



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Two- and three-year projects and postdoctoral projects

Registration number, Östersjöstiftelsen: ÖSS-dnr 19/18

Project manager: Nicholas Aylott

Project title: **Political Parties and their Leaders: Power and Selection in Comparative Perspective**

1. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

Party politics revolves around leadership, yet it is only in recent times that the process of selecting leaders by political parties has attracted systematic comparative study. Scholarly interest has primarily concentrated on the "official story" – the provisions outlined in party statutes and rules. Specifically, most research has focused on the "selectorate", the body designated by its statutes as that which chooses its leader. However, the selectorate is far from the only relevant actor in the selection process. Even when it adheres strictly to party rules, it may have been subject to decisive influence by others. While the empirical focus of previous research has thus predominantly centred on the formal institutional framework, our project has taken an innovative and innovative approach. It places greater emphasis on acknowledging and integrating the "real story" of party organisation into the analysis.

We want to highlight three overarching findings that we believe have contributed to advancing the research frontier on party leadership and party organisation.

First, our project has taken the distinction between the official story and the real story seriously. It has developed a theoretical framework that enables the identification of both the formal regulatory framework and the informal, often hard-to-observe processes that influence a leader-selection process. This framework has been used to empirically examine a range of cases of party leadership selection processes in nine different European countries. Together, these case studies provide strong empirical support for the aforementioned premise, that the official story is significant but far from sufficient to understand intra-party selection processes. The real story – how candidates are filtered,



discussions within different parts of the party, and interactions among leading representatives at various levels – is at least as important.

Second, our research demonstrates that when we also include the real story, the formal vote for the party leader is only occasionally the truly decisive event. Instead, we show that what could be termed the "pre-selection phase" is often more important. Previous research has observed that party leadership selections often conclude with a so-called "coronation," a vote in which only one candidate is presented to the selectorate. Our research reveals that such a coronation often results from a process known as "precursory delegation", in which a "steering agent" assumes the task of filtering candidates so that only a few, or just one, make it to the selectorate. A steering agent is an intra-party actor – either an individual or a group. Its status can be formal or informal, ad hoc or long-established. This actor has the mission and, at least to some degree, the capacity to set the agenda for the selectorate by promoting one or more aspiring leaders at the expense of others. As an agenda-setter, the decision-making by the steering agent needs to be nimble, sometimes confidential, and usually consensual – all of which puts natural constraints on its size. Crucially, its exclusive authority to manage the preparation phase reflects the prevailing distribution of intra-party power.

Third, our research, which utilises the aforementioned findings, demonstrates that the "party on the ground" – its leading representatives at regional and local levels – still wields significant influence within the parties. This empirical discovery challenges much established research on party organisation, which asserts that parties over time have become increasingly centralised, with power shifting towards the "party in public office", that is, its representatives in government and parliament. This is an important complement to dominant theories such as the "cartel thesis".

2. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

Our main contribution to the research front, in addition to the aforementioned results, is the analytical framework that has been created and developed over several years within the project group and in collaboration with the network of researchers that we have cultivated. The framework emphasises the inclusion of both the official story and the real story of party organisation, as well as encompassing both the pre-selection phase and the formal vote of the selectorate. The framework not only provides a more accurate depiction of how



a party leadership selection process unfolds, but also allows for the identification of where power lies within the party. The framework can, therefore, serve as the basis for describing intra-party processes in an informed and detailed manner.

3. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

Much previous research tends to emphasise significant differences between parties in Eastern and Western Europe, rooted in the fact that parties in the east were primarily established during a different historical period than those in the west. In many respects, this observation seems to hold true. However, little research has addressed internal processes, like leader selection.

Our project contributes new empirical evidence and knowledge about several countries in the Baltic Sea region and Eastern Europe. The project includes cases and researchers not only from Western European countries such as Finland, Italy, Sweden, Germany and the UK, but also from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. The results indicate that there are often similarities between western and eastern parties. The analytical framework used in the project appears to be effective in both parts of Europe, and the findings suggest that the distinction between the official story and the real story, as well as the pre-selection phase and the formal vote, is equally central in both regions.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

The central focus of the project has been on developing and applying an analytical framework that addresses two key distinctions: that between the official story and the real story; and that between the pre-selection phase and the formal vote.

