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Party functions and party education in the political landscape of Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Political parties are widely recognised as indispensable actors in democratic systems. One way to illustrate the actions and role of political parties is to explicate various party functions that may be carried out in a political system. The aim of this paper is to explore the relationships between the organisation of party education and five specific party functions in Sweden. The empirical material consists of interviews with party officials from all eight parties that were represented in the national parliament during 2018–2022 as well as a mapping of educational content, structure, and activities from various parties. This material has been analysed in relation to five concrete party functions and a theoretical approach that highlights interactions and relationships occurring on different levels in apolitical system. The results demonstrate that there are different relationships between party education and party functions which may generate implications that are important both for the agency of a party but also to the broader political landscape. It is also possible to discern one specific function related to the provision of party education, namely an affirmation function.

Introduction

The idea that political parties are important for democracy has continually been reiterated throughout time (Schattschneider, 1942; Sartori, 2005b; Gauja & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2021). Demker et al. (2020, p. 2)state that ´parties offer a unique linkage between voters and elected representatives as they are the only actors carrying out activities both in the electoral arena and in the parliamentary arena.'The diverse activities that political parties carry out in different arenas in society may be categorised and analysed as specific party functions. Although different lists of functions have been proposed over time, they often overlap and may be composed of the same central themes. (Diamond & Gunther, 2001).This paper, based on the national context in Sweden, will discuss the importance that party education may play in how five specific party functions are carried out. Historically, popular adult education played an important role in preparing and educating people for political participation and work reflecting the growing specialisation and complexity of the society (Larsson, 2013). Nowadays, it is mainly the political parties themselves that organise and offer education to their members and activists. By providing education to these target groups, the parties try to enhance their internal och external capacity to act, react and interact in relation to the dynamics of the democratic system. It may thus be possible to discern links between the provision of party education and how functions are exercised, which may also generate consequences for the functioning of the political system.

A functional approach is performed in the interplay between functions and systems. Sartori (2005a, p. 22) states that such an approach 'is an answer to the question 'what for?' and applies to means-ends relationships' in a political system. A functional approach may thus be applied to address to what ends party activities are conducted, by which means and how it relates to broader systemic changes. This may concretely encompass a party activity such as strategic social media work. This concrete party activity mayon a higher level of abstraction be conceived as being part of a function such as articulation of interest. Twenty years ago, this activity may not have been part of the party repertoire while today it may appear as a necessity. It may relate to what is being communicated, by which means and to which target groups. Which means are used and how they are employed in political work may be affected by the provision of party education. The educational dimension which is addressed in this paper is of great importance to explore as it relates to the questions of why and how functions are carried out as they are. Gauja (2015, p. 235) states that 'from the perspective of the political party, membership is a strategic or functional resource.' The provision of party education may thus be used to enhance the performance of parties or their capacity to adapt as societal preconditions change.

Mair (1997, p. 16) stressed that both 'Party change and party system change are multi-faceted'. This assertion may be reflected in the Swedish context. This system has been characterised by noticeable changes over time but particularly over the last few years. Historically, the country had one of the most stable party systems in the world (Möller, 2020). The same five parties (the Left Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, the Liberal Party, the Moderate Party)prevailed in the national parliament for almost half a century. The Social Democratic Party governed the country for decades. This stability has however been replaced by a more fluid and unstable party system. Since 2010 there have been eight parties (except the ones listed above also including the Green Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Sweden Democrats) represented in the national parliament. This change implies, according to Lindvall et al., 2020, p. 482), that 'Sweden has one of the most fragmented party systems in Western Europe.'Tendencies towards continued fragmentation were witnessed in the parliamentary elections in 2018 (Aylott & Bolin, 2019). The traditional focus surrounding socio-economic issues in relation to the political right-left scale has also been challenged by socio-cultural issues concerning values, lifestyle, and identity (Elgenius & Wennerhag, 2018).

Based on public investigations and introductory literature, it is possible to identify five specific party functions as being more prevalent than others in the Swedish context (cf Hagevi, 2019; Petersson, 2000). The first function concerns *aggregation of interests* which involves the deliberations, compromises, and negotiations when a party reaches a joint position on a specific issue or multi-party agreement in the broader political context. Secondly, a closely related function refers to *articulation of interests* which involves how parties express their positions and pursue political communication. A third function deals with *channelling flows* which may be understood as both top-down and bottom-up. Hence, channelling may be important in ensuring that the wishes and demands of member or voters go up to the political leadership. It could however also relate to leaders striving to inform the lower ranks of the political choices that have been made and make sure they are fully bought into. A fourth function concerns *socialisation* which may relate to various processes that can come to affect the preconceptions, attitudes and behaviours of people participating in a party. The fifth and last function is called *recruitment* and involves the work of a party in recruiting members and selecting suitable candidates for office following elections.

