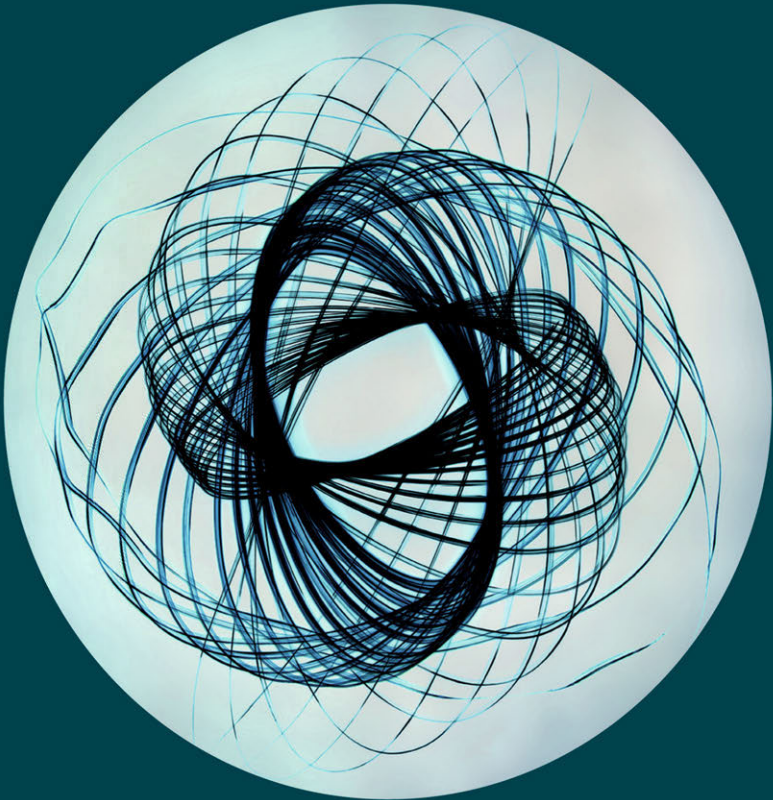


Political Parties in Multi-Level Polities

The Nordic Countries Compared



Nicholas Aylott, Magnus Blomgren
and Torbjörn Bergman



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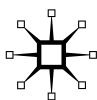
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Contents

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	vi
<i>About the Authors</i>	viii
<i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>	ix
1 Parties and the Challenge of Multi-Level Politics	1
2 Principals, Agents, Parties and the EU	26
3 Denmark: Party Agents on Tight Leashes	50
4 Finland: From Permissive Consensus to Angry Birds?	87
5 Norway: Strong yet Marginalised Parties	119
6 Sweden: Power to the Parliamentarians?	151
7 Conclusions: Nordic Political Parties, European Union and the Challenge of Delegation	185
<i>Notes</i>	218
<i>References</i>	227
<i>Index</i>	245

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

1.1	The role of political parties in the chain of delegation and accountability under parliamentarism	6
1.2	Two chains of delegation and accountability in an EU member state	10
2.1	Principal–agent relationships in party organisations	30
3.1	Danish parties on two ideological dimensions	63
4.1	The total number of tabled U- and E-issues and statements from the Finnish parliamentary standing committees, 1995–2007	97
4.2	Finnish parties on two ideological dimensions	99
5.1	EEA- and EU-related matters (of all types) addressed in the Norwegian parliament	127
5.2	Norwegian parties on two ideological dimensions	130
6.1	Swedish parties on two ideological dimensions	159

Tables

2.1	Forms of intra-party delegation and control	41
2.2	Summary of independent factors, expectations and relevant dimensions of control	47
3.1	Disproportionality in Nordic countries	53
3.2	Election results (percentage of parliamentary seats) and governments in Denmark since 1990	56
3.3	Danish referendums regarding the European Union	58
3.4	European Parliament elections in Denmark, 1994–2009	65
4.1	Type of cabinets in Nordic countries, 1945–2000	91
4.2	Election results (percentage of parliamentary seats) and governments in Finland since 1991	92

4.3	European Parliament elections in Finland, 1996–2009	102
5.1	Election results (percentage of parliamentary seats) and governments in Norway since 1990	121
6.1	Election results (percentage of parliamentary seats) and governments in Sweden since 1991	154
6.2	European Parliament elections in Sweden, 1995–2009	163
6.3	Party membership figures	166

