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# Does regulation matter? Trajectories of party organizational change in Western Europe (1970-2010)

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to verify whether a relationship exists between partly laws and party organizational change. While the prevailing contextualist perspective enhances the weight of social, economic and technological factors in shaping party change, we maintain that the intensity of party regulation plays a major role in this respect. Based on some basic assumption of Organizational Institutionalism, the article adopts the rationale of the Political Parties Database (PPDB): we thus conduct an in-depth empirical analysis of three core party organisational dimensions (Resources, Representative Strategies, Structures), over a total of nineteen parties in four Western European democracies (Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK), from 1970s to 2010s. Our empirical findings show that, while a growing number of party laws have been introduced in the countries under consideration, their impact on party organizational convergence is far from univocal: we thus provide different possible explanations of these results.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Party organisation; party regulation; dimensional approach; variance

## Introduction

In his well-known article *On the theory of party organization*, J.A. Schlesinger (1984, 372) argued that «To say that we lack a theory of party is to overstate the case. Rather, a theory exists embedded in most of our writings on parties, but we seldom see it as a whole». Despite this optimistic statement, to date the paucity and fragmentation of explicit theorisations is a persistent *vacuum* in party studies (Borz and Janda 2018; van Biezen 2005). In our opinion, the main cause of this state of affairs can be identified with what March and Olsen defined as ‘contextualism’ – i.e.: the tendency to understand politics as an integral part of society (March and Olsen 1984, 735; but also 1989 and 2008). The contextual perspective builds upon the underlying assumption that society shapes politics, and that changes in political organizations take place in response to broader environmental needs.

While not denying that exogenous forces (whether cultural, economic, demographic, technological etc. – Dalton and Wattenberg 2002) affect party organizational profiles, we challenge such an approach (Rahat and Kenig 2018). More specifically, we claim the importance to provide more attention to factors pertaining to the political sphere. In particular, we focus on the rules surrounding parties and modelling their competitive environment (Bardi and Mair 2008; van Biezen and Piccio 2013), to assess whether they have an impact, if any, along the three main party organizational dimensions (resources, representative strategies, structures) as identified in the recent literature (Scarow, Webb, and Poguntke et al. 2017).

This article has both conceptual and empirical objectives. Conceptually, we aim to enrich the theorization on party change by integrating insights from organizational institutionalism into the traditional analytical categories of party scholarship, and to shed light on the relative autonomy of the political sphere in orienting party organizational trajectories. Empirically, we observe and compare parties over time, within and across countries, using party organizational data from 19 parties in four Western European established democracies (Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom) to explore a so far understudied research area, the one connecting party rules and party organizational change (Casal Bértoa, Piccio, and Rashkova 2014).

The research questions that we raise are the following: have party organizations converged following the exceptional growth of legislation affecting parties from the Second World War onwards? Or do party organizations vary in spite of the growing party regulation? Are differences to be found depending on the actual degree of regulation? And how does regulation affect the different organizational dimensions of political parties?

The contribution is structured as follows. In Section 1 we introduce the theoretical premises underlying our analysis with a discussion on party organization: how it has traditionally been approached – with environmental explanations taking the lead – and the main assumptions underlying the trajectories followed by party organizations. Section 2 focuses on the main political drivers that influence party organizational paths. In Section 3, we present the research design and the methodology used, and in Section 4 we discuss the main findings of our empirical investigation. Finally, the conclusive remarks should help taking stock of our analytical framework.

## The limits of contextualism in explaining party change

Much of the studies on party organizations have discussed the central question of party change by building on two main and inter-related assumptions: first, party organizations tend to converge and become more similar one to the other; and second, parties do so by adapting to environmental (extra-political) pressures.

The idea that party organizations have converged along similar organizational templates draws much of its resonance from the tendency to discuss party organizational change revolving around the evolution of party models. According to this perspective, party organizations have shifted from one model to the other, over time: from the mass party (Duverger 1954), parties turned into catch-all parties (Kirchheimer 1966), then to electoral professional parties (Panebianco 1988), cartel parties (Katz and Mair 1995) and more recently into a plurality of new party types – from the business-firm (Hopkin and Paolucci 1999) or entrepreneurial (Krouwel 2006) party models, to personal parties (Calise 2015) and movement parties (Kitschelt 2006).

The analysis of the evolution of party models has significant merits. Most importantly, it allows to look for cross-country and over-time generalizations in the analysis of party organizational development (Scarrow and Webb 2017). However, while providing crucial heuristic tools to guide empirical research, approaching party organizational change only through the use of party models presents some important drawbacks. Gunther and Diamond (2003) referred to concept stretching and lack of precision as relevant perils of party modelling. Moreover, party scholars often adopted models as deterministic assumptions on how parties *should be* rather than using them as useful approximations of how they *could be*. Most importantly for the purpose of this contribution, by primarily focusing on organizational *similarities* to identify specific tendencies, party models tend to overlook *differences* in parties' organizational profiles, despite patterns of heterogeneity emerging from empirical evidence (Scarrow, Webb, and Poguntke 2022; Scarrow, Webb, and Poguntke 2017).