The specific aim of this paper is to investigate the relationships between party education and party functions in the political system of Sweden. This aim covers the following research questions: How may potential relationships be construed? On which levels in the political system may relationships be located? These research questions will be contrasted to the five functions that have been identified as central specifically in the Swedish context.

The empirical material consists of eight interviews with central representatives from all political parties that were represented in the national parliament during the term 2018–2022 in Sweden. It also covers an extensive compilation of information covering various items relating to the setup and

organisation of education within specific parties. The interviews and the other materials have been approached in a way that is common in Nordic didactic research (Larsson, 2006). It puts focus on the reasons and reasoning behind educational arrangements and how this may be manifested in content, activity, management, and implementation. As party education constitutes non-formal adult education, there are no curricula or national regulations that govern how education should be designed and provided. This means that the intentions and reasons from the party as an educational provider may be transformed into diverse and varied learning activities. This material has been further processed and analysed reflecting the three-level approach introduced by Almond and Powell (1966).

Research overview

Research has been conducted to examine the role of party functions. Dommett (2016) asserts that the balance between different party functions has altered in recent years in relation to changes in the political environment. One concrete example is the observation made by Mazzoleni and Voerman (2017) of the emergence of memberless parties in the Netherlands and Switzerland. Another study by Giebler and Werner (2020) evaluates the implications following from the successes of radical populist parties in relation to functions such as electoral mobilisation, structuring of policy issues and social integration. The success of these parties may come to affect the workings of the representative democracy and how functions are being exercised. Another study by Römmele (2003) discusses how the introduction of information and communication technology affects the performance of key party functions. Research in the Swedish context has also been conducted in relation to party functions. This research has mainly been carried out in response to the overall declining number of party members which has been witnessed in Sweden as well as many other countries (Kölln, 2016). Declining membership numbers may in different ways affect the channelling functions of political parties (Gidlund, 2010). Karlsson and Lundberg (2013) investigated how the party organisations in Sweden manage the recruitment function when fewer people become party members. One of the conclusions drawn in that study is the party officials did not seem overly concerned about being able to recruit people as candidates.

There are scattered research efforts around the world that investigate the role and meaning of party education. The research which has been conducted tends to focus on one specific type of party or a certain national context. Work has for example, been carried out to analyse party education in communist parties. Research has looked at the role, structure, and scope of the party school system in China which is said to have become increasingly important in contemporary times (Shambaugh, 2008). Other scholars have drawn attention to the historical role of the Chinese Communist Party in relation to adult education and the educational reforms which were initiated there (Boshier & Huang, 2010; Lucas, 1976). A few studies have also discussed the influence of communist parties of multiparty systems such as Australia (Boughton, 1997) and Singapore (Flowers, 2005) on their local community and context. These studies either draw focus to party education in non-democratic states or the potential influence from these parties on other contexts and actors. They do however not accentuate the provision of party education as such.

Some efforts have been made to investigate the role of party education in a national context such as Turkey. The study of Özbudun (2006) stresses the role of internal education within the Justice and Development Party in mobilising members. Gökçe et al. (2015) investigate party education in several different parties in Turkey. One of the main conclusions drawn in that study (p. 89) is that 'Intra party education has a significant influence on both the education of party administration and party members in accordance with party program and ideology.' Concerted efforts have also been made to investigate party education in Sweden. In the study conducted by Nordvall et al. (2020) it is argued that there are two main differences in how political parties organise and structure their party education. The first difference concerns the degree of centralisation and decentralisation of party education which is important to address as it relates to the role of the national party organisation.

The second difference concerns how education is being packaged. Educational components may be put together in a certain educational structure or they may be generally available to individual members and local branches to choose freely from. Another study by Nordvall and Pastuhov (2020) elucidates four roles that are ascribed to the provision of party education in the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party. These roles relate to ideological training, training leaders, social infrastructure, and internal positioning. The social or relational dimension of party education in these two parties has also been investigated by Arriaza Hult (2020). Her study demonstrates how these parties' study material has been developed to make new members feel at home in the party. A study by Bladh (2021, p. 14) looking at party education in Sweden specifies that the provision of 'internal education acts as a mediating factor between individual members and the party.'

