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The Local Party as an object of interdisciplinary comparative study
Some steps toward a theoretical integration

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Abstract

Local parties are typically "ianus-faced" (Lehmbruch 1979), because they have to combine two very different (and often conflictive) roles: as actors within the communal political arena on the one hand and as agencies of their supralocal mother-party on the other. Thus, a full understanding of their organization and behavior has to rely on substantive knowledge of political parties on the one hand and community sociology on the other. Unfortunately, these two strands of knowledge have been quite segregated during the last decades, because parties have largely been a domain of political scientists, while community research has traditionally been a genuine branch of sociology. The local party level deserves its own focus of research and theory building, because it has a life of its own and its structures and processes are only loosely coupled with those on the more encompassing (e.g. national) level. Understanding local party politics contributes heavily to an understanding of national parties and the national political system as a whole.

Content

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1.   Proposing a preliminary definition

While terms like "national party" hardly need any further clarification, it is somewhat doubtful which collectivities should be classified as "local political parties."

On the one hand, this concept may be applied to groupings which seek formal power within communities or municipalities by nominating candidates for local public offices. Pursuing the same goals and operating within isomorphic institutional and legal settings, such groups may be expected to display similar activities and organizational characteristics like parties campaigning on the state or national level, even in cases where they look more like interest groups or voluntary associations, exist only for short periods and have no formal links to supralocal party organizations. On the other hand, the term may also be used for precincts and other lowest-level party subunits, even when their sole function is to support supralocal election campaigns and when their territorial extension is not coinciding with any political unit of the communal level.

In this second sense, the concept "local" refers the fact that the physical operating field is rather small and recruitment takes mainly place on the basis of spatial proximity.

Empirically, most countries have local parties which cumulate these two characteristics. Such groupings or really "ianus-faced" (Lehmbruch 1979), because they have to combine two very different (and often conflictive) roles: as actors within the communal political arena on the one hand and as agencies of their supralocal mother-party on the other. Thus, local party theorists may do well to focus primarily on entities with such double embedments (because they are likely to display all relevant characteristics, activities and problems related to the concept). But on the other hand, no "closed theories" should be formulated which are unable to deal with groupings which fulfill only one of the two aforementioned conditions.

2.   The need for research

Looking at the rather modest research literature on local parties, there is still much reason to subscribe to the humble statement of William Crotty in 1986:

"We know so little about the urban, suburban, and small-town parties that we have at best a limited baseline as to past or present activities, from which to establish: what they did; to what degree and in what manner they have been, and are presently, organized; what contributions they have made or are making to governance; and how they have fared during the contemporary era in their quest for survival." (Crotty 1986: 5).

If this statement is true for the United States, it is even more true for most other countries. Consequently, there has never been an empirical basis for enacting comparative cross-national research on local parties - not even on the modest level of aggregated case studies - from which at least some minor inductive generalizations could have been drawn.

The best available studies deal with party life in very big cities - with a population matching those of several smaller European nations. Thus, the sophisticated long-term studies of Samuel J. Eldersveld (1964; 1986) on Detroit and of Dwaine Marvick (1986) on middle-level party activists in Los Angeles have produced many fruitful results. But they have raised even more questions concerning the generalizability of their findings to other American cities, settings of smaller size or community politics in other countries. Given these conditions, it seems justified to address the

subject of "local party" in a rather open and generalized way: in order to become impressed with their almost limitless variety of organizational forms and political functions and their highly variable placement within the communities, the encompassing party organizations and the political system as a whole.

Considering the dual character of (most) local parties as segmental party subunits on the one hand and as communal political actors on the other, it is evident that a full understanding of their organization and behavior has to rely on substantive knowledge of political parties on the one hand and community sociology on the other. Unfortunately, these two strands of knowledge have been quite segregated during the last decades, because parties have largely been a domain of political scientists, while community research has traditionally been a genuine branch of sociology. This segregation has again had the effect that political parties have mostly been studied within the perspective of the formal political system (e.g. by focusing on election outputs or by emphasizing the causal impacts of electoral law on party systems), while community research has been careful to study local politics within the more general web of informal social relations.

Any effort to synthesize these two strands results in a very high theoretical complexity, because it seems that very considerable parts of political science as well as sociology have to be mobilized in order to do justice to the multifaceted nature of local parties. Given the fact that local parties are most often seen rather "humble" objects with low or no impact on big party politics and the governmental sphere, it is not surprising that up to the present, no talented socio-political theorist has yet tackled this very complicated task. On the other hand, it has been acknowledged repeatedly that understanding local party politics contributes heavily to an understanding of national parties and the national political system as a whole. This is particularly true for countries like the United States where "all politics is local" (Tip O'Neill) because the composition of the federal legislature is not determined by a nationwide campaign, but by a multitude of smaller political contests on the regional and local level (Saiz 1999).

In a more general sense, studies on local parties have shown that the local party level deserves its own focus of research and theory building, because it has a life of its own and its structures and processes are only loosely coupled with those on the more encompassing (e.g. national) level (Crotty 1986: 6). This is again vividly exemplified by the United States, where the National Parties show rather informal structures and highly variable activity levels (e.g. between election and non-election periods), while studies on lower levels local parties (or groupings on the county level) have consistently demonstrated that groupings on the local (or county) level display rather intensive and regular activities (e.g. Bibby et al. 1983; Cotter et al. 1984 etc.).

3.   Local Parties as segments of larger party organizations

With the exception of virtual "online-communities" or some newer forms of "professional social movements" (McCarthy 1987), most institutions, organizations and collectivities are segmented into smaller local subsystems where spatial proximity of members (or adherents) allows for more intensive and informal social interaction. In some cases, these local subunits are rather ephemeral extensions of a dominant central organization; in others, they absorb most of the resources and constitute the "real center of institutional life", while the encompassing structures are mere subsidiary frameworks - mostly needed for internal coordination and external representation.

This second development seems to occur increasingly

a) in the *religious sector*, where the church activities are more and more centered around the loal parish (for the catholic church: see Hornsby-Smith 1989);

b) in the *private economic sector*, where recent trends of reorganization (e.g. "lean management") have resulted in a massive redistribution of resources and competences from headquarters to local profit centers (e.g. Peters 1993);

c) in *labor unions*, where the trend toward decentralized bargaining is correlated with a power shift from national centers to regional or local chapters (e.g. Höland 1993: 24ff.);

d) in the *political sector*: insofar as the growing task load of public administration has led to measures of "devolution" and to a disproportionate increase of communal budgets and organization (see Elander/Stig 1991; Prêteceille 1986 etc.).

In all these (and many other) cases, it can be noted that while the functional importance of these local subunits for the is very high, their existence and performances are often taken for granted, so that little attention is focused on them (by social researchers as well as the general public and the encompassing organizations themselves).

In the case of *political parties*, sketchy empirical evidence and deductive theoretical arguments suggest that from the point of view of supralocal organizations, local subunits perform a manifold of essential functions not substitutable by any other intraorganizational structures:

1) *Local sections provide quite easily accessible "training grounds" where political beginners can test their motivations and abilities for political work and where they can accumulate their first basic knowledge about the functioning of political processes and institutions*. By creating or supporting a widespread network of local sections, political parties maximize their chances of generating a large reservoir of experienced young adherents from which future candidates for higher party roles or public political positions can be recruited. By providing highly accessible gates for entering the party and very inexpensive modes of active participation, even citizens with relatively low political motivation may be attracted and the total size of party membership may increase (Niedermayer 1989: 156f.; Selle/Svasand 1983). In postsocialist countries, the local parties will be critically important in conveying political information and in socializing the population into the new framework of democratic values, norms and institutions. (Zychowicz 1999).

The local party level may also profit from the rising preference of citizens for rather specific and short-term party commitments (Levy/Zwicky 1984; von Beyme 1993: 45), because such fluctuating partisans will often not aspire for supralocal careers. As a consequence, local parties may experience a rising inflow of members even in times where the number of higher-level activists is decreasing. As most the newcomers are politically unexperienced and insecure about their political capabilities and motivation, local parties have to carry a considerable load of fluctuation and unpredictability concerning their activists and representatives in political positions. By filtering out the more capable activists and "promising talents", local sections generate the pool out of which higher-level party activists and candidates can be drawn.

While supralocal party levels can build on the socializing functions of local sections, these sections themselves - being at the lowest level of political organization - have to rely on extrapolitical sources of socialization. In Germany for instance, local party sections profit much from the dense networks of voluntary associations which offer widespread training opportunities for public roles (Schneider 1999). When nominating candidates, local parties will therefore often prefer individuals who have gained high reputation within such nonpolitical local groupings.

Consequently, local parties are easily accused of articulating highly particularistic interests of local notables, while neglecting more general supralocal concerns.

2) *Local sections provide a mechanism for "collective learning" without too much costs and risks for the encompassing party organization*. Thus, local sections can be used for testing out new types recruitment procedures, campaigning activities or parliamentary tactics within neatly defined territories: so that the larger organization is not affected during the time of experimentation. For example, urban party sections of the German SPD were the first to try out coalitions with newly emerging parties like the "Greens", long before such arrangements became viable on the level of the "Länder" (or even on the federal level). Similarly, they developed ways to cope with problems like drug addiction or multicultural populations which paved the ways for more generalized programmatic platforms on higher party levels.

This innovative experimental function of local party sections is reinforced by the basic fact that within the political systems, communities are functioning as peripheral "boundary systems" where new social and political problems are perceived, interpreted and dealt with just at the moment of their emergence, while higher governmental levels tend to intervene later in a "subsidiary" fashion (Lipsky, 1976).