A second interrelated assumption present in the scholarly literature is that the main drivers of change in the parties' organizational strategies are to be found in the external environment. As argued in the introduction, societal transformations (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002) are considered the main causes of change in parties' organisational strategies, which are expected to adapt to

environmental forces regardless of the specificities of the political and institutional context (Masi and Pizzimenti 2022; Rahat and Kenig 2018).

While we acknowledge that extra-political pressures are potential drivers of party convergence, we draw our attention to how political factors contribute to steering and shaping party change. The works by Sartori (1968), Panebianco (1988), and Harmel and Janda (1994) constitute important points of departure of such an alternative approach, as they focus on the active role that political parties play in converting and ‘translating’ (Sartori 1968, 174) external stimuli through internal processes of elaboration and mediation. Parties, therefore, do not automatically follow the inputs coming from the extra-political environment: on the contrary, parties should be conceived as purposeful actors with specific priorities and objectives that affect the ways and the extent to which they respond to environmental impulses.

Organizational Institutionalism (Greenwood et al. 2013) is an additional theoretical backing in this respect, which party scholars have taken little advantage of. Differently from the predominant approach that characterized the first generation of new institutional studies – according to which organizational behaviours conformed to the prevailing organizational myths (Meyer and Scott 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977), by adapting (Powell 1988) through isomorphic tendencies (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983) – contemporary organizational institutionalism aims at formulating specific assumptions on the role organizations play as active agents in shaping and reproducing the environment. If studies centred on the concept of isomorphism were based on the implicit «[...] idea that institutional models or prescriptions are ‘out there’ » (Greenwood et al. 2013, 17), the recent literature has emphasized how organizations, rather than being passive to environmental demands, are promoters of environmental change. As opposed to contextualist views, recent works in Organizational Institutionalism emphasize how the institutional context should be ultimately framed as a social construction built upon and reproduced by the interactions among the organizations that operate within it (Philips and Namrata 2013).

This foundational assumption is crucial for the interpretation of political parties’ role in contemporary liberal-democracies. In fact, even if parties – like any other organizational form – must be able to respond to contextual pressures, they do not simply adapt, thus converging towards a specific template: rather, parties are purposeful actors able to manipulate such external solicitations as well as to intervene on the environment (Panebianco 1988). In organizational terms, it follows that parties *do not necessarily converge* toward a single model, since differences may occur among parties operating in the same context, depending on their own capabilities.

Moreover, the political sphere shows a peculiar autonomy and a functional precedence compared to the other institutional spheres and organizational populations (March and Olsen 1989). In liberal-democracies, the authority to formulate and to adopt collective binding decisions disciplining any community is demanded to the state and, within state institutions, to a limited number of actors. Political parties represent the primary and legitimated sources of the regulative processes, competing to control the representative institutions and to exercise the political power over the polity. Most importantly for the purpose of this paper, and as a unique case among organizations, political parties are entitled to regulate *their own* organizational field. As Mair points out,

[...] regardless of whether we are dealing with state regulations, or party laws, or levels of state subventions, we are always dealing with decisions which have been taken by the parliament, and by the political class, and therefore by the parties themselves. (1997: 143)

As we shall discuss more in detail in the next section, parties set the rules governing their relationships with the state, by disciplining a wide range of areas. Following Janda (2005), we will refer to this set of rules as party laws. Party laws include all the regulations having an impact on political competition and party profiles, such as electoral laws, political finance laws, laws regulating party organizations, media laws, laws on civil association, and Constitutions. We

focus our attention on party laws and explore the extent to which they affect party organizational changes, defined as modifications in the realms of party *resources*, *representative strategies* and *structures* (Scarrow, Webb, and Poguntke 2017).

## Party regulation and party change

The fact that rules structuring political competition affect parties is of course not new. Formal institutions, such as electoral systems and constitutional relations between the executive and legislative, produce effects on parliamentary behaviour (André, Depauw and Shugart 2014), party competition (Mair 1997; van Biezen and Borz 2012), party discipline (Becher and Sieberer 2008), policy cohesiveness (Carroll and Nalepa 2020) as well as on electoral coordination (Cox 2008). Notably, however, the specific link between these rules and party organizations has not yet fully been explored and lacks an empirical comparative dimension (Samuels and Shugart 2010). This holds in particular for those regulations that govern the definition, composition, structure, and activities of political parties. Indeed, as a growing number of political scientists have started analysing party regulation (Casal Bértoa, Piccio, and Rashkova 2014; Van Biezen 2008), party law cannot be considered any longer ‘the domain of academic lawyers’ (Müller and Sieberer 2006, 435). Attention by scholars has focused on the way in which regulation has affected party system development (Van Biezen and Casal Bértoa 2014), parties’ organizational consolidation at the European level (Lightfoot 2006; Wolfs 2022), the dynamics of party systems (van Biezen and Borz 2012) or regulation *per se* (Karvonen 2007; Norris and van Es 2016; van Biezen and Piccio 2013). Notably though, if the *Party Organization Handbook* by Katz and Mair (1992) presents important case study analyses, the impact of party rules on party organizations has received limited attention, especially in comparative terms.