It may be concluded from this overview that research on party education is in general lacking. More research has been conducted on the roles of party functions, especially as a point of reference when contrasting changes in the political context or contemporary times. However, there seems to be no research exploring the relationship between party education and party functions.

Theoretical perspective

Various scholars have proposed different ways of conceptualising the functions associated with political parties (cf e.g., Almond & Powell, 1966; Panebianco, 1988; Sartori, 2005b). The common denominators of different functions, according to Diamond and Gunther (2001, pp. 11ff.), fall into seven main categories. These categories cover 1) candidate nomination, 2) electoral mobilisation, 3) issue structuring, 4) societal representation, 5) interest aggregation, 6) forming and sustaining governments, and 7) social integration. Bartolini and Mair (2001, pp. 332ff.) have also suggested that various functions may be grouped under two main headings which are referred to as 1) representative and 2) procedural and institutional functions.

The theoretical roots of these functions are found in concerted efforts from the 1950s. These efforts aimed to distill functional categories that would enable comparisons of political systems around the world. The functions were derived from asking a number of questions regarding political activities in the most differentiated political systems of that time. Different scholars have conceptually addressed the relations between functions and systems in ways that both differ but also complement each other (cf e.g. Almond, 1960; Easton, 1965).

Almond and Powell (1966, p. 30) states that 'The theory of the political system will consist of the discovery of the relations between these different levels of functioning – capabilities, conversion functions, and system-maintenance function and adaptation functions – and of the relations of the functions at each level.' They thus introduce a theoretical approach that allows us to discern interrelated functions that may be understood on different levels. Capabilities relate to the performance of units and the system. This level concerns how interactions and actions relate, regulate and respond to changes and activities in the political system. Another level of functioning relates to conversion processes that 'are the ways systems transform inputs into outputs.' (Almond & Powell, 1966, p. 29). This can encompass functions such as interest articulation, interest aggregation and rulemaking. The last level concerns system maintenance and adaptation functions such as socialisation and recruitment in the political system. This level encompasses underlying conditions and propensities that can affect the performance of units and the system. Socialisation processes within political parties may for example differ in relation to the ideology, inner culture, and history of a political party. What eventually follows from various socialisation processes may come to affect how party members experience, understand and act in relation to the political discourse and societal changes.

The theoretical perspective that guides the analysis of this paper adheres to the principle of mild functionalism suggested by Widfeldt (1997). In relation to this perspective, 'Political parties are assumed to be actors which fulfil a number of functions in the system.' (Widfelt, 1997, p. 11). Hence, there is no need to adhere to a strict scheme of explicated functions. The understanding is that

a political system generates conditions for the diverse activities of political parties which on a more abstract level may be construed as functions. As actors in a political system, a political party and its organisation and membership may however operate and act in different ways. The operation of the parties may relate to dynamics of the society, change of technology, but also how they try to enhance their internal and external capacity to act, for example, through the provision of party education. It is thus construed as a dynamic system that can change over time where both the actions and interactions of the actors are directly intertwined with the functioning of the political system. The employment of an analytical approach that enables a more sophisticated understanding of the actions and interactions of political parties within a political system allows us to discern how and why party education has a role to play. This enhanced understanding opens up for more fine-tuned comparisons between different parties and national contexts.

Data collection and analysis

The collection of empirical material was initiated by gathering material from the parties that relate to different aspects of the provision of party education. On the basis of these materials, different overviews have been generated. These overviews list and structure various items relating to the provision of party education from the eight parties in a more coherent way. It was thus a way to sort the variation that could be identified and to more clearly pinpoint both differences and similarities. This inductive mapping was mainly done in 2018 based on the information and materials that the parties and their related study associations provided online.

The first overview encompasses information about the organisational structure, party officials responsible for party education, relevant formulations in statutes, the structuring of education, statements from annual reports, goals specified in activity plans and information about ongoing cooperation or coordination with a related study association. This overview provides, for example, information as to whether the parties have requirements in relation to party education in their statutes or if they have specified goals in their activity plans. Although the availability of information in relation to different aspects varies between the parties, the overview provided a valuable mapping of how political parties organise, structure, and plan their educational activities.