Even under very adverse authoritarian conditions, local parties may still function as channels for upward communication, because when supralocal agencies are very dominant, they need much information about local conditions in order to behave rationally on the communal level. This is exemplified by the highly centralist communist regimes (like Poland), where local parties were formally conceived as mere executive agencies of the national party, but informally also heavily used as instruments of the local population for articulating their demands vis-à-vis higher-level decision makers (Zychowicz 1999).

3) *By means of their local sections, political parties gain access to new sources of membership motivation which are based on various kinds of social gratifications and incentives*. For instance, Herbert Schneider observes that German local parties make extensive use of social activities (like bowling events, Christmas parties etc.) for furthering member cohesion. On the level of such expresssive activities, parties are very similar to any other local associations (Schneider 1999). Likewise, Roger Buch Jensen notes that local political groupings in Denmark rely heavily on personal contacts and relationships when recruiting new members (Jensen 1999).

Such "solidary motivations" (in the language of Clark/Wilson 1961) are particularly crucial for intra-party cohesion in cases where neither "material incentives" nor "purposive incentives" are sufficiently strong. In other words: members of local party sections may well cling together even when they expect no personal benefits (in terms of attractive jobs etc.) from the party, and when they do not agree with the encompassing party's programs, policy or leaders. Or expressed in a third way: by means of solidary incentives, party elites may become able to almost anything they want to without risking any considerable exodus of members. For this reason, local parties may be effective to dampen ebbs and flow of party membership caused by changing macropolitical conditions, ideological fashions or any kind of economic or societal change.[1] Thus, declining parties losing all power on the national level may temporarily retreat to the lev-

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[1] In Switzerland for example, it has been found that local party membership has remained quite stable in a period where conserable "dealignments" have taken place in the general electorate. (see Geser 1991).

el local sections where they "hibernate" and prepare for future opportunities to start a new national career. Their risk to be wiped out completely is minimized because it is highly probable that at least some few communities offer adequate opportunities for survival (e.g. because charismatic local party leaders are effective).

In addition, local parties profit from the commitment of adherents who would never engage in party activities for ideological (or any other type of "political") reasons, because they are predominantly motivated by social gratifications (e.g. by the opportunities to enlarge their field of personal acquaintances, to have fun in expressive social gatherings or to acquire high social reputation. Several empirical studies have found that such social motives become more important during the years in office (e.g. Marvick 1986), so that they are often decisive to keep activists working and incumbents re-running for office during longer periods of time (Eldersveld 1986). Thus, local sections may be most important in keeping party members loyal and active during frustrating periods of high work load and little electoral success. On the other hand, it has been remarked that solidary incentives engender additional intraparty cleavages along lines like age, gender and ethnicity (= criteria are relevant for informal and expressive social association). (Zald/Garner 1987).

In order to secure their grassroot anchoring, local parties of larger municipalities and cities are likely to subdivide themselves into different neighborhood branches. While this segmentation may increase the party's capacity to mobilize members and adapt to subtle specificities within urban population, Jensen's study on Denmark shows how it can contribute to internal fragmentation and lower the potential for effective unified action (Jensen 1999).

Of course, the subjective motivations of local party activists will be severely influenced by the larger party framework in which the communal sections are embedded. When communal party work is seen as a useful first step (or even an indispensable prerequisite) for the acquisition of higher-level party positions or attractive political offices, local sections may be invaded by opportunistic careerists even if they themselves have no material incentives to offer. This will surely happen in the case of powerful majority parties with many political mandates and highly elaborated central bureaucracies; particularly when these supralocal positions are all filled endogenously with "proven party loyalists" (not with citizens recruited laterally from outside the party). In Switzerland for instance, local parties seem to profit largely from the influx of adherents aspiring to higher-level political positions, because local party membership (and activity) is a prerequisite for most intraparty careers. Given their long-term perspective, such young activists are often disposed to do much work without any compensation. As a consequence, even sections in larger communities can function on very low budget levels because they have no need to hire expensive full-time officials (Ladner 1999).

When a local section belongs to a rather weak national party (or to no supralocal party organization at all), motivation of adherents will depend more on the incentives provided by themselves. Thus, extrinsic ("materialist") motivations will only be dominant in cases the local party has to offer many attractive jobs or other utilitarian rewards (like in the famous cases of metropolitan "political machines"). If no such incentives exist, it may be expected that either ideological or social motives (or a mixture between the two) will prevail. This is largely the case in most smaller communities where patronage functions are quite limited because very few attractive jobs and positions are available for distribution (Schneider 1999). Indeed, several studies have shown that many local party activists are considerably driven by a mixture of ideological motives (like: "concern for public issues") and social incentives (like: "acquiring a good repu-

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tation" or "getting acquainted with many interesting people"; Bone 1952; Marvick/Nixon 1961; Marvick, 1986; Eldersveld 1982: 165ff.).

There is some evidence that ideological motives prevail in urban or suburban contexts, while "nonpolitical" social motivations are more salient in rural settings (Conway/Feigert 1968). In cases where ideological orientations, issue commitments or solidary incentives are important, local parties will be attractive insofar as they provide ample opportunities for social gatherings and political discussion. Thus, they will maintain a rather high level of intraparty democracy and pluralism, while tendencies to enforce uniform consensus and exercise authoritarian leadership will be weak or inexistent. "Ideological" parties are particularly inflexible because whenever their leadership wants to change their programs and goals, time-consuming discussions have to be enacted in order to reach consensual decisions (Wilson 1962).

4) *Like labor unions and most other voluntary associations, parties use local sections to delegate considerable amounts of labor to volunteering amateurs working (almost) without pay and subsiding the party with private infrastructure (e.g. by doing office work at home).* This has the advantage of keeping the fixed costs absorbed by wages low, so that more financial means can be allocated to variable items (like: election campaigns), and the party is able to function without crisis even when revenues are highly fluctuating and unpredictable. (Geser 1994: 26ff.).

These low budget expenditures may also explain why even heavy losses of membership are not experienced as an emergency situation, because in contrast to highly professionalized associations, the main party activities do not depend on a regular flow of financial contributions. This system of volunteer activity may be easily destroyed when supralocal party centers increase their flow of subsidies to the local chapters, because in such cases, unpaid local activists may feel discouraged and give way to paid professionals. As a consequence, classical membership parties may be transformed into new "professional parties" which depend very little on their membership base.

For evident reasons, the reliance on unpaid volunteer work entails the risk that central party leaders and bureaucrats are not able to determine how much and what kind of work will actually be done, and that they have no sanctions at hand when local activists are disengaged or following deviant courses of action. In addition, such parties are likely to become dominated by adherents affluent enough to lend these kinds of material supports. This may be at least partially explain the empirical regularity that on the local level, "notables" have often maintained an influential status they have lost long ago on the supralocal levels. Thus, parties with a low supply of generous volunteers (e.g. many lower class and minority groupings) will find themselves more handicapped on the communal than on the national level, because they lack the resources for substituting unpaid activists by fully paid personnel.

5) *Evidently, most communal party sections also function as "local marketing agencies" by making the party and its programs and leaders publicly known, by trying to "sell" its ideologies and issue position to the local citizens and by mobilizing maximum amounts of adherents, voluntary helpers and financial sponsors (particularly during the periods of state or national elections).* By doing this, local parties compete with many more advanced marketing strategies used by modern parties: e.g. with TV-spots or direct mailings.

Compared with these more sophisticated means, local sections have many advantages associated with their capacity to accumulate knowledge about local conditions and to enact diffuse

interpersonal interactions on an "archaic" face-to-face basis. Thus, national parties may maximize societal penetration and influence by adapting to the subtle characteristics of local social conditions and political cultures (e.g. by using homely language patterns or by co-opting citizens high on local reputation). In fact, the general public image and attractiveness of political parties may be largely conditioned by the appearance and performances of their peripheral "representatives" within the various cities and communities. On the basis of personal contacts, local activists may well be able to mobilize and persuade additional communal voters not accessible by any other means of political propaganda; and parties may well profit from the charismatic aura of local leaders which is only effective within the radius of their physical presence. For example, Eldersveld has found that a single local party activist may be able to increase the votes given to a specific candidate by about 5 to 10 percent, and that this effect is particularly strong in the case of weaker parties (which cannot afford very extensive media advertising) (Eldersveld 1956; Katz/Eldersveld 1961). Similar results have been reported by Cutright and Rossi on an middle-sized mid-western City (Cutright/Rossi 1958).

According to Joseph A. Schlesinger, these studies suggest that the effect of face-to-face canvassing consists mainly in rising the absolute level of voting turn out (by mobilizing additional, hitherto undecided or apathetic citizens), while the relative shares going to various parties and candidates is not much affected (Schlesinger 1965: 791f.). In addition, they hint to a very general kind of functional symbiosis between the two levels of party organizations: in the sense that the supralocal levels mainly provide the "software" in terms of goals, programs and attractive candidates, while the local sections add the "hardware" in the form of material resources and cohesive social organization:

"Thus, local organizations care little about the continuity and substance in the national party but much about its ability to present appealing tickets, while national party leaders care little about the policies and even the corruption of local organizations but much about their continuity and substance." (Schlesinger 1965: 792).