In line with our theoretical premises, we argue that rules and regulations are deeply intertwined with party organizational change. Party rules set the legitimated guidelines and constraints that influence party organisational strategies (March and Olsen 2008) and affect party organizations stimulating processes of change. At the same time, such very regulations are promoted by dynamics that develop among parties (Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Katz and Mair 2009). Looking into this relationship, therefore, is important as it allows to expand our knowledge on the potential drivers of party organizational trajectories and to observe how strictly political variables can influence their development.

In this vein, we consider party organizational variance at least as plausible. This should be evident across countries, since each country is characterized by different party laws; but it could be consistent also within countries, since a number of different organizational templates may coexist within the same party population, despite abiding to similar rules (Poguntke et al. 2016).

## Hypotheses, research design and methods

What can we expect from the relationship between party regulation and party organizational change? First, scholars have shown that patterns of party regulation differ considerably across countries in terms of content and frequency of reforms (Gauja 2016; Piccio 2012). In this respect, it is reasonable to expect that different regulatory approaches translate into different organizational characteristics across countries. Thus, party organizations are likely to become more similar one to the other in countries where the regulation of the parties’ organizational matters is more intense, and less where regulation is more limited (van Biezen and Borz 2012; van Biezen and Piccio 2013; van Biezen and Rashkova 2014). Accordingly, we formulate our first research hypothesis as follows:

**H1** The higher the intensity of party regulation, the lower within-country party organizational variance;

Second, we expect party regulation to affect parties differently along different organizational dimensions. Following Scarrow, Webb, and Poguntke (2017), we distinguish between three core dimensions: Resources, Representative strategies and Structures.<sup>1</sup> By doing so, we can empirically assess whether parties converge along specific organizational dimensions, while possibly diverging over others. It can be expected, for example, that higher organizational convergence will be found among party Resources, given the substantial increase in the rules affecting party finance throughout Europe (Bardi, Calossi, and Pizzimenti 2017; Koß 2010; Nassmacher 2009).<sup>2</sup>

In line with the rationale underlying the dimensional approach, we do not specify *a priori* the ways in which party regulation affects the different organizational dimensions. We will elaborate on this once the empirical analysis will indicate possible interpretations of this relationship. Accordingly, our second research hypothesis states the following:

## **H2** Party regulation has different impacts on different organizational dimensions.

Our analysis is based on a sample of four Western European liberal-democracies: Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. These countries are selected based on the significant variations that characterize the intensity of party regulation according to secondary literature in the field, from the 'heartland of party law' (Germany), to one of the most recent and light-touch regulated countries in Europe (UK), with Sweden and the Netherlands as two intermediary cases (Müller and Sieberer, 2006; Casal Bértoa, Piccio, and Rashkova 2014; Pilet and Van Haute 2012).

To test our hypotheses and appreciate stability and changes in both party regulation and party organizations, we analyse a time span of over 40 years. Three time-markers are identified: the beginning of the 1970s, of the 1990s and of the 2010s. We selected those specific time markers as they allow for a longitudinal and cross-country comparison of party organizational data. As for the individual party organizations, we selected 5 parties for Germany, 5 for the Netherlands, 6 for Sweden and 3 for the UK (see [Appendix](#)).

Concerning party regulation, we focus only on the most relevant reforms introduced in the two decades preceding each time-marker. Reforms are deemed relevant when they entailed significant changes in the legal environment affecting political parties according to a secondary analysis on the countries' regulation. Examples of relevant reforms may be, for example, the introduction of public funding to party organizations; the requirement for parties to adopt specific organizational standards or decision-making procedures; or the introduction of more stringent registration requirements. Smaller legal amendments such as inflation adjustments for funding provision or minor changes in the electoral laws are not considered in the analysis.

In order to measure party organizational trajectories, we combine and codify the data provided by the PPDB with those published in the *Party Organizations Data Handbook* (Katz and Mair 1992). As argued before, we look at party organizations distinguishing between three main organizational dimensions: Party Resources, Representative Strategies and Structures, for a total of 1333 observations (excluding missing values). Each cluster, but Party Resources, is made up of a number of dichotomous variables, whose values range from 0 to 1 (see [Appendix](#)). The variables included in the first cluster, Party Resources, are the ratio between party members and voters (M/V) and public subsidies as a percentage of party total income (PS/PTI). Party Representative Strategies focus instead on the rules on party membership and on the involvement of both individual members and collective bodies in the candidate selection procedures (16 variables – see [Appendix](#)). Finally, Party Structures encompass variables pertaining to the number of party layers, the parliamentarization of party organs and the empowerment of the party leaders and of the representatives of the party in public office (8 variables – see [Appendix](#)). Thus, for each country we measure the degree of party organisational variance along the three organisational dimensions mentioned above. In order



to assess the degree to which party organizations vary within each of the four selected countries, we formulate an index of variance for each organisational dimension, as a simple mean between the standard deviations of the variables included in the three clusters, for each party and at each moment in time.