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book started life as the continuation of various conversations. They began in about 2002, when one of the authors, Aylott, arrived in the Department of Political Science at Umeå University in northern Sweden. It turned out that the two other authors, Bergman and Blomgren, were already working there on various aspects of party politics. Moreover, both were fascinated not only by parties, with their mix of ideas and institutions and influential individuals, but also by the effect that European integration has had on these organisations. The obvious next step was a collaborative research project; and the Nordic countries – mostly in the European Union, partly still firmly outside – were the natural empirical focus of that study.

We started the project with a brainstorming session at the Hotell Lappland in Lycksele, a couple of hours inland from Umeå. This was an excellent way to begin our work. Since then, a lot has happened, both within the parameters of the project and outside it. First, Aylott moved south to Södertörn University in southern Stockholm. Alongside courses that had to be taught, meetings that had to be attended and all the other familiar (and occasionally less familiar) components of academic life, we maintained our reflections and our discussions about how national political parties organise and manage themselves in the face of modern challenges, not least from the European level of what these days is known as multi-level governance. This book, the product of our project, has taken its time in coming. But we think it has been worth the wait.

We have various people to thank for the fact that it has actually seen the light of day. First, we gladly acknowledge that without the generous support of the Swedish Research Council (grant 2004-3641) the project would never have got off the ground, never mind reached this conclusion. We are also grateful for the unstinting support and patience of Liz Holwell and, latterly, Andrew Baird and Amber Stone-Galilee at Palgrave Macmillan.

Of course, the many people whom we interviewed deserve our deep gratitude. These interviews took place throughout the Nordic countries and in Brussels, and they enhanced enormously the insights that we obtained into the way that parties run their operations both nationally and supranationally. Sofia Andersson, Niklas Bolin, Johan Eriksson and

Susanne Hellqvist contributed some first-rate research assistance at different times over the course of the project.

We are lucky to be involved with a terrific network of scholars, mainly but not exclusively based in Europe, who work on party politics. The feedback and constructive suggestions that can be derived from such a network are invaluable. Early drafts of important chapters were presented at seminars held at Södertörn and at Luleå University of Technology in 2005; at the European Union Studies Association conference in Montreal in 2007; at workshops conducted during the annual conference of the Swedish Political Science Association at Uppsala University in 2008 and at the University of Gothenburg in 2010; and at the British Political Studies Association annual conference in London in 2011. The comments that we received on those occasions helped greatly in developing our ideas and the organisation of our analysis.

We are still more indebted to the colleagues who offered their comments about specific chapters. Although the errors and misinterpretations that remain in the book are ours alone, there would surely be many more of them had it not been for the generous help that, in particular, Elin Haugsgjerd Allern, Jacob Christensen, Jo Saglie and Tapio Raunio were prepared to offer. Working with scholars like Svante Ersson, Johan Hellström and Karl Magnus Johansson also made our research much better than it would otherwise have been.

Finally, we want to thank our respective families for putting up with the time and energy that our project has demanded of us, but also – on occasion – for dragging us home and away from our computers. Concentration on writing is obviously necessary if a book like this is to be produced, but it can all too easily lapse if it is unleavened by life's many other aspects.

Nicholas Aylott, Magnus Blomgren and Torbjörn Bergman
Stockholm and Södertörn, April 2012

1

Parties and the Challenge of Multi-Level Politics

For all the changes in European governance in recent decades, which some suggest have left the old 'boundaries' of the state out of sync with each other (Bartolini 2005), national democratic systems remain the centrepiece of politics. Moreover, despite their frequently alleged decline (see Daalder 1992), parties remain absolutely central to political competition. It is hard to envisage a genuine alternative to them so long as parliamentarism remains the democratic system of choice in the majority of European countries.

Yet the conditions in which parties operate have unquestionably changed. Party-based democracy – which, in practice, is a reasonable synonym for parliamentary democracy – has been firmly associated with the national state. Nationally delimited elections mean nationally delimited parties. But what happens when the national parliament is no longer unequivocally the highest political authority in the state, as is the case in the modern European Union?