Consistent with this hypothesis, Ladner finds that Swiss local party leaders think that they get most help from supralocal party levels in the realm of information and ideological guidance, while their own dominant task is to provide these higher levels with substantive organizational support during elections (Ladner 1999: 230). Given that most local parties are administered by unpaid volunteers hardly able to keep pace with urgent everyday problems, it is evident that little time and energy is left for long-term strategic thinking or ideological elaborations. As Schneider observes in Germany, local parties are quite strong in recruitment functions, but are very weak in programmatic activities: leaving the elaboration of ideology and programs ("software") to supralocal levels. (Schneider 1999).

6) *Local parties can be effective to translate generalized party ideologies and programs into specific local issue positions and communal political decisions. They serve as "transmission wheels" by securing that party ideologies and programs are represented within the communal political systems.* Without local subsystems, parties may not be able to "colonize" the large sphere of community politics; and they will lack these mechanisms of upward communication which make higher party levels knowledgeable about local problems (as well as local proposals for their treatment or solution).

By integrating communities into a common framework of political ideas, rules and procedures, local party networks maintained by supralocal parties may contribute significantly to the over-

all integration of the political system. This is particularly seen in Switzerland where these networks help to overcome many centrifugal forces stemming from different local and regional traditions (Ladner 1999)**.** On the other hand, too tight vertical coupling is mostly avoided, because it engenders the risk that negative developments on one level affect the other level as well. For example: when communal parties are judged to be mere local representatives of national party organizations, their fate is likely to be heavily dependent on the overall reputation of this national party. This is vividly illustrated in Great Britain where the growing unpopularity of the Conservative Government (lead by Thatcher and Major) resulted in an ongoing loss of Conservative seats in the level of boroughs, counties and shires (Rallings/Thrasher 1999).
This indicates that community elections may sometimes function as "safty valves": allowing the outlet of political discontent about the national government in times where no national elections take place. In Canada, it seems that national parties are generally unwilling to engage in local politics because they fear that poor performance on the federal level would lower their turnouts on the community level. They rather prefer to sponsor "independent" local candidates not formally affiliated to any supralocal party (Filion 1999).

7) *Local sections provide larger party organizations with a mechanism for reacting quickly and flexibly to changing environmental needs and conditions.* For example, much less effort and resources are needed to convoke a local party session than a party congress on the state or national level; and much intraparty communication will go on ad hoc on informal channels (e.g. when members spontaneously meet in neighborhood gatherings or within other voluntary associations.[2] On higher party levels, quick party action is paid with high losses in intraparty democracy because only small oligarchic groupings are able to gather frequently and on very short-term invitations. On the local level, such incompatibilities between imperatives of internal participation and external adaptation are much attenuated. But of course, the mere functional capacity to maintain intraparty democracy does not mean that local party sections are not exposed to many other causes of centralization (e.g. on the basis of charismatic leadership or traditional elite structures).

8) *By providing highly accessible and non-demanding opportunities for political participation, local parties are likely to absorb also citizens from more marginal social segments (e.g. very young people, housewives, lower-class incumbents etc.) which are not likely to participate on the (more elitist) higher levels.*[3] To a much higher degree than any local voluntary associations, communal parties bring together people with very different status characteristics (in terms of gender, age, education, class background etc.), thus contributing to an overall social integration. As Schneider remarks, they are much more open for newcomers than most strictly autochthonous groupings, because they define themselves in terms of supralocal symbols, goals

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[2] On the methodological level, this implies that no realistic assessment of local party activity is possible on the basis of formal processes (e.g. frequencies of official meetings) alone, because much less visible (and highly irregular) kinds of informal social communications and interactions have to be included in the analysis.
[3] According to Prewitt, about the highest 40% of all citizens (in terms of income and education) are represented in community politics. This is quite a large segment compared with the highly elitist recruitment practices on the state and national level. This rather "plebiscitarian" character of community politics may b reinforced by the fact that most higher-class citizens show little interest because they focus their political interest on supralocal levels. (Prewitt, 1970: 33ff.).

and forms of social organization (Schneider 1999).[4] Consequently, community parties may be "plagued" with an unusually heterogeneous membership articulating a broad spectrum of different demands and ideological orientations. Whenever supralocal parties give voice to their local subunits, they may also give voice to these many marginal party segments not represented elsewhere in the organization.

Local sections contribute to the softening of intraparty conflict by providing a multitude of small arenas where adherents of different wings and factions can discuss controversies in a rather informal way and where they can elaborate viable compromises. Higher level party congresses profit from these integrative endeavors insofar as their participants are often representing such local subunits - thus articulating positions which are not likely to be very extreme and polarizing.

The more heterogeneous the membership of local sections, the more they will tend to produce highly equilibrated compromise positions which will contribute to the dampening of party factionalism on supralocal levels. In addition, local party sections can reduce conflict by adding a new dimension of loyalty and cleavage to the already existing intraparty segmentations - thus making it more likely that most members experience "cross pressures" most of the time. By extending their local networks, parties often experience major shifts in the composition of their membership, and in many cases, such extensions take place with the (explicit or implicit) intent of producing such kinds of change. For instance, parties may be eager to colonize rural regions in order to generate an influx of rather conservative voters shifting the whole party to the right. This was clearly seen in the German Social Democratic party (SPD) where the proliferation of rural sections since the 1970ies (as a consequence of territorial reform) resulted in an influx of more conservatives categories of adherents. Thus, widespread rural party sections are a powerful vehicle for integrating rather marginal nonurban strata into the national political system, so that national political power centers become less dominated by cities and large suburban agglomerations (Schneider 1999).

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On a general level, it may be assumed that much ambivalence exists in the relationship between local sections and their encompassing party organizations, because they are charged with two quite conflictive roles. On the one hand, they are used as *executive agencies* expected to implement the party's programs and policies and to support campaigning activities for supralocal elections. For securing this executive function, mother parties are likely to treat their sections as subordinated administrative units obliged to conform with centralized commands and rules. If this "top-down" relationship dominates, sections have will often be founded (and continuously supported) by the supralocal party organization, and their existence does not reflect an internal communal need , but the intentional strategy of the mother party "to show its presence" in the locality and to invest resources for purposes and mobilization and persuasion. On the other hand, local sections function as *articulating agenc*ies busy to give the communal party adherents (and clienteles) voice and influence within the larger party. In order to fulfill this political function of upward communication and upward lobbying, local sections have to be respected as autonomous

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[4] see also: Nassmacher/Rudzio 1978: 138ff).

bodies capable of expressing their demands and participating effectively in higher-level decision-making. If the "bottom-up"-relationship prevails, sections will originate endogenously by "spontaneous" collective action within the community, and they will tend to preserve their autonomy by procuring their own resources and by defining their own programs and goals.

Higher party leaders may well see that a strategy of strict bureaucratic subordination is hampering the party's goal of optimizing its political influence and maximizing the number of electoral votes, because in such cases, the communal sections have not enough leeway to adapt their mobilization and persuasion activities to the specific conditions of local situations, mentalities and political cultures.

It has been noted that the relative weight and autonomy of local subsystems correlate with the macro-environmental conditions to which an organization and institution has to adapt.

When the supralocal system faces a single, highly focused environmental challenge, it will tend minimize subunit autonomy in order to maximize its capacity for quick decision making and concentrated unified action. This is the case of nations facing war or of labor unions which have to mobilize all its resources against very big employers. On the other hand, an environment segmented into a multitude of smaller problem areas will evoke internal decentralization, because no single decision making center is capable of collecting all the relevant information and of implementing and supervising a similar multitude of different courses of action. In order to exploit optimally such a manifold of independent "niches", subunits have to be provided with sufficient resources and autonomy to develop their own local strategies and to adapt quickly to unpredictable local events and developments.

On a very high level of theoretical generalization, it may be stated by "mapping the environment into the system", adaptive social collectivities tend to develop structures which are isomorphic to the structure of their (salient) environments. (Buckley 1968; Hannan/Freeman 1978; Geser 1983: 249ff.). In the case of political parties, it may be safely assumed that their salient environments are constituted by the *surrounding political system* on the one hand and the *general electorate* (from which they draw their voters, adherents, activists and candidates) on the other.

1) By seeking formal political power, parties have to adapt to the institutional and legal framework of the encompassing political system as well as to the more informal structures of political influence and authority.

In *highly centralized nations* where almost all political power is concentrated on the highest governmental levels, they will surely find it most attractive to win the national (parliamentary and/or presidential) elections, so that not much resources and motivations will be left for campaigning or for issue-related activities within provinces or communities. Consequently, local section will be reduced to the status of subordinate agencies obliged to fulfill higher orders and rules and to support national party activities. As Sabine Kropp shows in her analysis of the political transformation processes in Russia, this has been largely the case in the Soviet Union where the Communist Party represented the ideal-type of a "top-down party" paralleling the hierarchy of governmental administration. Its main role was to "program" these governmental agencies by providing them with ideological outlooks and general directives, while the role of all other political actors (including communal agencies) was to implement these instructions in accordance with regional and local needs. But as these party cadres were not dependent on any electorate, they had no incentive to be responsive to the demands of local populations. (Kropp 1999).