$$POV_{resources, strategies, structures} = \frac{1}{n} \left( \sum_{i=1}^n \sigma_i \right)$$

Building on the analytical proposal by recent literature (Masi and Pizzimenti 2022; Pizzimenti et al. 2022), we then elaborate a general index of Party Organisational Variance (POV), per country and per period, as a mean of the three dimensional indexes, ranging from 0 (no variance) to 1 (complete variance). The POV index is calculated as

$$POV = \frac{(POV_{resources} + POV_{strategies} + POV_{structures})}{3}$$

where  $i$  stands for the variables included in each of the dimensions and  $\sigma$  represents the standard deviation.

In order to test our hypotheses, we proceed as follows. First, we conduct a qualitative analysis of the regulatory environment affecting parties for the countries considered, mapping all significant changes based on secondary literature. The intensity of party regulation (IPR) is measured bringing together two indicators. The first one refers to the content of party regulation (CPR) and assigns a score, for each time marker, to the different sources of law in each country. The scores set are the following: 0 Electoral Law only, 1 Party Finance Law (PFL); 2 Party Law (PL); and 3 Party Constitutionalization (PC).<sup>3</sup> Given that we take for granted that any liberal-democracy rests on an electoral system, each case can range from 0 (electoral law only) to 6 (which sums up PFL+PL+PC). The second indicator provides a measure of the frequency of party regulation reforms (PRF), and is calculated as the ratio between the number of relevant reforms adopted and the number of years between each time marker ( $N^{\circ}_{REF}/N^{\circ}_{YEARS}$ ). The IPR index is obtained by multiplying the two indicators:

$$IPR = CPR * PRF$$

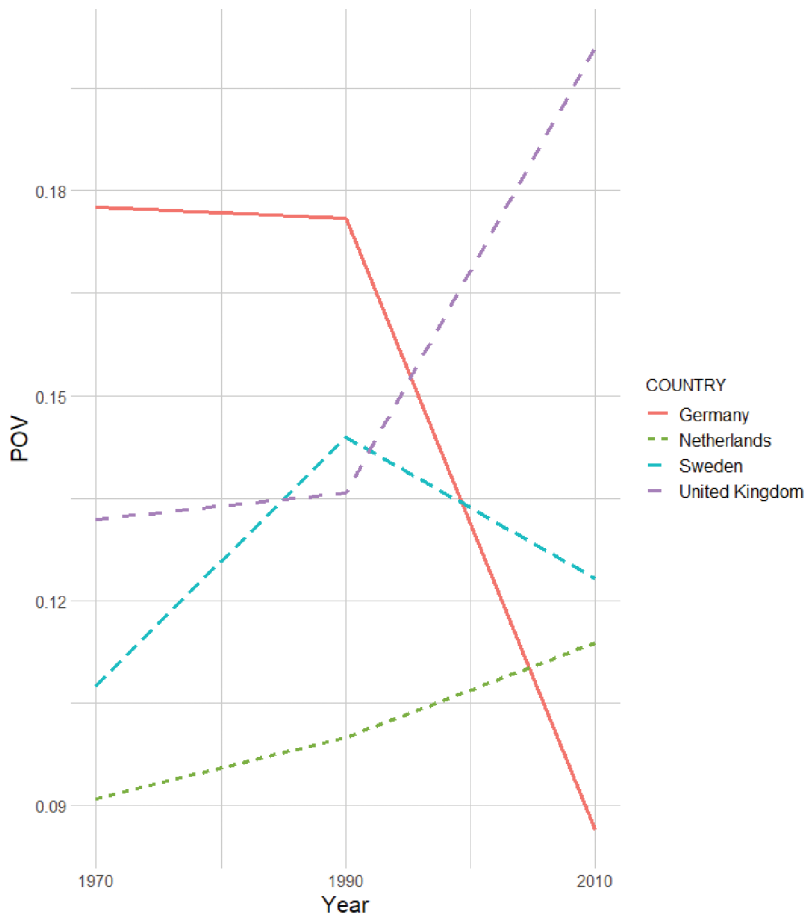
As the number of cases is too limited to conduct a regression analysis, we resort to a number of linear relations between the variables considered (IPR, POV, Resources, Representative Strategies, Structures) to assess the possible connections between them, along with a descriptive discussion of the results.

## Empirical findings

We first present a comparative and longitudinal analysis of the organizational trajectories followed by the 19 parties we observed. As Figure 1 shows, not only the organizational trajectories differ across countries, but they also vary over-time. German parties tend to become more similar from the 1990s, the Dutch parties show increasing organizational variance, and for the case of the British parties we find variance slightly increasing until the 1990s, and then skyrocketing. No clear trajectory emerges instead in the Swedish case, as variance across parties increases between 1970s and 1990s, while showing an opposite trend in the period that follows. Overall, the POV index registers rather low scores and limited deviations, both per country and per period. This suggests that party organizations within individual countries tend to converge. However, the alleged convergent trajectories of party organizations should be reconsidered as we turn to the cross-countries comparisons.