Since the European Court of Justice established the primacy of European law over national law, and since the Single European Act introduced the real possibility of member states being outvoted in the Council of Ministers, accountability through parties has been harder to exercise. A minister can hardly be sanctioned by his or her government if he or she strove to pursue the preferences of both parliament and government in negotiations with counterparts from other member states, but failed to win them over. Nevertheless, the policy that those other member states' ministers preferred will become law in the recalcitrant state all the same. This, in essence, is a big part of the much-discussed 'democratic deficit' in the EU. It is deepening in tandem with the expanding policy competencies of the Union (Follesedal and Hix 2006: 534–7). In short, the EU is creeping into ever more areas of public

policy, but its authority is not being held properly to account – not, at least, according to traditional democratic measures.

A great deal of research, both normative and empirical, has been devoted to this democratic deficit. The vast majority of it focuses on the institutions of the Union. Only a small, albeit growing, section takes up the effect of European integration on national political parties, and only a small proportion of that looks inside the parties at the internal mechanisms of democratic accountability that they contain.

This book is part of an attempt to help fill that gap. It reports the findings of a research project that investigates the state of delegation and accountability in Nordic political parties – that is, the parties represented in the national parliaments of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. The aims of the project are threefold.

First, it seeks to peer into the black box of party organisation, and to do so through a distinct conceptual lens. In doing so, we hope to derive a clearer understanding of how power within parties is delegated and accountability exercised. Second, the project compares these mechanisms of delegation and accountability according to how they work at two different levels: at the customary national level and at the EU level. Of course, such a comparison will be of limited scale in the parties operating in one of the two Nordic non-EU member states, Norway. But it is far from meaningless even in those cases, thanks to the two countries' involvement in European integration via the European Economic Area (EEA). Third, the project aims to compare these mechanisms across cases – that is, to shine a comparative light on the way that parties operate across the Nordic region, with particular emphasis on the effect of European integration.

In sum, ours is a study of political parties' role in the multi-level politics – or perhaps even polity, in singular – that much of Europe has become, with our empirical material drawn from the Nordic region. The study draws inspiration from previous research that models modern representative democracy as a chain of relationships. Each of these relationships involves one actor delegating tasks to another actor, with the first actor then holding the second accountable for executing the tasks satisfactorily. In other words, the basic model that we start from is one of principals and agents (Lupia 2003; Miller 2005). The role of institutions in these relationships is to help to minimise 'agency loss'. Lupia (2003: 35) defines agency loss as 'the difference between the actual consequence of delegation and what the consequence would have been had the agent been "perfect"', with perfection conceived as the agent doing what the principal itself would have done, given unlimited information and resources.

Furthermore, we envisage the process of delegation in parliamentary democracy as, in practice, following multiple tracks or channels. Bergman and Strøm (2004a, 2011) outline three channels within which delegation and accountability is conducted. One of these channels is the *constitutional* one, in which voters delegate to parliamentarians, who delegate to a prime minister, who delegates to ministers, who delegate to civil servants. In most of the stages, parties play a vital role in allowing delegation and accountability to proceed effectively. Indeed, this role is so vital that in addition to the formal, constitutional channel, *parties* can be seen as comprising their own separate channel of delegation. This party channel is the one that primarily interests us.

The third channel is what Bergman and Strøm (2004a, 2011) call *external constraints*, that is, mechanisms that give principals at different levels the chance to monitor or sanction their agents in ways that go beyond or circumvent those mechanisms that normally structure the delegation relationship. External constraints include such institutions as referendums, constitutional courts, independent executive agencies and – of particular interest to us – supranational authority, such as the European Union. Parties tend not to be much involved in external constraints – although, as we will see later in this chapter, their involvement in European integration is said to be increasing.

This balance between the weight that any polity places on these three channels is not straightforward or stable. In fact, the model of democratic delegation that has traditionally been associated with parliamentarism in general, and the Westminster style of parliamentarism in particular, may well be seriously compromised by the growing importance of external constraints, especially those exercised from a supranational level of decision-making. Our research project was fired by our interest in the impact of external constraints that the EU imposes.

Earlier research has investigated the impact of European integration on the constitutional track. We concentrate on the impact of European integration on the party track. Our research question can then be summarised as: how effectively does intra-party delegation occur within Nordic political parties? We seek to answer this question through a comparison across parties and between two levels of operation, the national and the European.