Another overview which was put together includes information about courses and educational activities that the parties provide or specify online. That overview provided information about the name and general format of the education that parties offer, online availability, and whether study guides or manuals had been provided. This overview was helpful in providing an general outline of content, variation of different educational types, and how specific components are structured. However, it was not possible to obtain much information on these matters from the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Sweden Democrats as they keep their educational material inaccessible.

Following the mapping of the general structures and items as specified in the overviews, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with party officials from all eight parties represented in the Swedish parliament in the term 2018–2022. The interviewees were selected based on the prerequisite that they were part of the national party organisation with a central responsibility for the organisation of party education. This concerns education provided by the party organisation and not their sister organisations such as the political youth associations. To a large degree, the overviews that had been generated simplified the identification of relevant persons to interview. The interviews were prepared carefully, taking into account theoretical, practical and ethical aspects (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). These preparations included providing information to all participants about the research in advance, and they all confirmed their informed consent. The overviews generated in the initial phase of the research provided a preliminary understanding of the educational approach and structures in each party. This understanding was used to identity relevant follow-up questions. As the value of interviews are related to relational and interactive dimensions, it was deemed important to foster an open and positive climate when initiating and conducting the

interviews. It was also clarified that the interviews were conducted to get the perspective of the party organisation and not specifically personal ideas or opinions. Notes were also taken during the interview sessions and academic memos were produced shortly after. The memos gathered reflections and observations from the interviews while also providing a tentative understanding of potential relations to the information which had been sorted in the overviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The study received ethical approval from the regional ethical review board (Dnr 2018/280-31).

The empirical material which has been gathered through the interviews, overviews and other related materials, has been sorted and organised in relation to the five concrete party functions but also reflects the three-level approach as introduced by Almond and Powell (1966). There is a link between the didactical approach when gathering the empirical material and the later selection of theoretical tools. As the didactic approach (Larsson, 2006) concerns aims and intentions behind educational arrangements and choices, it may be possible to relate the reasoning and justifications given to conditions, demands or challenges in relation to what could be understood as a political system. The theoretical approach provided by Almond and Powell (1966) may thus help us to contextualise choices made in the national party organisations reflecting the society as an extra-organisational frame. It may be important to stress that the focus of Almond and Powell (1966) is political systems in broad terms which can involve a range of various actors and processes. This means that there has been some adjustment of the analytical focus in relation to the aim and research questions of this paper. The employment of the three-level approach introduced by Almond and Powell (1966) opens up for a more sophisticated understanding of how different functions and levels may penetrate, interact and overlap in different ways.

Findings

The findings of this paper are sorted and discussed in relation to the three-level approach towards understanding functions and system interactions as elaborated by Almond and Powell (1966).The functions of socialisation, recruitment and channelling are located on the system maintenance and adaptation level. Articulation of interest is discussed on the capabilities level. The function concerning aggregation of interests is found on the conversion level.

System maintenance and adaptation level

The functions addressed below will also discuss interrelations and interactions with other functions and levels.

Socialisation

Political parties can, according to Almond and Powell (1966, p. 120), be regarded as 'powerful agents for political socialisation.' This agency involves processes that influence and shape different cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions following participation in party activities (Almond and Powell 1966, p. 124). These processes of socialisation may involve both reinforcement or changes to occurring political attitudes, beliefs, and actions.

For political parties in Sweden, party education constitutes an arena where socialisation activities are occurring or fostered. The importance of the processes of socialisation can however be understood in different ways and on different levels. One dimension where party education plays an important role is when welcoming newcomers to the party. This issue is highlighted by several parties. The Centre Party specifies that new members can become acquainted and integrated into the party through party education. The Christian Democrats state that it is important to design education that incorporates social community building activities to ensure that new members feel welcome. Both the Green Party and the Left Party have noticed an interest in education with a clear

ideological profile among the people that recently joined the ranks and who may not have been previously involved in political matters. However, generating such educational opportunities is also of interest to the parties, as specified by the Green Party below:

> And there is also a need to educate people in the ideology so that they sort of grasp the rest as well.