We find instead significant differences, both across countries and overtime, as we look into the three different dimensions of party organizations (Resources, Representative Strategies and



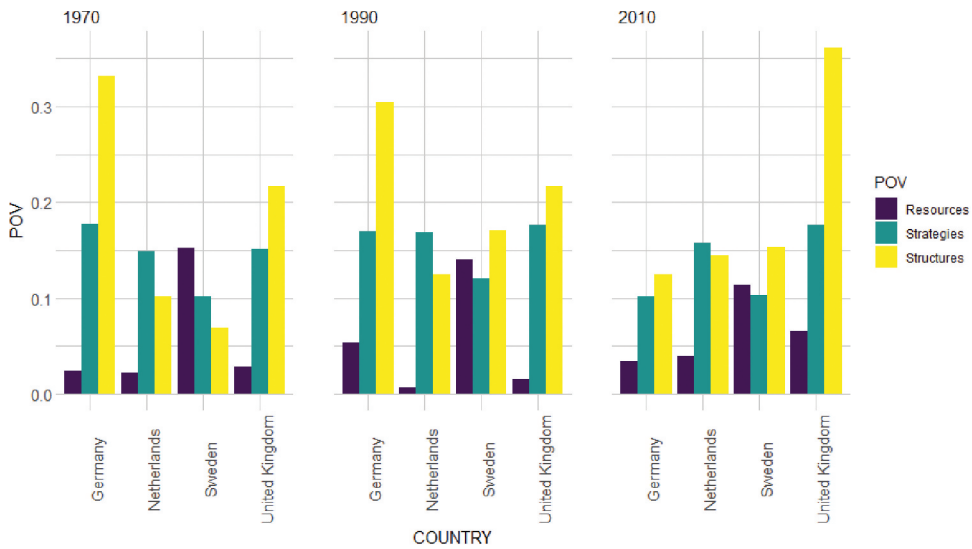


**Figure 1.** Party Organizational Variance per country and period.

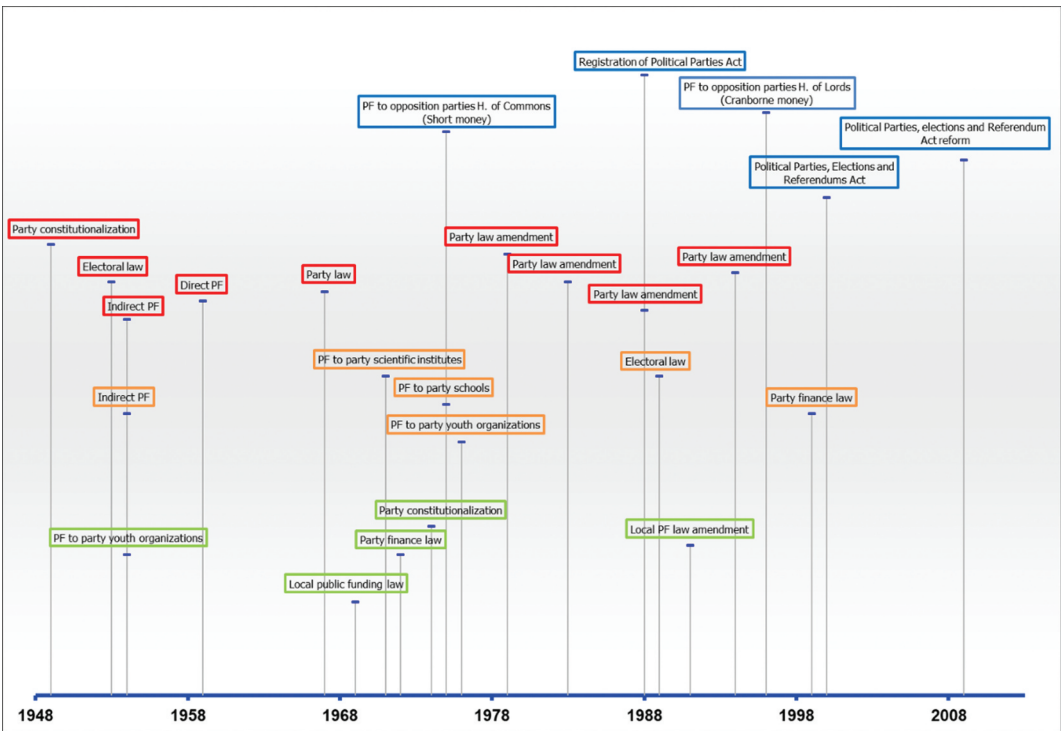
Structures – see [Figure 2](#)). Among the three dimensions, variance along Party Resources is the lowest (with an average, for all countries, of 0.06). Figures reveal particularly low and overtime stable for the German and Dutch parties, whereas they increase from 2010 in the British parties. Swedish parties, instead, follow an opposite trajectory, as they tend to converge overtime. Variance figures are higher (with an average of 0.15) for party Representative Strategies. Except for the case of German parties, whose variance decreases overtime and particularly from 2010, scores remain relatively stable across parties in the Netherlands, in the UK and in Sweden. Party organizational variance scores the highest (with an average of 0.19) when it comes to Party Structures. Overtime trends appear more marked along this dimension, with variance sharply decreasing in Germany, while they follow an opposite trend in the UK. Dutch parties become more divergent, over time, while a marked increase in variance can be found among Swedish parties in the passage from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Once these patterns of organizational variance have been described we now turn to the question of whether they have been affected by party regulation. [Figure 3](#) summarizes the evolution of the legislation on political parties, showing the most significant reforms introduced in the four selected countries.