The rest of this introductory chapter unfolds as follows. First, we peruse the research context. We review existing literature on parties, democracy and European integration, framed by those three channels of delegation and accountability. Our discussion emphasises contributions that have special relevance to the Nordic states. During this

review, the contribution of our project to this literature should become clearer. In the following section, a further, methodological rationale for our project is offered. Finally, we outline the remaining chapters in this book, in which our specific analytical model and expectations, our country studies and our conclusions are presented in turn.

Political parties and democracy: The constitutional channel

Parties offer a mechanism for aspiring political leaders to pursue their goals, through minimising transaction costs and resolving collective-action problems (Müller 2000: 312–17). In so doing, parties also offer citizens a means of holding their political elites to account in the constitutional channel.

By aligning themselves under a common party banner prior to an election, and by signing up to a common party platform, individual candidates can make more credible promises to electors about what they might achieve in the post-election parliament. With their personal reputations bound to that of the party, individual parliamentarians are then forced to share responsibility for the action of the executives affiliated to that party if and when these executives get the chance to govern.¹ Parties thus make the process of selecting a collective decision-making body, the parliament, one in which voters can exercise a reasonably informed choice. For one thing, they can make a judgement about parliamentarians' previous actions. At the same time, they estimate parliamentarians' likely future behaviour, thanks to the collective interest of these parliamentarians and their aspiring successors within the party in preserving its reputation among voters. As Müller, Bergman and Strøm (2003: 19) put it, parties 'seek to remain in business well beyond the terms of individual politicians, and hence do their best to make incumbents with discrete ambition (that is, ambition that does not extend beyond their current term of office) behave *as if* they would face the electorate again' (see also Brennan and Hamlin 2000: 191–2; Müller 2000: 325).

Further down the chain of delegation, parties have still more to offer. They serve to simplify the process of bargaining between MPs about policy output by reducing transaction costs (Cox and McCubbins 1993; Lindberg, Rasmussen and Wantjen 2008b: 1111–2; Thies 2000). Above all, they structure MPs' choice of their own agent – that is, the prime minister. The prime minister's delegation of tasks to individual ministers is also strongly influenced, if not always entirely constrained, by

party affiliation. Only in the final step in the constitutional channel, from ministers to civil servants, is the role of party usually seen, at least formally, as less welcome (Müller 2000: 311).

In sum, the singular chain of delegation in a parliamentary system – from voters to MPs to prime minister to line ministers to civil servants – helps to align the preferences of many of those who hold public office, so that policy can be implemented with minimal obstruction from other actors and institutions (Bergman and Strøm 2004: 98; also Strøm, Müller and Bergman 2006).

In presidential systems, the different branches of the state – executive, legislative, judicial – are designed to check and balance each other. In the language of our model, the system features strong external constraints. While parties are far from irrelevant under presidentialism (cf. Aldrich 1995), the individual character of many public offices (not least the presidency itself), plus the deliberately engineered tension between those offices, serve to make cohesive, organised parties less central to political competition than they are in parliamentary systems.

A distinguishing feature of parliamentarism, by contrast, is that the executive, rather than being checked by the legislature, is connected to it via an accountability relationship and reflects in some way the distribution of preferences within parliament.² A parliamentary election is thus, indirectly but fundamentally, about government formation. This provides the party with an incentive to present to the electorate a clear set of pre-election pledges about how it would like to govern, and to discipline its affiliated candidates if they stray from those pledges. At the following election, the governing party's candidates have no one else to blame for its policy failures in government when they stand for re-election. Alternatively, and more optimistically, they need not share with other public actors the glory for policy successes. Parties thus provide what Jones and Hudson (1998: 185) describe as an 'implicit contract' between the voters and the elected representatives.

In addition to this electoral connection, most prime ministers in parliamentary systems, though not all, enjoy two further powers. First, they can make particular parliamentary votes issues of confidence. Second, they can, largely at their own discretion, dissolve parliament and call a fresh election. Both these powers add further incentives for party cohesion and discipline (Strøm 2003: 69–70). So too does the fact that ministerial recruitment often, though far from always, draws from parties' parliamentary groups, which gives ambitious MPs reason to avoid upsetting their party leader.