members no longer fulfill the personal link to the voters. Therefore, this change should have been placed in its new context when membership representativeness was discussed.

In addition, representativeness is generally a problematic issue in politics. Representative democracy can never be a mirror of the voters' political preferences or their social stratification. In Sweden, the party decides nomination criteria and ranking. Party membership recruitment, in contrast, is not selective, and in principle the doors are open to all newcomers. When few are willing to be recruited and few feel motivated to leave, the outcome is given: party members are aging. If and when members diverge from the opinions of the electorate in terms of age, social stratification, and political preferences, problems will emerge for the party leadership. To successfully compete in elections, party leaders have to appeal to the voters' opinions, which might be in conflict with the members' opinion. In a case like that, party membership can be regarded by the leaders as a burden and not a resource. In addition, the nomination of candidates in elections can become problematic as it might be difficult to find popular candidates among the members. Also, strong membership influence on party decisions in this context may have a negative impact on a party's success in elections. Perhaps these constraints have contributed to separating members in the local branches from the national leadership as described in the cartel party concept.

When Political Parties Cross National Borders

The book on the Swedish party membership is written in English, whereas the edited volume on the transnational links between Scandinavian parties and organizations at Nordic, European and global level is written in the

Scandinavian languages. It would have been more appropriate to have the book on party internationalization in English than the book on the internal membership life in Swedish parties. Nevertheless, *Partier uten grenser?* (Parties without Boundaries?) is the first Scandinavian book on this particular theme. Nine political scientists from Denmark, Norway and Sweden have contributed with nine sections, covering specific country-based studies to more general overviews. The book is well planned and every section fits well into the framework. It is, however, not an accident that this book was written. Sweden and Finland became members of the EU in 1995, and Norway was closely linked to the Union. International party links multiplied when the national parties took seats in the European Parliament, and the national parties form transnational parliamentary parties with other related parties among the member states. Although these parliamentary party formations are weakly organized, it is a large step in a process of integration between the European parties.

Of course, communist and social democratic parties have always been international. The Communist International, centered around the Soviet Communist Party, was not only a Soviet controlled international organization for communist parties, also the radicalized Norwegian Social Democrats were members for a short period. In a Scandinavian context, the Socialist International is more important. It was the center for social democracy and anti-fascist struggle during the Spanish civil war. At these times, social democracy in Scandinavia was in progress. The party annuals from the inter-war period evince a remarkable sense of international solidarity unheard of at party meetings of today. This form of international party cooperation is not discussed in the book, although it is the very essence of how the socialist parties taught their members to think and act internationally.

In contrast, the book is focused on international government institutions created by nation states. The role of the parties in this context is to govern the supranational unit of states. To be efficient, parties have to cooperate, and this is best achieved by utilizing already existing links from international party cooperation, such as the Socialist International, the Liberal International, Christian Democratic International, and the International Democratic Union. It was in these associations that the Scandinavian social democratic, liberal, Christian, and conservative parties cooperated with other West European colleagues long before their EU membership. In addition, their supranational experience dates back to the early 1950s and the birth of the Nordic Council. However, the role of the Council was to represent the national Parliaments until the 1970s, when the first political Council party appeared. The resemblance between the Scandinavian parties was high, the links between them well established, but still they preferred to work in a national setting. Therefore, it is an enigma

why the Scandinavian parties were immediately ready to give up their national interest protection in the EU Parliament, with which they lack any form of common identity.

It took the Nordic parties 20 years to form the first cross-national Nordic Council party, whereas they welcomed the concept in the EU over night. This is even more remarkable if we take into account the strong popular resistance against EU membership in the Swedish 1994 referendum, a pattern that has been repeated in a number of Danish and Swedish opinion polls. According to several Eurobarometer measures, Danes and Swedes top the anti-EU opinions in the Union. Focusing on this political somersault would have given the book a useful frame. After reading the book, we still have to live without this knowledge, but the book is still full of well-documented facts about how parties cross boundaries. Therefore, the question mark after the title is an unnecessary signal of modesty. Without it, the title would live up to what this pioneering work really is offering.

All Politics is Local

After Poul Meyer's well-known book *Politiske partier* (Political Parties) from the mid-1960s, party research in Denmark lived a quiet life for years. At the same time, the Danish parties and party system underwent an unprecedented crisis. New parties emerged in the early 1970s, fragmentation and volatility increased, and the old established parties faced serious problems with decreasing membership and a sudden drop in votes. While the Danish parties and the entire party system was on the edge of a crisis, Danish local government lived a totally different life. In 1970, the 1100 municipalities were reduced to 277 by amalgamations, and the number of elected councilors was decimated. As a result, the degree of party politicization increased from 57 percent in 1966 to 83 percent in 1970. Since then, the degree of politicization has increased steadily. In addition, local politics is now dominated by the big national parties, who, paradoxically, have gained full advantage of the process of politicization which leaves less room for the small and very limited space to the single non-party lists.

Although national politics makes sense, local politics is different. Local council elections are held simultaneously in all municipalities, which means that there are as many elections as there are local councils, which in Denmark means over 270 elections on a single day, as compared to a single parliamentary election. The more autonomy is given to the municipalities, the larger the difference in content and style of local politics. The three different types of elections are implicitly described and compared without being placed in their right context. With this in mind, we can agree with the authors of *Kommunalvalg* (Local Elections) that local elections are

influenced by national politics. It is also correct that we can predict the outcome of local elections from the previous national election. However, each local election in each single municipality is unique. Local issues, far from what is on the national agenda, may dominate the campaign, and as a result, the national cleavages are not well reflected in a local context. Moreover, the less parties can be separated by ideology, the more probable it is that their local profile varies from one municipality to another.

It would have been interesting to discuss not only the autonomy of the municipality, but also the autonomy of the local party association. Studies show that the cartel party model is applicable in Denmark. If that is true, then it would have been an excellent chance to test to what extent the cartel characteristic of mutual autonomy from the national level down to the local level can be verified. Nevertheless, the book has broadened our knowledge of Danish local politics, elections, and campaigning, and it fills a gap which has been growing since Karl-Henrik Bentzon's well-documented book *Kommunalpolitikere* (Local Politicians) from 1981 was published.