The 'heartland of party law' (Müller and Sieberer, 2007: 435), Germany, regulated political parties as early as 1949, with the country's constitutional provisions shaping the legal contours of party organizations and the Electoral Law (1953) and Party Law (1967) enforcing the constitutional requirements into ordinary legislation. The high degree of the parties' external and internal



**Figure 2.** Dimensions of party organizational variance per country and period.



**Figure 3.** Relevant party rules in Germany, UK, Sweden and the Netherlands (1945–2010). **Key:** blue rectangle box = UK, red = Germany, green = Sweden, orange = the Netherlands; PF = Public funding. Source: authors' elaboration based on secondary literature.

**Table 1.** The intensity of party regulation and party organizational variance.

Country	Time marker	CPR (A)	PRF (B)	IPR (A*C)	Resources POV	Strategies POV	Structures POV	POV
Germany	1970	5	0.25	1.25	0,02	0,18	0,33	0.18
	1990	5	0.2	1	0,05	0,17	0,30	0.18
	2010	5	0.05	0.25	0,03	0,10	0,12	0.09
Netherlands	1970	1	0.05	0.05	0,02	0,15	0,10	0.09
	1990	1	0.2	0.2	0,01	0,17	0,12	0.10
	2010	1	0.05	0.05	0,04	0,16	0,14	0.11
Sweden	1970	1	0.15	0.15	0,15	0,10	0,07	0.11
	1990	4	0.15	0.6	0,14	0,12	0,17	0.14
	2010	4	0	0	0,11	0,10	0,15	0.12
UK	1970	0	0	0	0,03	0,15	0,22	0.13
	1990	1	0.1	0.1	0,02	0,18	0,22	0.14
	2010	3	0.15	0.45	0,07	0,18	0,36	0.20

environment (Poguntke 1992; van Biezen and Piccio 2013) in the early post-War decades in Germany is shown by the IPR score computed for the 1970s (1.25), by far the highest across the cases/periods examined (see Table 1). As opposed to Germany, except for the provision of indirect financial facilities to political parties and party youth organizations in Sweden and the Netherlands, few are the acts regulating political parties in the decades immediately following World War II. As we shall see, despite the growing number of party laws introduced in the decades that followed, differences in the four countries' legal traditions remained marked, with Germany leading as the most heavily regulated case, the UK little and only recently regulating parties at the opposite end, and the Netherlands and Sweden in between the two extremes.

In line with our first hypothesis, we expect to find greater organizational convergence where party regulation is more intrusive, and greater organizational variation instead where regulation is more 'light touch'. As we crossed the IPR index with party organizational data, however, findings go against our expectations: higher degrees of party regulation do not seem to translate into lower organizational variance across parties. This emerges clearly from the early post-War scores in Germany. As shown in Table 1, despite the intense post-War party regulation discussed above, scores on the POV index in Germany are particularly high (0.18). Conversely, Dutch political parties score the very low on the POV index (0.09), thus reflecting a pattern of organizational convergence, despite the few laws regulating political parties until the 1970s.

This also holds for the second time marker we observed. Indeed, from the 1970s to the beginning of the 1990s, we observed a phase of greater legislative intervention across the selected countries. Germany continued its legislative activities on political parties, revising and redrafting party funding rules following several judgements issued by the Federal Constitutional Courts (Gunlicks 1988, 1995). Sweden and the Netherlands both introduced new rules regulating the parties' environment. Legislative activity affecting parties was particularly intense in Sweden. First, public funding was extended to the municipal and regional elections (1969). In 1972, a party funding law was introduced to regulate the distribution of public aid to political parties obtaining at least 2.5% of the votes in the latest parliamentary elections and indirect public funding was provided to support to parties who had spent substantial amounts on their affiliated newspapers. In 1974, moreover, references to parties were introduced in one of the four fundamental laws composing the Swedish Constitution. In the same period, the Netherlands established a series of rules providing indirect state support to the parties' scientific institutes and organisations (1971), to institutes for political formation and education (1975) and to the political parties' youth organisations (1976). The UK remained the country introducing the fewer rules on political parties, with the introduction of public funding for opposition parties in the House of Commons to support parliamentary business and policy research (1972) as the only relevant party law introduced in this early period. However, despite an increase in the IPR values (except for Germany whose greatest regulatory activity had taken place in the early post-War decades, POV scores increase rather than decreasing as predicted by our first hypothesis. This is

clearly shown in the case of Sweden, where party legislation has been more intensive in this period. A positive relationship between IPR and POV can be found also in the Netherlands and in the UK, despite the very limited deviations in the POV values.