By providing education on ideological matters, the party may help to build a sound foundation upon which newcomers can navigate both their party and the context where they participate. Another issue which relates to the process of welcoming new members as well as other member categories is the aspiration to strengthen a party community through party education. The Social Democratic Party emphasises that party education may confirm the commitment of party members by providing relationships, a sense of purpose and an expanded understanding of political contexts. The Green Party specifies that organising party education is a way for the party to care for their members, as expressed in the quote below:

> And keep members because it is member-care, to take care of, or like educate our members

Education is thus a part of member-care and caring for the members can help them feel at home in the party. For the Moderate Party, party education is one factor that may strengthen and develop a sense of a collective identity within the party. The building of a community or strengthening of a collective identity also relates to the question of consolidating or maintaining internal cohesion in the party. This is construed as a challenge for the Sweden Democrats whohave witnessed a significant increase in their membership numbers over the last few years. One way to enhance internal coherence in the party is to generate opportunities for people to meet and connect through the organisation of party education.

There is also a socialising dimension in relation to how education is designed and implemented. For a party like the Social Democratic Party, which has developed a unified and national structure for the party education they provide, the importance of fostering joint frames of reference through party education is highlighted. This matter is accentuated in relation to the leadership training they provide. Their elected representatives or internal leaders should be well-accustomed to, and instilled with, the expectations of the party regarding what constitutes good Social Democratic leadership. For the party, the organisation of party education has been a way of trying to change or update the behaviours of their members to better mirror the values the party identify with.

In this section, different dimensions relating to socialisation have been portrayed. Party education is particularly seen as playing a role in relation to the welcoming of new members and embedding them more deeply in the political attitudes, beliefs, and actions of the organisation they have joined. Party education may also play an important role in enhancing internal coherence and thus strengthening the collective capacity of the organisation to act.

Recruitment

Almond and Powell (1966, p. 118) state that political recruitment is 'one of the defining characteristics of political parties.' This assertion is especially true for a country like Sweden which is often referred to as constituting a party democracy. The parties play a decisive role in who is allowed to become a candidate for the parties. The role of party education in attracting people outside the organisation to become members and potential candidates is however limited. However, party education plays a clear role in the recruitment process for people that aspire to or become candidates for their parties and that consequently may run for office.

All political parties in Sweden provide special training and education for those members who will be confirmed as nominated candidates on the electoral list of the parties. For the Moderate Party, it is even compulsory to take part in education, as expressed by one party official as below:

> And this is important to state, people are not allowed to become candidates for the Moderate Party, unless they have undergone some form of education.

Making candidacy education compulsory is construed as quality assurance from the side of the party. Some elements of the education relate to how candidates are supposed to behave on both social media and in real life when interacting with voters and media. The Sweden Democrats are considering making this type of education compulsory, as expressed by one of the party officials below:

> We should also mention that we will probably introduce some kind of requirement, that those who are candidates in the next election, for example, should have taken part in X number of educational activities, and if this has not been done, they will not become an approved candidate.

The party perceives a need for both theoretical tests and additional assessments of members that want to run as candidates for the party. As well as preparing candidates for forthcoming elections, the political parties also regularly deliver different types of education on strengthening and developing leadership within the party. This education may in different ways overlap with education for candidates. Providing specific leadership training for current or future leaders can also act as a way to expand the base of relevant candidates for forthcoming elections.

In some parties, leadership training has been integrated into the education structure of the parties, others arrange it more on a one-off basis or as part of national gatherings. The Centre Party is one of the parties that has integrated leadership training into their educational structure, and the party official explains their aims with this education below:

> Yes, but we want to display good leadership on all levels, and this concerns both being an organisational leader and a political leader.

It may be interpreted from this section that there is a clear relationship between party education and the recruitment process of candidates or internal leaders. The general focus of the candidacy education is to enhance the competency of their candidates and to prepare them to interact with media and voters in a skilful manner. There may also be an overlap with the leadership training that different parties offer, as internal leaders may gain the internal trust and confidence to also become external leaders.

Channelling

Another function to be found on this level, although there are discernible interrelations with other functions and levels as well, is channelling. On a general level, channelling is related to the overall responsive capacity of a political system. However, this capacity of the system is dependent on specific and internal mechanisms and processes in individual units such as political parties.

For the political parties that have centralised their educational work, the national party organisation plays an imperative role for the implementation of education. In these parties, it is possible to discern channelling streams going from the top of the party to the rest of the organisation. This concerns how educational content is defined and specific activities carried out. The Social Democratic Party stresses that the unified and national structure for party education that they have developed should ensure that the values and ideals of the parties are presented in a consistent manner nationally.