"Democratization" in post-socialist countries always includes an upgrading of communities as autonomous political actors. This pressure toward devolution may be particularly strong in the first transitory phases when the legitimation of the new national regime is still insecure. But on the other hand, most post-socialist communities are not adequately equipped to make rational use of their new political prerogatives because during the decades of socialist dominance, they have never learned to create their own internal structures of political articulation (e.g. by building endogenous local parties). Consequently, the first community elections in Poland, Russia and the Ex-GDR (in 1990 or later) took place in vacuum condition, characterized by the lack of organized communal groupings with clearly defined ideological and programmatic positions (Schneider 1999; Zychowicz 1999; Kropp 1999). In the case of Eastern Germany and Poland, the communities never got the opportunity to develop their own endogenous parties in accordance with their local needs. To the contrary, they have become quickly "colonized" by the newly founded national parties which are eager to install local mobilization agencies in order to gain a maximum number of voters (Zychowicz 1999). In Russia, a more enduring condition of anomy seems to prevail because the national parties seem to lack the capacity (or motivation) for extensive "communal colonization" Kropp 1999). Given these conditions, there is ample room for municipalities and cities to function as testing grounds" for a large variety of newly-emerging political groupings struggling for survival and political power. These "trial-and error-processes" were already initiated in the Gorbachow era when the loosening of the party's monopoly gave rise to a huge number of neighborhood groups, "interest clubs" and other kind of "subpolitical" local associations (Kropp 1999).

It may still take years or decades until the "fittest" of them will prevail and succeed in establishing nationwide networks of local and regional organizations. Kropp argues that a new consolidated party system will be difficult to achieve because the postsocialist transformations will certainly lead to new societal cleavages (e.g. along class lines) which again will give rise to new future parties (Kropp 1999). As no stable party system can be envisaged in the near future, political integration on the national level has to be achieved by other means (e.g. by charismatic leadership or even rude military force). Consequently, Kropp concludes that Yeltsin may have had no other choice than initiating a process of "recentralization" in the course of which he has been able to enlarge hin presidential authority without becoming dependent on any political parties. She argues that this shift toward a "new authoritarianism" has been facilitated by the fact that many new parties behave like to past CPSU by focusing on highly abstract principles and programs, leaving more specific issues to nonpartisan actors. Likewise, she observes the role of local parties has been weakened by the tendency of many communal candidates to campaign outside organized political groupings, because the mere term "party" evokes negative historical connotations (Kropp 1999).

Thus, there are many indications that at least in the longer run, the political centralism of the socialist era is likely to be continued in the form of a highly centralized national polity, so that endogenous developments on the communal level are likely to be curbed. This process of recentralization may be supported by a rather low disposition of the population to participate actively in the new democratic institutions (Zychowicz 1999).

In *federated countries* where considerable political power is exercised by infranational subunits (like provinces or communities), parties will find it rational to divide their attention and their resources up between these different vertical levels. The goal *"to gain a maximum share of formal power"* will imply that a party follows a multitude of adaptive strategies at the same time in order

to succeed at very different places and under very different environmental conditions. Of course, the strain for decentralization will be highest when these political subunits are quite different in terms of their party system, their electoral law and governmental organization.

Switzerland and Denmark illustrate the case where local parties become numerous and rather autonomous and influential because local self-government occupies an important place within the national political system. Particularly in Denmark, their position is sufficiently supported by the fact that about 70% percent of all public expenditures in the country are administrated on the municipal level (Jensen 1999). In Switzerland, the proliferation of organized local groupings is all the more astonishing as most communities are extremely small and as the institutions of direct democracy (like the town hall meeting) lower the need for intermediate political organizations (Ladner 1999). Federated national systems are likely to give rise to "bottom-up-parties" in which local sections are able to influence (or even determine) higher-level decision making and to permeate supralocal levels by their "communalistic" styles and procedures. .In the United States for example, the low ideological profile and high incoherence of national parties may well be conditioned by the fact that national elections are nothing more than an aggregation of many local and regional campaigns (Saiz 1999).

Only in same rare cases, the internal decentralization of political power may even preclude the emergence of a vertically integrated national party organization, because different provinces or communities develop their own endogenous political associations. This constellation is exemplified in Canada where a sharp hiatus persists between national and subnational levels of party organization. As Pierre Filion shows in his historical account, Canadian cities are outstanding by the high volatility of their local party systems and by the notorious failure of national parties to assert themselves against autochthonous party groupings as well as against independent nonpartisan associations. On the one hand, Canada has experienced a similar upsurge of local party activity during the 1970ies like most other Western countries; but on the other hand, these developments were not channeled by national party organizations and - therefore? - did not result in stable and irreversible change. Contrary to Switzerland where the local party networks *compensate* for the centrifugal forces of federalism by adding an element of nationwide integration, Canadian local parties *reinforce* political regionalism (including the cleavage between Anglosaxon and Francophone provinces) by giving rise to a fluctuating manifold of strictly local political groupings. Given the low impact of supralocal factors, such parties have to be explained mainly by endogenous community variables (e.g. by characteristics of the local population or electoral system or by the accidental presence of impressive charismatic leaders). Not burdened with the task of representing national party interests within the city, they have always remained quite responsive to the demands of local electorates and associations and quite adaptive to changing social cleavages within the communal population. In particular, Canadian local party histories mirror faithfully the ebb and flow of "technocratic" vs. "democratic" public moods as well as the emergence of participatory and "postmaterialist" social movements (Filion 1999).

2) By aspiring to win maximum support among the electorate, parties face a second adaptive challenge which may well collide with the challenges stemming from the political system.
Thus, even parties in highly centralized nations may be forced to decentralize internally when they face an electorate highly segmented into groups with different ethnical origins, cultural traits, mentalities or ideological dispositions. In such cases, the goal to maximize electoral support is a very multifaceted task which cannot be managed by highly centralized and standardized strategies

of mobilization and persuasion. Instead, local subunits have to be given at least the autonomy to translate the party's goals and programs into the language of local political subcultures and to vary their activities in accordance with different local habits and preferences.

On the other hand, even parties in highly decentralized, multilayered nations may be able to remain quite centralized when they face a highly homogeneous and predictable population across all political subunits. In such cases, local sections may well be advised (or obliged) to follow the same (centrally generated) programs and courses of action, because they prove to be similarly successful in all parts of the country. Of course, such "plebiscitarian" adaptive strains will be highest for very inclusive parties which aspire to find support in very different population segments and to campaign successfully in all regions of a country.

By conclusion, we may hypothesize that local subsystems will have maximum autonomy when a party faces at the same time a highly decentralized political system and a highly heterogeneous population.[5]

Environmental conditions facilitating and inhibiting intraparty autonomy of local sections:

		Demographic electoral environment	
		homogeneous	heterogenenous
Institutional political environment	**Unitary/centralized**	highly inhibited	institutionally inhibited electorally facilitated
	Federalist/decentralized	institutionally facilitated electorally inhibited	highly facilitated

For evident reasons, the management of large networks of local sections may be a difficult and absorbing task pressuring the supralocal party to adopt a more formalized and elaborated organizational structure. This pressure may be rather easily absorbed by leftist "bureaucratic mass parties" already habituated to formalized rules and procedures. But it may entail considerable change for informal "caucus parties" traditionally relying on rather loose and fluctuating networks of adherents and supporters. This was vividly seen in Germany where the expansion of local section networks on the countryside (since the 70ies) was particularly decisive for the conservative party (CDU) which mutated from a rather informal party of political adherents to a formalized membership party. (thus following the way the Social Democrats have completed in previous decades). (Schneider 1999).

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[5] This is certainly the case in Switzerland where formal political federalism cumulates with many subcultural territorial divisions on the basis of language, religion, divergent historical traditions etc.(see Ladner 1999)

4.   Local Parties as actors within communal political systems

In a second perspective, local party groupings may be seen as components of communal political power structures and political organization which are likely to be shaped by various demographic, socio-economic, cultural, political, institutional and legal characteristics of their local environment. Since several decades, party sociology acknowledges the high degree to which political parties have to be seen as dependent variables which are shaped by many factors of their socio-demographic, cultural, political and legal environment. (Beck 1974: 1229). In fact, parties are more likely to be highly adaptive to external circumstances than many other types of voluntary associations. This is conditioned by their basic goal to win formal political power by competing for adherents and voters within a given formal political system.

These goals implies that they have to be very sensitive and reactive

1) toward the citizens (and their various public groupings) which have to be addressed, mobilized and persuaded;

2) toward various characteristics of the legal and political system which offers many obstacles and opportunities for winning elections and for exercising influence.

Consequently, local parties tend to mirror community structures in a similar way as national parties reflect the encompassing conditions of the whole country and its political order. For example, it has been found that the emergence of "party machines" was determined by large percentages of ethnic minority voters (Beck 1974: 1230).

 "The context of local politics - the conformity and value structures; the settlement and economical industrialization patterns; the ethnic, social and religious composition of the electorates - are likely to exert an influence on local parties powerful enough to result in agencies that bear little resemblance to and have few ties of any consequence to, party organizations at higher levels. Local parties may be just that: creatures of the local environment." (Crotty 1986: 6).

While the United States may be outstanding by the degree to which community life evolves independently on political structures and processes on the state or federal level, Crotty's assumption that local parties are highly influenced by the diverse characteristics (Crotty 1986: 4) of their communal contexts may also be true for many other countries (with the possible exception of totalitarian systems where the monolithic national party structures is truly reproduced within each local subsystem.

Given the fact that communities are very numerous and vary enormously in all kind of demographic, socio-economic, institutional and cultural conditions, they offer an excellent field for assessing the causal impact of different environmental factors by collecting data on a large number of units and submit them to multivariate statistical analysis (Crotty 1986:6). On the basis of widespread empirical evidence as well as many theoretical insights gained from several decades of extensive community research, it may be contended that two contextual variables stand out as particularly potent causal factors: community *population size* and communal *social stratification*.