At our third time marker, it is possible to notice that in three out of the four countries we examined the IPR scores decreased compared to the previous decades. Notably, a reform of the Electoral Law (1989) introduced important changes for Dutch parties, forcing them to comply with specific organizational standards and decision-making procedures (Elzinga 1997; Eskes 2008). In 1999, moreover, a public funding law was adopted that first introduced direct public funding to party organizations. Legislation on political parties continued to be present, albeit less intense, in Germany. The most relevant changes for party organisations in this latter period took place in 1992 following yet another Federal Constitutional Court judgement which led to the sixth reform of the Party Law in 1994. The new rules decreased the parties' reliance on state funds and introduced mechanisms to reward parties to seek own revenues. The greatest impetus in party legislation in this period took place in the United Kingdom (with a IPR score of 0.45). Even though the regulation of parties remained limited in the UK, with internal activities and organisational structures of parties not being regulated, parties were formalised for the first time under the Registration of Political Parties Act (1998), which provided a system of party registration and financial regulation. Next, the 'Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act' was introduced, after which parties acquired the status of legal entities and became subject to a stringent system of control over their financial management, with restrictions over private funding and campaign expenditures and disclosure requirements (Ghaleigh 2006). The law also introduced policy development grants from the Electoral Commission to be divided among eligible registered parties – that is, those that gained parliamentary representation – to develop policies to include in their electoral manifestos. Once again, however, despite the regulatory activity in the country in the two decades preceding the 2010s, we found party organizations becoming more divergent rather than converging.

Overall, except for the case of Germany, where party organizations converged at last (with a 0.09 value under the third time marker) in spite of the growing regulation of political parties, POV values overtime tend to remain either stable, as in the case of Sweden and the Netherlands, or to increase, as in the case of the United Kingdom.

As we turn to our second hypothesis, which states that the impact of party regulation is likely to vary depending on the specific organizational dimensions considered, results are less univocal. In line with our expectations, given the major role of party funding rules in post-War Europe legislation, organizational variance in party Resources is particularly low. Notably, low variance for the United Kingdom is found for the very opposite reason: as virtually no public funding to political parties is into place, parties converge along a similar (mainly privately funded) organizational models. Values in party Resources are the highest in Sweden, despite the early introduction of public funding to party organizations. No relevant differences across the countries and the periods under examination appear instead for the party Representative strategies, which refer among others to membership rules and candidate selection procedures. In Germany, however, organizational variance under this dimension decreased over time, most significantly under the third time marker. Cross-country differences are more significant under the Structures dimension. Except for Germany, where party organizations seemed to converge along this dimension from the 2010s, variance increased significantly for the other countries.

**Table 2.** Correlation matrix between POV and IPR.

	Resources POV	Strategies POV	Structures POV	POV	IPR
Resources POV	1				
Strategies POV	−0.673*	1			
Structures POV	−0.230	0.662*	1		
POV	0.069	0.545	0.944***	1	
IPR	−0.013	0.371	0.682*	0.687*	1

The correlation matrix presented in [Table 2](#) confirms the research outcomes discussed thus far. Indeed, our correlation matrix shows a highly significant relationship between IPR and POV ( $p=0.014$ ). As this relationship is positive, however, it disconfirms our first hypothesis which stated that higher intensity of party regulation decreases party organizational variance. As we turn to the relationships between the IPR and each organizational dimension matters get further complicated. In fact, the IPR is significantly correlated only to party Structures ( $p=0.015$ ), while it shows no significant relations neither with party Representative Strategies ( $p=0.235$ ), nor (against conventional wisdom) with party Resources ( $p=0.969$ ). In this respect, it could be argued that since party Structures are seldom regulated by law ([van Biezen and Piccio 2013](#)), the intensity of regulation is not directly linked to this organizational dimension: on the contrary, the absence of any significant relationship between IPR and the other party dimensions is more difficult to explain, in particular for party Resources. In this respect, leaving aside considerations about the dimension of the sample, it is interesting to notice that also the POV index shows no significant relationship with its Resource component, while it is clearly correlated to the other two dimensions. All in all, our data does not allow to confirm or disconfirm our hypothesis H2.

## Discussion and conclusions

In this contribution we maintained that when accounting for which factors drive variation or convergence in party organizations across Europe, a too prominent weight is assigned to environmental, extra-political stimuli. We suggested that the use of party models has played a major role in this respect and that political factors should be given greater attention as potential drivers of party change. To be sure, this is not to deny the role of environmental factors: we believe that an interplay of internal and external factors must be considered, as party organizations do *also* respond to broader social changes. In this work, however, we wanted to add one more piece to the puzzle of party change, looking at the ways in which party regulation – a strictly political factor in that it is designed for and by political parties – has been influencing party organizations. Overall, the rather low values and limited deviations registered by the POV index, both per country and per period, suggests that the tendency towards organizational convergence holds within countries. Cross-country comparisons reveals instead that the alleged party organizational convergence thesis should be reconsidered.