The next step in the research process is to utilise this framework to explain other political phenomena. The analysis of a larger and more representative sample of cases would enable us to evaluate possible associations between types of leadership selection and the intra-party power constellations they reveal, as well as various political outcomes – such as the occurrence of coronations, types of leaders selected, and electoral and governmental consequences.

Additionally, we could contribute to more normative debates, such as those regarding the value of intra-party democracy in its various forms.



5. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

Edited volumes

Aylott, N. & Bolin, N. (eds) (2023). [Party Leader Selection in Europe: Concepts, Processes and Outcomes](#), research topic in *Frontiers in Political Science* (open access).

Aylott, N. & Bolin, N. (eds.) (2021), [Managing Leader Selection in European Political Parties](#), London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Journal articles

Aylott, N. & Bolin, N. (2023) "[Editorial: Party Leader Selection in Europe: Concepts, Processes and Outcomes](#)". *Frontiers in Political Science*. DOI: 10.3389/fpos.2023.1279488 (open access)

Bolin, N. & Aylott, N. (2023), "[Analysing intra-party power: Swedish selection committees over five decades](#)". *Politics*, 43(3): 387-403. (open access)

Aylott, N. & Bolin, N. (2023), "[Locating power in party leader selections](#)", *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 46(1-2): 1-22. (open access)

Aylott, N. & Bolin, N., (2023), "[Explaining party change: Leader Selection and the breakdown of managed democracy in the Swedish Liberal Party](#)". *Frontiers in Political Science*, 5:1070269. DOI: 10.3389/fpos.2023.1070269 (open access)

Bolin, N. & Aylott, N. (2019) "[Populist party leadership in Sweden. One of a kind or one in the crowd](#)", *Polish Political Science Review*, 7(1): 24-40. (open access)

Book reviews

Bolin, N. (2020), [Book review: The Leadership Capital Index: A New Perspective on Political Leadership](#), *Party Politics*, 26(4): 523-524.

Book chapters

Aylott, N., & Bolin, N. (2021). Conflicts and Coronations: Analysing Leader Selection in European Political Parties. In N. Aylott & N. Bolin (Eds.), *Managing Leader Selection in*



European Political Parties (pp. 1-28). Palgrave Macmillan.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55000-4_1

Aylott, N., & Bolin, N. (2021). The Rule of the Valberedning? Party Leader Selection in Sweden. In N. Aylott & N. Bolin (Eds.), *Managing Leader Selection in European Political Parties* (pp. 175-195). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55000-4_9

Bolin, N., & Aylott, N. (2021). Patterns in leader selection: Where does power lie? In N. Aylott & N. Bolin (Eds.), *Managing Leader Selection in European Political Parties*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55000-4_11

Top five conference papers

Aylott, N. & Bolin, N. (2021). "Leader Selection, Management Failure and Institutional Change in the Swedish Liberal Party", paper presented at the XIX Nordic Political Science Congress, Reykjavik, August 10th-13th.

Aylott, N. & Bolin, N. (2017). "The Scope of Party Leadership", paper presented at a conference on Change and Future Viability of Party Democracy in Europe, Düsseldorf, October 13th-14th.

Aylott, N. & Bolin, N. (2016). "The Scope of Party Leadership", paper presented at a workshop on Party Leadership and Intra-Party Politics, University of Sussex, November 4th.

Aylott, N. & Bolin, N. (2016). "Managed Intra-party Democracy: Precursory Delegation and Party Leader Selection", paper presented at the first International Conference on Public and Political Leadership, Radboud University, Nijmegen, April 7th-8th.

Aylott, N. & Bolin, N. (2015). "A Peculiar Practice: Democracy and Leader Selection in Sweden", paper prepared for presentation at the conference of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, on September 3rd-6th; and at a workshop in Intra-Party Politics, University of Gothenburg, September 17th-18th.