1. Population size

By focusing mainly on urban contexts, most studies on community parties have produced little empirical evidence concerning the impact of community size on party organization and party ac-

tivities. Synthesizing many different publications, the following preliminary generalizations may be stated:

1) The larger a community, the better the conditions for political parties to find an adequate number of adherents for constituting a stable organization, for nominating candidates regularly and for maintaining steady collective activities. (Evestone/Eulau 1968; Dahl/Tufte 1974: 39; 100f.).

 In smaller villages, this threshold may be reached only by a few mainstream parties, while larger cities may well be equipped with a manifold of groupings of only minor significance. (e.g. based on ethnic recruitment or characterized by extremist ideological orientations). In other words: minority parties are likely to suffer from an "urban bias" because their only (or at least: their most influential) community sections tend to be all located in the more sizable urban settings. This is illustrated by the socialist regimes (e.g. in Poland) where the minor "opposition" parties tolerated by the reigning communist party had their only strongholds in larger cities (Zychowicz 1999).

As minor parties are not able to organize sections in smaller communities, they lack one important means for establishing themselves on a stable basis within the national political system. In Switzerland, this has found to be a main reason for the ephemeral nature of most "single issue parties" emerging out of the various "new social movements" after 1968 (Ladner 1999).

Thus, we may guess that the traditional major parties must be interested in conserving a political system where communities are numerous and - on the average - rather small, because under these conditions, they are not likely to be effectively challenged by newly emerging rival parties.

Majority parties, on the other hand, will often be segmented into urban and rural sections (of extremely unequal size and significance),. so that they tend to reproduce internally any kinds of rural-urban cleavages prevalent in the national society and its political system.

In addition, many smaller locals may be pushed to be highly unselective in their recruitment and nomination practices in order to reach the threshold necessary for the maintenance of a viable and continuous organization (Wurzbacher/Pflaum 1954: 285; Vidich/Bensman 1968: passim).

In their study about recruitment patterns among local party officials, Bowman and Boynton have found that the major job of local parties is not to select candidates, but to look out for any citizen anyhow "suited" for a public position and to pressure him or her to accept it in order to prevent vacancies (Bowman/Boynton,1966; Rothmann 1974: 228f.). Consequently, the party's capacity to control the behavior of its office holders are very weak because it is more dependent on its representatives than the other way round.[6]

On the other hand, many rather dissenting activists will not quit because the small community does not provide other party sections better coinciding with their views. As "exit" is no viable option, they will tend to exert "voice" within the party: thus contributing to the difficulties of reaching consensus and maintaining a clearly defined profile (in terms of programs and goals).[7]

Particularly under conditional of proportional electoral representation, increasing community size will be associated not only with a rising number of local parties, but with a growing tendencies of

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[6] It has also to be considered that official roles in smaller communities are quite unattractive because they include many unwanted "secondary activities" like operative administrative and technical tasks (Vidich/Bensman 1968: 262). Among other things, this implies that when looking for "suitable" candidates", such instrumental qualifications are often more important than any kind of "party loyalty" or ideological orientation. This accords with the finding that the nonpartisan type of "council-manager government" is most prevalent in smaller American cities (Banfield/Wilson 1965: 184). The authors argue that only larger cities can "afford" to recruit their major on the basis of political (partisan) considerations, because all technical and administrative work can be delegated to full-time civil servants.

[7] for the substitutive relationship between "exit" and "voice" see Hirschman 1974: passim).

different groupings to specialize on different segments of the electorate and to present themselves in terms of sharply profiled programs and ideological positions. In other words: the trend toward polarization and extremism will increase.[8]

2) *The smaller a community, the less intermediary structures like parties are needed in the political process because personalized informal relationships are adequate for choosing among candidates or for exerting influence on political decisions.*

Given the spatial proximity of the population and the rather dense networks of voluntary associations and other arenas for social interaction, it may be expected that even in urban areas, party organizations may have to compete with less formal channels of political participation. In his empirical analysis, Martin Saiz shows that the budget behavior of U.S. mayors is significantly determined by direct voter preferences, while the mediating influence of political party organizations is practically nil (Saiz 1999). This finding supports the hypothesis that under certain conditions, communities (and even in larger cities) can still provide a breeding ground for nonmediated, "plebiscitarian" forms of political life rarely observed on higher political levels. Only on the local level, candidates are sometimes able to secure enough votes by cultivating numerous particularistic relationships with individual citizens (and their families), so that their dependency on party support is almost nil.

This may explain Magnier's Italian finding that "newcomers" (and other candidates with a rather marginal intraparty position) are particularly disposed to be personally acquainted with a large percentage of their constituency and to devote much time to informal contacts with (lobbying or grieving) inhabitants (Magnier 1999). By enlarging such informal networks, local role incumbents are able to become more independent from their party and to show more autonomy in their political behavior. Consequently, even parties with large shares of votes and mandates may prove ineffective to translate their partisan views into public policy, because they are not equipped with enough sanctions to control their own role incumbents.

Particularly in smaller rural communities with low population turnover and densely-knit networks of social acquaintances, parties may be inexistent or party channels may be circumvented by personalized interactions (Wurzbacher/Pflaum 1954: 275ff; Vidich/Bensman 1968: passim). As Schneider shows for Germany and Jensen for Denmark, national parties initially had a hard time in colonizing the countryside because they faced the resistance of a traditional political culture which stressed values of personalized trust and reputation (Schneider 1999; Jensen 1999).

In his study on Switzerland, Ladner reports convicing empirical evidence that local parties in small communities, parties are much less likely to launch political proposals and initiatives, because such articulative activities take place mainly through direct contacts and informal talks. Generally, he finds that local parties are not only more numerous but also more active and influential within the arena of communal politics - despite the fact that other types of voluntary associations are also better organized (see Ladner: 1999).

Such findings support the hypothesis that with increasing size, political activities are becoming more a domain of specialized political groupings, while other associations are likewise specializing more on their nonpolitical goals. This accords with similar studies in Germany which have shown a

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[8] This hypothesis accords with the cross-national study of Harmel and Janda which showed that country size was positively associated with extremism and interparty polarization (Harmel/Janda 1982: 34ff.).

consistently positive relationship between community size and the degree to which political life was dominated by parties (Holtmann 1994: 256f.)

The causal impact of community size on the functional significance of local parties has been demonstrated in countries which have conducted territorial reforms. A case in point is Sweden where the transformation of 2498 smaller into 284 larger communities (between 1951 and 1989) has resulted in a major decline of nonpartisan elections. In addition, it was observed that the local party sections got more prone to behave like their supralocal mother organizations and to create stronger vertical links to the national party levels (Elander /Stig 1991: 317). Very similar develop- ments are reported from Germany where rural local politics in the 1950ies and 1960ies (before the territorial reform) was dominated by reputable individuals, by circles of notables ("old fami- lies") and by nonpartisan "voter's groups" (without connections to supralocal organizations; see Schneider 1999). Historically, this lack of rural local parties gave the NSDAP ample opportunities to intrude into rural regions and to mobilize significant segments of the (younger) population.

In the 1970ies, German communal reforms have led to a sharp decline of "free voters" and other nonpartisan groupings. (Klein 1979). As local sections became stronger and more numerous, their influence on supralocal party activities (e.g. on the nomination of candidates for parliamentary elections) has considerably increased (Niedermayer 1989; Haungs 1980: 36).

Schneider argues that for two different reasons, the German territorial reform facilitated the spread of local parties even in very rural regions,

1) As the old informal elite structures were restricted to the previous smaller communities "Ortschaften") , the new (more encompassing) municipalities offered no resistance to the in- trusion of party politics.

2) Larger communities offered more professional and powerful political positions, thus making it more attractive for parties to engage in the competition for community power, and making it more attractive for party candidates to seek political careers in competitive elections (Schnei- der 1999).

Converging with Schneider, Jensen and Rallings/Thrasher also argue that the spread of local par- ties and contested partisan elections in Denmark and Great Britain (since the 70ies) was also mainly conditioned by preceding territorial reforms which resulted in diminishing the numbers and rising the average size of Communities all over the country. (Jensen 1999; Rallings/Thrasher 1999). In Great Britain, the major national parties colonized the communities by winning more and more seats formerly held by nonpartisan incumbents or adherents of strictly local groupings.

As a consequence, contested elections became widespread also in the countryside, while in the decades before, they were more restricted to metropolitan areas and cities. Thus, the community reform resulted in a more homogeneous distribution and activity of local parties across all areas of the nation (Rallings/Thrasher 1999).

It has also been remarked that in larger cities, citizens are more likely to articulate very diverse and intensive political demands because their daily life is highly conditioned by public services (e.g. public transportation), and because larger public administrations are more potent in under- taking many important (and also: controversial) things (Arzberger 1980: 96ff.). Consequently, there may be more demand for intermediary structures like political parties for discussing com- munal political issues and for influencing the political process.

Finally, the costs of campaigning are disproportionately rising with the number of inhabitant citi- zens to be mobilized and persuaded. In small villages, any well-known citizen may have enough personal acquaintances and friends to reach a sufficient number of signatures or votes

(Vidich/Bensman 1968: 148), while in larger communities, even wealthier candidates need to rely on the resources and the apparatus of a full-blown party organization (Black 1974).