However, the meaning of channelling in relation to party education may be broader. According to the party officials of the Liberal Party, their party has experienced internal turbulence for some years. Educational activities have constituted one channel where the party leadership and organisation can gain support for the choices the party has made during this period. It is also an arena to update party representatives from around the country on what is happening at the national level. This aspect is addressed by one of the party officials as below:

> It has provided an incredibly important venue and opportunity to keep the party up to speed on what has been happening and to educate them, to practice and to help us find ways to communicate effectively.

The Liberal Party has also established other channelling mechanisms that are used to provide information and political arguments. These are the digital newsletters and information that the party regularly transmit to members and elected representatives. The flexibility and continuity of this channel can also support members in keeping themselves up to date with what is happening in the party and in the political context. Other political parties also employ digital newsletters or similar solutions to regularly educate members and keep them informed about current debates, issues and arguments.

It is however also possible to illustrate the role of party education in relation to channelling in the opposite direction. Arranging party education may be a way for the national level to listen to the concerns and interests of local branches or individual members. Party education can generate opportunities for learning, not just for the participants but also for the central level, to enable them to get input from discussions at a local level.This point is addressed by the Green Party when discussing collaboration on education between the national level and their larger districts:

> And then we developed education and plans together, so that we are in harmony and I get the input from those who are closer to the members.

So, in this section we have seen examples of internal channelling mechanisms going in different directions. On a fundamental level, the design of educational content and activities may constitute an expression of channelling. However, parties have also developed more flexible solutions to both update and get updated about what is happening in the party and in the political context. These solutions may have been integrated into the provision of party education.

Capabilities level

According to Almond and Powell (1966, p. 192ff) a capability analysis concerns the performance level and patterns of interactions within a certain environment. Party education has a role to play on this level, in particular with regard to the function of articulation of interest, where there may be interrelations with different levels and functions. It is for example, mentioned by Almond (1960, p. 39) that the 'distinction between interest articulation and aggregation is a fluid one.' How and what a party communicates as the position of their organisation is however not only important in relation to the other actors that are involved in formal political decision-making, but also to their membership, media, and voters. By providing party education on communication, the performance of articulation of interest as well as other related functions may be strengthened.

Education on communication is something that is occurring in all parties. One reason for this may be the importance of consistency in political communication. From the central level, party education is one tool to ensure consistency when different representatives articulate party interests. This reason is illustrated by the quote from one of the Liberal Party officials below:

> Because one should be able to, as a politician, regardless of whether you are in the city of Hultsfred or in the city of Stockholm, you should be able to respond to a position we have taken on defence issues or nuclear energy concerns, even if it doesn't concern you at all as a politician in Hultsfred.

Articulation of interest is thus also related to the channeling function. This relation concerns communication going from the party to the general public. The articulation of interest from the party would be articulated in a less consistent manner if party representatives from different parts of the country would provide diverging messages on the same issue or topic. This relationship is especially important when elections are approaching. This is one reason why education on communication is integrated in the training that is provided for candidates in different parties in relation to the recruitment function. It constitutes a way to enhance the quality of candidates when articulating the interests of their party in advance of coming elections. What this education may encompass is described by the Moderate Party as below:

> This concerns how to behave as a candidate, it doesn't really matter if is on Twitter or when you meet voters outside ICA [a supermarket chain in Sweden), or something like that. It is difficult to train people on that, but we like to remind people how to behave.

To remind candidates how they should behave when meeting voters or acting on social media is a matter that the Sweden Democrats have also tried to address. The communication plan that the party issued in advance of the elections in 2018 ends with a checklist specifying what are construed as positive and negative behaviours in relation to communication. Party representatives should for example refrain from displaying a resentful tone when interacting with other politicians.

The relationship between channelling and articulation of interest can also be portrayed internally. The Christian Democratic Party gathers their leading politicians on the local and regional levels for national get-togethers a few times a year where educational components are integrated in different ways. These occasions also provide opportunities for the party to update how the key messages of the party should be conveyed. Education on communication may also be integrated in the leadership training that parties offer to certain categories of their members.

Articulation of interest plays a vital role in the political system. It is important not only to the aggregation of interests, but also to functions such as recruitment and channelling. Education on communication is prevalent in all political parties in Sweden. This education aims to affect and enhance the capacity of party members, activists and politicians on how and what to communicate.