On the other hand, it is also true that local parties may flourish astonishingly even in very small communities because they can build on densely-knit informal networks, on a stable population high in community identification and on effective norms demanding that all citizens participate in public matters. Such conditions are certainly effective in Swiss and Danish parties where it is found that in smaller communities, higher percentages of all members are regularly active (e.g. by participating in general meetings) (Ladner 1999; Jensen 1999).

As party activities get more intense and demanding with increasing community size, they become more monopolized by a rather selective (or even "elitist") stratum of core adherents within the section (Ladner 1999).This implies that the number of party activists tends to rise rather degressively with increasing population size.

3) In larger cities, the functional significance of political parties may again be diminished because potent mass media are active to propagate candidates and to inform and influence individual citizens.[9] In addition, big cities are more likely to possess various kinds of potent interest group organizations quite able to influence local political decisions.[10] Thus, Zychowicz (1999) reports that within the Socialist Polish regime, the local chapters imposed by the reigning communist party have been particularly powerful in smaller communes where they enjoyed a monopoly position in the political realm. In the cities, their power was more restrained by some minority parties and a manifold of other organized groupings (reluctantly tolerated by the communist regime). Consequently, the highest level of party influence may well be found in middle-sized communities which are big enough to offer a support base for party organizations, but still so small that no competitive associations are acting in the political arena. This is vividly seen in the case of many Swiss communities where local parties almost monopolize the political process because no other groups with a similar commitment to local political issues are in existence.(Geser 1991). In particular, they monopolize the delicate thing called "legitimate political articulation", because other interventions all tend to be of a highly personalized and particularistic nature.

4) In smaller communities, local parties are likely to suffer from an general social climate inimical to political controversies and contestation. In many case studies on smaller cities and villages, it was found that inhabitants tend to suppress overt political conflict or even to avoid political topics in private conversation (Vidich/Bensman, 1968: passim; Lehmann, 1976:100ff.). This correlates with a public myth saying that "community problems" are per se non-political issues: to be solved by pure common sense, by applying norms of "technical efficiency" or by uncontested professional expertise. Thus, "free voters group" in German communities still work on the assumption that community issues are not political, but should be decided by "objective" decisions (see Schneider 1999). Historically, this view was strongly asserted by one of the leading political reformer of the

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[9] This is particularly the case in larger cities where campaigning is covered by local TV-stations, because Television has the effect of "personalizing" campaigns, so that the impact of parties on voting decisions is reduced (see Harmel/Janda 1982: 126).

[10] In his comparative studies of German cities, Arzberger has shown that with increasing population size, the "Veto-power" of mass media and other organized community actors rises more steeply than the power of political parties (Arzberger 1980: 64ff.).

19th century: Rudolf Gneist. Similar attitudes are found in Danish communities where citizens think that they want "the best possible child-care" or that "the council must behave in an economically responsible way" (Jensen 1999).

Various authors have theorized that this reluctance against political thinking and political discussion is a logical correlate of small size, because within tiny and densely-knit populations, conflicts of any kind tend to polarize (and desintegrate) the whole social system into two opposing parties and to go along with negative interpersonal emotions which are not compatible with communalistic life (Black 1974; Dahl/Tufte 1974). Thus, the high degree of ideological polarization and political conflict reigning among national opposition parties is not likely to be fully reproduced on the level of their local sections, because these groupings have to adapt to the imperative needs of consensual communalistic integration (Lehmbruch 1979).

As a consequence, differences in party ideology are often not translated into similarly polarized standings in community issues. In Denmark for instance, it was observed that *"...the ideologically conditioned differences in the preference of politicians .are not leaving any traces in the (economic" behavior of the municipalities." (Mouritzen 1990).*

In many countries, we find local sections of competitive national parties to share executive power even within communities and even larger cities. This is certainly true in Germany where "Allparteienkoalitionen" are quite common on the communal level (Schneider 1999; Holler 1981: 127). The same is true in Sweden (see Elander/Stig 1991) and in Denmark (Jensen 1999) where parties are most often striving for compromise policies supported by all political groupings in the community. Such "consociational arrangements" may be additionally facilitated by the scarcity of available personnel: so that all citizens possessing useful qualifications (e.g. leadership talent) have to be included in the governmental apparatus. As a consequence of this "co-option", oppositional groupings may well find themselves without independent leaders.

In most countries, there is consequently a sharp hiatus between the national level where parties are highly competitive and the local level where they tend toward consociational arrangements.

Switzerland is certainly an exception to this rule because in this country, the same consociational practices prevail in local, cantonal and federal bodies of political decision making. As a consequence, parties are also disposed to maintain the same strategies and mutual relationships on all levels of their organization (Ladner 1999).

Do national parties find it harder to maintain an attitude of uncompromising opposition and polarization when they are involved in many cooperative relationships on the communal level? This quite fascinating question has - to the authors- knowledge - never been subjected to empirical research. It may well be that local parties may contribute to a dampening of macro-level interparty conflict in a similar way as they attenuate intraparty factionalism (see above).

5) The smaller the community, the more likely that the structures and activities of local sections are highly influenced by very small groups of adherents or even by single individuals (Vidich/Bensman 1968: passim). As a consequence, sections may change abruptly when the composition of membership changes (e.g. as a result of population turn over) or when important core individuals leave. The lack of impersonal bureaucratic structures is particularly harmful in very dynamic communities where a highly fluctuating population leads to constant entries and leavings, even on the level of formal role incumbents and political representatives of the party. Such unpredictable turn over may severely hamper the possibility to maintain stable procedures of decision making, display a stable ideological profile and follow consistent strategies of political ac-

tion. When written documents (e.g. statutes or protocols of sessions) are lacking, local sections don't have any kind of "collective memory" which would help them to record their own history and to maintain an explicit structure and identity not affected by changing membership. Thus, small local sections tend to be "ahistorical" social systems unable to remember their past (and therefore unable to assess the degree to which they have experienced change) (Geser 1994: 29).

As organizational stability can only be based on stability of individual membership, it is quite functional for local parties to rely on the most "sedentary" segments of the communal population (e.g. on middle-aged home-owners and descendents of "old families"; Geser 1994: 28).[11] Thus, there are good reasons for assuming that the smaller a community, the more a local section will be affected by endogenous determinants stemming from the demographic, socio-economic and cultural conditions of its local setting. By contrast, larger urban sections are more likely to be shaped by exogenous factors: e.g. by the impacts of supralocal party levels on their formalized structures.[12]

2. Social stratification

Apart from population size, the structures and activities of local parties are highly affected by *social class characteristics of the communal population*.

1) Communities with a highly polarized class structure are likely to possess a rather pluralized power structure and several competitive elite factions, so that local parties will be more polarized and more competitive and decision processes more centralized than in more homogeneous class settings (Clark 1968; Rothmann 1974: 259).

2). Wealthier social strata are more prone to be politically active, to articulate a broad spectrum of political demands and to be highly critical about the performance of politicians and the communal administration. (Alford/Scoble 1968; Arzberger 1980; Gilbert 1972:36; Kevenhörster 1979).

As a consequence, we may expect "upper class parties" to display higher levels of activity, at least in specific areas related to the supervision, critique or correction of executive decisions.

3) Within higher social strata, more citizens can be found which are able and motivated to fill leadership positions or to perform efficient administrative work (e.g. in organizing and presiding sessions, writing notes and letters, consulting higher-level officials etc.), because they meet similar demands in their normal occupations [13] By importing managerial and administrative practices or professional expertise from private firms and other organizations, they may help to make local parties more efficient and more influential within the community as well as within the supralocal party organization.[14]

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[11] This strategy is facilitated by the fact that long-term residents are particularly high in local political involvement (Alford/Scoble 1968; Kasarda/Janowitz 1974).

[12] This was vividly seen in the German territorial reform ("Gebietsreform") which lead to the creation of very artificial new municipal unity lacking any kind of encompassing social cohesion (because social life was restricted to the smaller preexisting communities). As a consequence, the formation of local party setting after the reform was predominantly initiated and guided by supralocal party organizations (Klein 1979).

[13] There is also empirical evidence that incumbents of such occupational roles (e.g. supervisors in bureaucratic organizations) are more prone to be very active and to apply for leadership roles in communal voluntary associations (Hagedorn/Labowitz 1968).

[14] This may explain why some studies have found that in upper class communities, formal associations exercise higher influence in local politics (Gilbert 1972: 42).

On the other hand, it has been amply demonstrated that intermediary organizations like political parties are less needed in communities with high SES-populations because many citizens (e.g. lawyers or entrepreneurs) are disposed (and capable) of intervening individually without support by any formal organization. Even when local parties exist, a smaller percentage of all political interventions may be channeled through them than in lower-class communities where the general level of political participation often depends heavily on the activity of intermediary formal organizations (Rokkan/Campbell 1960; Goel 1980).

3. Institutional factors

Apart from demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, several institutional and legal factors decide whether local parties are likely to emerge and gain an influential position:

1) *When local elections are guided by plurality rules, the national parties will restrict their local sections to "worthwile" districts where they have a chance to win seats. Under rules of proportionality, it pays for them to maintain such sections in all parts of the country*. This relationship is illustrated by Denmark where the introduction of proportional rule (in 1909) resulted in a sharp increase in the number and salience of local parties (Jensen 1999). *Ex negativo*, the same regularity is evident in modern Russia where the plurality ballot system encourages many local candidates to run without affiliation to any political party (Kropp 1999). In Switzerland, empirical studies have shown that more local parties exist in communities following proportional election rules, and that this effect is particularly strong in the case of smaller communities (Ladner 1991: 169ff; Ladner 1999).

2) *When political authority is divided among several agencies and boards with specific competences (e.g. for school, health, social welfare etc.), recruitment is likely to take place on the basis of specific (e.g. technical) qualifications*. The more all domains are concentrated on a single executive with generalized iurisdiction, the more parties will come into play, because of their ability to provide generalized ideological perspectives relevant to a infinity of different issues. Thus, Danish local parties have lost recruitment power when competencies have been transferred from the central administration to more specific local agencies and institutions (Jensen 1999).

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Viewed from a contrary perspective, communal parties may of course also be seen as *independent* variables which in turn affect communal political processes and political structures.
In this view, the following most fundamental question arises:
Do communal parties really make a difference for local politics (e.g. by exerting effects or fulfilling functions which cannot be readily substituted by other components of the political system)?
The United States is particularly suited for assessing the impact of party absence, because nonpartisan forms of communal politics are more widespread than in most other countries. In about two third of all communities with more than 5000 inhabitants, nonpartisan elections are the rule (Crotty 1986: Saiz 1999).
This negative evaluation of party politics in the "reform government" movement may be mainly an effect of the corruptive character of the legendary "party machines"; but it may also reflect a high preference for non-mediated, individual forms of democratic participation and for a highly

professionalized and efficient form of public administration (Crotty 1986). In addition, it expresses the view that in essence, communal issues are "nonpolitical" in the sense of being amenable to "the" one optimal solution on the basis of common sense, technical efficacy, economic efficiency, or objective professional expertise (Banfield/Wilson 1965: 138ff.).[15]

On the other hand, several studies have shown that nonpartisan elections result in democratic deficiencies by lowering public interest and voting turnout, by favoring candidates from higher social strata, by reducing policy discussion in election campaigns, and by decreasing the public accountability of office holders (Cutright 1963; Gilbert 1962; Lee 1960, Crotty 1986). Bledsoe and Welch (1988) have found that the absence of political parties works in favor of more wealthy strata because it lowers the voting turnout particularly in lower-class wards.

The relevance of local parties for political legitimation is actually illustrated by post-socialist countries were the breakdown of the national regime left many (particularly smaller) communities without organized groupings able to control the processes of political recruitment. For example, nonpartisan mayors in Polish communities are highly exposed to public criticism because they cannot rely on the legitimation provided by a reputable party (see Zychowicz 1999). Jensen (1999) argues that within the arena of communal politics, local parties tend to occupy a highly indispensable role because they are often the only groupings aiming to *reduce* public expenses, while all other groups (voluntary associations etc.) try to *increase* public spending in some specific areas.

Summarizing most of the existent argumentations and empirical findings, Kevenhörster concludes that nonpartisan urban politics is harmful to democracy because

1) voters not included in exclusive "inner circles" find it hard to inform themselves about different candidates and to rank them in terms of their own evaluation standards;

2) campaigning is expensive and inefficient, because candidates which lack a party label have no choice than to make themselves personally known to a maximum number of voters;

3) new candidates find it hard to compete against office-holders, because they lack organizational support;

4) lower classes find it particularly difficult to represent themselves because they lack candidates able to provide (or mobilize) money by their own efforts;

5) decision making bodies (e.g. parliaments or executive boards) are very unpredictable because nonpartisan members cannot be identified in terms of party adherence or ideological and programmatic positions;

6) political Innovation is hampered because outside the formal bodies, no organizations are active to initiate and elaborate new political proposals;

7) there is a general decline in political interest and participation, because no organizations are active to provide basic political information, to socialize young voters to keep political discussions going on and to energize public political discussion by providing clearly profiled alternatives and lively competition.[16] Thus, the basic function of transmitting political culture is delegated to rather informal social mechanisms (e.g. socialization within families or voluntary organization) which are not specialized for this kind of task (Kevenhörster 1979).

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[15]Even within partisan cities, many American citizens with quite strong party commmitments in national elections have been found to define themselves as "independent" in community elections, because they believe that *"there is no Republican or Democratic way of laying sewers (for example)" (Jennings/Niemi 1967: 90).*

[16] Numerous comparative studies on the level of cities and states confirm the hypothesis that party competition is positively correlated with electoral participation (Agger/Goldrich/Swanson 1964; Milbrath 1965; Geser 1991).

Finally, Kevenhörster notes that the lack of communal parties contributes to a dissociation between local and supralocal political elites, because communal office holders are often not linked to higher-level politicians, and because they are themselves unable to instrumentalize their local mandates for a higher political career (Kevenhörster 1979: 308).

By providing a highly visible frame of formal organization and highly universalistic criteria for acquiring membership, local parties are particularly functional for integrating rather marginal individuals and population segments into the political process which have no access to the more diffuse interpersonal networks of "notables" and other informal circles (Prewitt 1970: 40). Thus, they may catalyze the political integration of recently immigrated inhabitants or of discriminated minority groups and lower social strata. This is vividly illustrated by the classical "political machine" (e.g. in Chicago) which gave immigrant lower class citizens an opportunities to "trade" their voting rights for material advantages.

The larger the number of new immigrants and the lower their social class status, the more it may be expected that "social entrepreneurs" are making use of local party structures for gaining public support and promoting their own political career. For similar reasons, local parties can be functional for catalyzing change within the local political elite, because they provide universalistic opportunities for recently immigrated upper classes to gain public offices. Thus, the need for parties will be highest in communities and cities where dynamic socio-economic change has resulted in an inflow of new economic or professional elites eager to participate in formal political power (Clelland/Form 1964).[17]

In a very general sense, local parties increase the degree to which communal politics is governed by formal rules and procedures not unlike those reigning on supralocal levels. Sections of supralocal party organizations are particularly likely to contribute to this development because they are embedded in such encompassing bureaucratic structures. As Schneider reports, this was certainly the case in Germany where even the - hitherto very informal - autochthonous local groupings ("Free Voter's Groups") were forced to adopt more complex formalized structures in order to remain competitive with the newly founded sections of the three national parties (Schneider 1999; Holtmann 1992: 183).

5   A Theoretical Caveat

It may be objected that the theoretical discussion displayed above relies heavily on *functionalist* arguments by treating political parties as a special kind of adaptive social systems, while genuinely *causal* relationships have not been sufficiently assessed. This functional approach is certainly fruitful insofar as it opens the view on the causal impacts of environmental factors on organizational activities and intraorganizational structures.

But its limits are given by two implicit premises which evidently do not hold in many cases.

First, it is assumed that parties adapt rationally and without delay to any kind of changing external conditions. This view surely neglects that adaptive system changes are known to be time-lagged and incomplete, because of inertia factors as well as because some specific identity-constituting factors are not amenable to opportunistic change. Thus, Stinchcombe has indicated that most

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[17] For the case of Chicago, Bradley and Zald have shown that the emergence of the "political machine" helped much to marginalize the old "economic dominants" and to further the rise of a specialized political elite (Bradley/Zald 1966).

organizations are inclined to preserve the structures they have acquired during their early formative stages, regardless of later environmental change (Stinchcombe 1965).

Applied to political parties, this would mean that internal party structures are best understood as adaptations to historical political conditions at the time of their origin.[18]

In addition, organizational studies have shown that organizational adaptation to environmental conditions is discontinuous and highly dependent on leadership decision (which may occur with considerable time-lags or never at all; Meyer 1978). In their studies on Germany and Denmark, Scarrow and Jensen stress the structural and behavioral inertia of local parties which makes them largely unable to exploit their specific functional potentials.(Scarrow 1999; Jensen 1999).

Given the spatial proximity of their adherents and voters, functional analysis would predict that local sections are particularly prone to specialize on face-to-face contacts and very informal, personalized activities, while supralocal parties would focus more on indirect contacts based on leaflets, press statements etc. But empirically, such expectations are not fully borne out. On the one hand, it is true that local sections invest much activities in meetings or in talks with local public officials (see Jensen 1999, Ladner 1999). But on the other hand, very informal contacts like door-to-door-canvassing are found to be very rare (Scarrow 1999; Jensen1999), while mediated forms of communications are used almost to the same degree as on supralocal party levels (Scarrow 1999; Ladner 1999).

Similar rigidities make it unlikely that local sections adapt flexibly to changing environmental conditions. Thus, Danish communal parties have been fund to "cling to the old ways" (e.g. in recruitment procedures) even in the face of dramatically shrinking membership (Jensen 1999). Using even more drastic language, Scarrow concludes that local election campaigns in Germany are mainly conducted as a kind of routinized "civic ritual" (providing periodical political legitimation), not as rational strategies for reaching effectively specific political goals (Scarrow 1999). Given this ritualistic character of their activities, local parties are not in need of many activists, and they may not even react in the face of heavy losses of membership (Scarrow 1999; Jensen 1999).

Classical party theories (initiated by Robert Michels and Max Weber) would predict that such endogenous structural rigidities are mainly a concomitant of an elaborated bureaucratic organization (Michels 1911: passim; Weber 1972: 843).

Contradicting this contention, local parties vividly illustrate that similar (or even more pronounced) ossifications can well emerge in collectivities without any professional roles.

In fact, it may be argued that they are even mainly conditioned by the fact that leadership functions and administrative tasks are fully in the hand of volunteers, because such unpaid "amateurs" are likely to minimize their work load by clinging to established traditional routines.-In other words: they lack as well the motivation as the capacity and skill to conceive and try out new strategies and to expand their role to additional activities which may involve unexpectedly long work hours and lead to uncertain results (see also: Vidich/Bensman 1968: passim).