Conversion level

The conversion level, as understood on an abstract level as the processes and contexts where inputs are transformed into outputs in the political system, can concretely encompass activities such as the adoption of resolutions, passing of laws or budgetary decision. Also this level may in different ways relate to party education. National parliamentarians or municipal councilors may in various ways be supported by their party through the provision of party education. This education may have been designed, arranged, and provided with a specific focus on functions found on the conversion level.

The Sweden Democrats is the party that most clearly expresses the relationships between party education and the converting functions. Developing the knowledge and competence of their members through party education is seen as a way of delivering on the promise of change that they believe they made to their voters. This point is illustrated by one of the party officials as below:

> This is about that we as a party, uh . . . must be able to . . . deliver what the voters expect us to deliver and what we say we'll deliver.

The party aspires to demonstrate that they have the necessary ability and competency not only to govern a local municipality but also at the national level. They also want to ensure that their representatives 'not only do the right things but the right things well.' In other words, this point illustrates a desire to improve effectiveness in political work which also implies higher effectiveness in relation to the converting processes.

However, the focus on improving competency is also found in the Green Party. The party official repeatedly expressed the idea during the interview that more knowledge was necessary to make members better politicians, to more skilfully act within the democratic system. By providing members with more knowledge and skills through the provision of party education, their representatives were construed as 'being able to perform small miracles' in political work.

Hence, party education may be arranged to improve the governance capacity and thus converting ability of party representatives. Apart from forming a general aspiration of some of the parties, more specific and targeted support and education aimed at different categories of politicians has also been developed.

For example, the Liberal Party launched a specific, national, educational programme titled 'Mission Whole Country' (Uppdrag Hela Landet). The aim being to improve the capacity of both elected representatives and political staff across the country to govern effectively, as regards

leadership, politics, and communication. This programme included strategies for increasing membership numbers and for developing a political platform for party representatives in different local context. The latter was understood as a plan of action developing strategies, identifying relevant target groups and assessing channels of communication. From the perspective of party officials, this initiative represents a major educational effort for both the party and the participants.

The Liberal Party, together with its study association, also offers a digital course called 'Congratulations, you've just been elected' (Grattis du är nyvald) targeting people that were elected onto a municipal council for the first time. The course aims to provide an introduction from the side of the party concerning formal political structures, how local policy issues are handled and the role of being a politician. The Centre Party has arranged similar study circles for newly-elected representatives. These study circles include education on how the local party branch is conducting political work, how to act within the municipal political structures and about mass media interactions. However, the party also recognised that members or politicians on different levels need different types of education and support.

One way to support those representatives in the most demanding positions is to offer coaching or mentorship from the party. Similar opportunities are also provided in the Social Democratic Party. One advantage of this solution, as stated by the party official, is that this support is provided on an ongoing basis. This thus provides learning opportunities for representatives to develop and upgrade their skills over time, with tailored feedback from the coach or mentor.

Apart from educational activities to enhance the governance competency of members and elected representatives, aggregation of interests is one specific function which is commonly associated with this level. This function plays an essential role for the political system as inputs are transformed into outputs through the aggregation of interests. However, this function can be understood on various levels relating to different actors. Party education can be arranged in direct relation to annual meetings or national gatherings where internal interest aggregation takes place. This may happen for example, in the Christian Democratic Party when local branches or party districts hold their annual meeting.

However, there is also another way to approach the relationship between party education and aggregation of interests. This is expressed in particular by the Social Democratic Party, which is traditionally construed as a mass party with close links to a variety of different peoples' movements. Although the links may not be as a close as they historically may have been, there is an interest from the party in trying to develop these bonds again. Here party education has a role to play. This point is illustrated by the party official as below:

> And this is because I want an order where the labour movement, which is broader than the Social Democratic Party, arranges education.

The reasons stated for these arrangements are to broaden networks and generate new relationships, but also to strengthen the quality of education. Party education may constitute an arena where different perspectives and joint understandings are coordinated and aligned. This process may have a role to play for both internal and external aggregation of interests from the party's side.

Hence, political parties may provide education and support to members and elected representatives on different levels. By supporting people who take political decisions, the conversion processes of the political system may be improved. It is also possible to discern a more direct link between party education and aggregation of interests within the Social Democratic Party.

Concluding discussion

The importance of political parties for democratic systems has been widely recognised. Dalton et al. (2011) conclude, for example, based on a multi-nation study, that 'political parties remain as central as they ever were to the effective operation of modern democracy.' The parties thus act as central intermediaries between the people and various policy levels. One possible avenue for political

parties to enhance their performance is to provide party education for members and elected representatives. How parties choose to design, plan, arrange and offer party education may not only create ramifications for the agency of the party but also the broader political landscape.