By implication, this means that supralocal party headquarters have almost no way to determine how much (and what kind of) campaigning support they get from their local sections. Of course,

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[18] This accords well with many other findings which have shown that political parties are particularly prone to be very conservative organizations surviving without major reforms under highly variable societal and political conditions. Thus, Lipset and Rokkan have shown that contemporary party system are still deeply shaped by very outdated (e.g. religious or class-related) societal cleavages (Lipset/Rokkan 1967). Similarly, Harmel and Janda have found that national parties founded in earlier epochs have preserved lower levels of "organizational complexity" than parties of more recent origin (Harmel/Janda 1982: 50).

this may increase their motivation to use new campaigning techniques (e.g. by mass media) in order to lessen their dependency on local organizations.

Secondly, the "open system" hypothesis relies on the implicit premise that political parties are dependent variables adapting to an already existing political system. While this assumption may hold in of most western democracies, it is evidently questionable in the case of various authoritarian systems where a single "governmental party" is genetically constitutive for a specific political regime (like in Irak, Syria etc,) or even for a whole form of societal organization (like in the former communist regimes in the Soviet Union and in the Eastern European countries).

In these latter cases, the term "party" - usually applied to competitive groupings - has to be stretched in order to cover monopolist institutions designed to provide an entire political system with basic forms of legitimacy and ideological orientations. Here, we may say that the *government* is the dependent variable, because its high centralization is made possible by a pre-existing party which provides national decision making centers with sufficient legitimacy to exercise authoritarian power. This has surely been the case in socialist Poland where *"the party created the parliament, government and all other authorities, which later, as being formalized, perform its doctrine." (Zychowicz 1999).* In these unitary systems, the centralist nature of national government was isomorphically mirrored in a highly authoritarian power structure within each district and community (Kropp 1999; Zychowicz 1999). Consequently, the dissolution of such monopoly parties is sufficient to cause the decay of the whole governmental system erected on them, because when the monopolistic "top-down" party fails, no "bottom-up" parties are readily available to restore the legitimacy of a national regime. In addition, the erosion of the national party leads to a political decay of all subnational party organizations (like local sections), because all these subunits have never been conceived to function without centralized guidance and support. Thus, post-socialist countries are presently all plagued with very high levels of "anomie" in communal politics which makes it very hard for all participants (as well as for social researchers) to predict future developments and to engage in long-term, planful courses of action.

Another example of low environmental adaptiveness is provided by Annick Magnier's study which shows that in Italian cities, incumbents of different parties differ very much in their disposition to interact informally with local inhabitants. Thus, mayors belonging to leftist parties are less likely to be acquainted with many citizens and to use much time in talking to them than mayors of more conservative parties (Magnier 1999). This finding indicates that parties high in ideological discipline tend to inhibit "populistic" forms of political leadership even in smaller communal settings, because such plebiscitarian orientations are likely to reduce the conformity to the principles and programs of the supralocal party organization.

Thus, leftist candidates seem to follow quite similar behavioral strategies in local and supralocal campaigns. On the other hand, candidates of "nonideological" parties (like the defunct Democrazia Cristiana) make heavy use of the possibility to gain communal seats by cultivating widespread personal relationships to many individual voters - a strategy not available on the provincial or national level.

6   Conclusions

Many authors contend that modern parties become less dependent on the functioning of their local subunits because new communication technologies give them ample opportunities for campaigning and persuasion without using the old-fashioned mechanisms of local gatherings and the "spirit of community" often found among adherents of local sections (Beck, 1974: 1243; Crotty,1984). Thus, Plasser thinks that parties are drifting toward a form of "telecracy" in which the old mobilizing members are completely substituted by professional public relations experts, marketing specialists and fund-raising agents (Plasser 1987). In his analysis of the abortionist and anti-abortionist movements, McCarthy has shown that the "Pro Choice Movement" (the professional type) was acting quite successfully on the basis of extensive media propaganda and direct mailing, while the opposing "Pro-Life Movement" (the "grass-roots type") still relied on the basis of rather densely knit local groupings (e.g. religious parishes; McCarthy 1987). But this analysis also shows the severe functional shortcomings of pure professional movements: e.g. their inability to develop "strong ties" to their followers and to segregate their movement from the ebbs and flows of general public opinions and moods.

Contrary to all theoretical arguments about a growing reliance of parties on mass media and other channels of supralocal communication, Gibson et al. found that local party activity in American Counties has increased in the period between 1964 and 1979. In addition, they found that many of these local groupings were showing a remarkable level of programmatic activity as well as "party-maintenance activities" (also *between* election periods).[19]

While no visible increase in voter alignment or party membership has occurred, Martin Saiz notesthat contemporary local parties in the U.S. are politically more articulative (and more polarized in their issue positions) than in the past (Saiz 1999). Researchers reporting from Germany, Great Britain, Denmark and Switzerland agree on the point that a major growth in local party networks has occurred since the early 70ies in their respective country (Schneider 1999, Rallings/Thrasher 1999; Jensen 1999; Ladner 1999). In most cases, this growth was conditioned by a preceding territorial reform which - by eliminating minor communities - facilitated indirectly the emergence of organized communal groupings With explicit political goals. In Switzerland, however, the same development occurred without any formal change in the communal system. (Ladner 1999). Thus, it may be hypothesized that this parallel growth in such different countries has been conditioned by other factors as well: e.g. by general dispositions toward political participations prevalent during and after the student revolt of 1968, and by the emergence of "new social movements" within almost Western countries. In most cases, these movements of the 1970ies have given rise to various "single issue groups" .trying to compete with the traditional parties. But generally they have proven to be transitory groupings not able to reach and maintain considerable shares of votes. Thus, the performance of the "Greens" in Great Britain has shown to be highly dependent on temporary and localized issues (like the "chunnel" project which determined their transitory success in Dover in 1991; Rallings/Thrasher 1999). During the past decade, political parties have again "inherited" many former activists set free by the decline of their respective (e.g.

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[19]Thus, the erroneous prejudice that American parties were very poorly organized (see: Harmel/Janda 1982: 52ff.) has at least partially be caused by a too long ignorance about the local party level.

antinuclear or pacifist) movement. Thus, Jensen concludes that party alignment has again gained momentum and reached the same level 1990 as it had twenty years before (Jensen 1999).

It has been argued that local parties are getting more salient because there is a tendency of community issues to become more "political", so that they come to be discussed and decided in the same controversial manner like issues on the state or national level.

In his study on Switzerland, Ladner (1999) presents empirical evidence that more communal issues than in past are interpreted to be "real political issues" to be decided on the basis of political discussion and contestation. As a consequence, local parties find more and more opportunities to raise their voice and to contest the seats in even quite specialized (and hitherto "unpolitical") boards and commissions. Among other factors, this may be caused by the phenomenon called "vertikale Politikverflechtung" (= vertical policy interconnection) by German political science (Scharpf et. al. 1976). This term relates to the empirical regularity that communities are more and more drawn into complex political processes and programs where decision making and execution takes place by joint actions of local and supralocal levels (e.g. in the case of zonal planning or ecological policies). As a consequence, the boundaries between "mere community matters" and "higher politics" become blurred and political parties have no choice than to create stronger links between local and supralocal levels of political action (Holtmann 1992: 16ff;).

Considering that more and more governmental laws and programs are executed cooperatively by all administrative levels, it becomes increasingly important for communities to articulate their interests on higher political levels. This is rather difficult when all political groupings in the community are strictly local (= possessing no links to supralocal organizations), but it is very much facilitated when communal parties are sections of supralocal party organizations, because in this case, local role incumbents are likely to have have easy access to various influential politicians on higher governmental levels (Schneider 1999). While larger cities possess various other channels for effective political articulation, smaller rural communities are particularly prone to profit from such vertical linkages (Schneider 1999). In addition, the salience of local parties may rise as a correlate of processes of political "devolution" which have the effect of increasing the power (and therefore: attractivity) of local political positions as well as the volume of substantial (and controversial) political issues to be decided on the communal level.[20]

Finally, it seems reasonable to assume that in some cases, local parties may profit from the erosion of traditional forms of "Gemeinschaftlichkeit" in community life, because this means that informal ways of discussing issues and evaluating candidates are no longer available and the same universalistic and ideological criteria are applied to community matters as to supralocal levels (Klein 1979: 103). New immigrants are particularly disposed to use formal party membership as a vehicle for communal integration, because they don't find access to the more exclusive informal circles.

Whenever national parties are eager to gain foothold extensively on the community level, the growth of local party networks may well gain its own momentum independent of any developments on the individual level. This is vividly illustrated by Denmark where communal party groupings continued to proliferate during the 1970ies and 1980ies, while the number of adherents (and available candidates) was sharply shrinking (Jensen 1999). On the other hand, several studies also agree on the point that local parties are not very active in channeling individual political demands and grievances into the communal political system, because most inhabitants prefer to contact

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[20] For the case of France, see Prêteceille 1968.

other role incumbents or persons outside the formal political system. In addition, their role in supporting supralocal election campaign is at least questionable, because in most cases, they rely on minimal volunteer activity and are quite reluctant to adapt their activities optimally to their surrounding conditions. Thus, it may be doubted whether local parties are absolutely irreplaceable components of national party organizations on the one hand and for community politics on the other. But the fact that they are functioning reasonably well within both frameworks may nevertheless guarantee their long-term survival and contribute to their endogenous revival in the post-socialist world.

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