The specific aim of this paper was to investigate the relationships between party education and party functions in the party system of Sweden. As the overview of this paper has demonstrated, there are different relationships between party education and party functions. In some instances, these relationships are very explicit, like for example, the relationship between recruitment and party education. In other cases, the relationships may be understood in an indirect manner, especially concerning the conversion level. The analysis presented in this paper builds on, but also expands, the work of Nordvall and Pastuhov (2020) in relation to their identification of four roles ascribed to party education in the Left Party and the Social Democratic Party. The conclusions expressed in this paper are based on empirical material from all eight parties that were represented in the national parliament in 2018–2022.

On the system maintenance level and adaptation level we find the function of socialisation. Through the provision of party education, different opportunities for socialising are provided. These opportunities contribute to embed members and activities in the culture, norms, and settings of the party organisation they have joined. These processes may be important to both newcomers and more experienced members, as well as to the party itself. As such, the socialisation processes may have a role to play in consolidating and fostering internal coherence. This coherence may be of importance for the party in relation to other functions such as articulation of interests or aggregation of interests. The external aggregation of interests in for example, a parliament or a municipal council is preceded by internal aggregation of interests. Lack of coherence within a party can make both internal and later external aggregation more demanding.

Recruiting is another function that is found on this level. As specified, party education is currently not employed as a tool to attract non-members to become members and candidates of the parties. In this respect, the results concur with the observations made by Karlsson and Lundberg (2013) about the national party organisations not prioritising the recruitment of new members. However, it is evident that political parties provide education to potential or confirmed candidates. This education covers both broad ideological and contemporary issues and of reminding people of how to behave when conducting political campaign work outside a supermarket.

In this paper, the function of channelling was located on the system maintenance level and adaptation level. The main reason for this choice is that the responsive character of channelling is important for the overall maintenance of the system. By providing information on current issues and how to respond, argue and relate to voters and media, as in the example of the Liberal Party, the channelling function, in terms of going from the party to the public, is enhanced. In the paper we also see examples of other channelling mechanisms going in different directions related to party education.

There is also a clear relation between party education and articulation of interest, which in this paper was located on the capabilities level. Education on communication is occurring in all parties in Sweden. This highlights the importance of having members and representatives who can articulate the interests of the party in a competent, credible, and convincing way. For political parties, it may require long and sustained efforts to build trust and confidence in the eyes of the public, which may be ruined by an unfortunate slip of the tongue. By providing education on a critical element of the political toolbox, political communication and articulation of interest may be enhanced. This function is also closely intertwined with aggregation of interests before, during and after a decision on a specific policy issue has been made.

For most political parties in Sweden, there is a possible indirect relationship between party education and aggregation of interest. Party education can act as a background factor that in different ways supports individuals carrying out political work on different policy levels. This support may be directed towards municipal councilors in a local municipality going all the way up to the highest positions on the national or international level. However, as the specific example

from the Social Democratic Party has shown, the relationship between party education and aggregation of interests can also be understood more directly. By inviting other segments of the labour movement to the party education that this party arranges, it also tries to re-establish connections which may have been lost and to align perspectives.

Apart from these functions, there may be another one that is more specifically related to the provision of party education. The analysis also points to a function that may be called an affirmation function. Although it was argued that party education does not play a central role for attracting non-members to the party, the provision of party education appears to play a decisive role for the affirmation of current members. The provision of party education generates opportunities for the party to acknowledge and confirm the dedication of party members. This acknowledgement can be important for both the development of a party-associated identity and to sustain the continued commitment of party members. These results concur with the observations made by Arriaza Hult (2020) and Bladh (2021) on the social and socio-cultural dimensions relating to the organisation of party education. This function could be located on the system maintenance and adaptive level in the interplay between the processes of recruiting and socialisation.

Hence, it can be concluded that there are different relationships between party education and party functions. The national party organisationsplay a strategic role in strengthening the performance and agency of their parties through the provision of party education. Enhancing the competency and skills of individuals may also come to strengthen the collective agency of the party to act. These efforts may come to be reflected in the exercise of specific functions. How political parties act and how the broader party system evolves may come to play a pivotal role for thevitality of democracies in times to come.

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Notes on contributor

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