Overall, the claim that greater party regulation leads to higher organizational convergence does not fully hold. Germany, the country whose remarkably intense party regulation ‘can legitimately be expected to have had a powerful effect in inducing convergence of formerly diverse organizational models’ ([Poguntke 1992](#), 15), stands out as a relevant exception. Indeed, with a delayed effect since the first party laws were introduced, we found German parties lowering their POV scores from the 1990s, under all three organizational dimensions we considered. For the other countries instead, organizational templates seem barely affected by the evolution of party legislation. Even if the relation between IPR and party organizational variance is significant, it goes in an opposite direction than expected by our hypothesis: party organizational variance slightly increases in parallel with higher intensity of party regulation.

Several reasons may be considered to explain these findings. First, impact on party organizations is intuitively less pronounced where party regulation is less intrusive. The fact that the average values of the POV for the United Kingdom, the country regulating political parties the least among the four, are the highest is much telling in this respect. Similarly, reasons for parties in the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom not to converge under the Structures dimension, can be found in the fact that the intensity of party regulation is not directly linked to this organizational dimension.

An additional explanation may lie in the weakness in the enforcement regimes and the (often-lamented) gap existing between concrete content of the law and its actual enforcement ([van Biezen](#)

and Casal Bértoa 2014; Casal Bértoa and van Biezen 2017; Norris and van Es 2016). Finally, we do of course not know the extent to which party organizations may have differed in a virtually unregulated context. Even in the cases of least intrusive regulation, by establishing criteria for either registering as an official organization, or participating in electoral competitions, or obtaining state funds, party laws forced political parties to adapt along some specific framework.

## Notes

1. See the Political Parties Database website: <https://www.politicalpartydb.org/>.
2. As van Biezen and Rashkova (2014, 18): '[...] the magnitude of party regulation has increased noticeably across Europe. [...] However, a more careful analysis of the dimensions of regulation suggests that the most substantial expansion of regulation has occurred in the area of party financing in particular'.
3. Following van Biezen (2012), we consider a Party Law to be the law which is called or specifically defines itself as a law on political parties, with the title of the law including a textual reference to political parties (e.g. Law on Political Parties, Party Law). We do the same for the definition of a Party Finance Law.
4. ARP, CHU and KVP are considered as a single party in the 1990s and 2010s, as they merged in 1977–1980 and founded the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA)

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## Appendix

### Parties included

Country	Parties	1970s	1990s	2010s
Germany	Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU)	X	X	X
	Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)	X	X	X
	Free Democratic Party (FDP)	X	X	X
	Alliance '90/The Greens (G)		X	X
The Netherlands	Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU)	X	X	X
	People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)	X	X	X
	Labour Party (PvdA)	X	X	X
	Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP)/Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) <sup>4</sup>	X	X	X
	Christian Historical Union (CHU)/Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) <sup>2</sup>	X	X	X
	Catholic People's Party (KVP)/Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) <sup>2</sup>	X	X	X
	Democrats 66 (D'66)	X	X	X
	GreenLeft (GL)		X	X
Sweden	Left Party (V)	X	X	X
	Green Party (MP)	X	X	X
	Centre Party (C)	X	X	X
	People's Party Liberals (FP)	X	X	X
	Moderate Party (M)	X	X	X
	Social Democratic Workers Party (S)		X	X
UK	Conservative Party (CON)	X	X	X
	Labour Party (LAB)	X	X	X
	Liberal Democrats (LIB)	X	X	X

#### PARTY ORGANIZATION (PPDB QUESTIONS)

##### Cluster 1 – Party Resources

MBRVOT: Inverse of the Number of Individual Members/Number of Voters (1-(M/V))

CR29\_1REVSTOT Share of total party income (CR24\_1INCOMTOT) which comes from direct public subsidies. [Percentage]

–888. Not Provided

–999. This party finance data is not published

##### Cluster 2 – Representative Strategies

CR6MBRRUL Party statutes recognize party membership as a formal category, distinct from unaffiliated supporters.

(1) Yes

(2) No

–888. Not Provided

–999. Not Applicable

CR7FRIEND Party statutes recognize a separate level of formal affiliation with reduced obligations and reduced rights (for instance, party 'friend' or 'registered sympathizer'). This does not include members with reduced dues but full rights, such as reduced fees for young people or unemployed.

(1) No

(2) Yes

–888. Not Provided

–999. Not Applicable

A33MBRJOIN Is it possible for an individual to join the national party directly?

- (1) Yes
- (2) No, no individual membership
- (3) No, individuals join affiliated organizations only
- (4) No, individuals join regional or state parties

–888. Not Provided

–999. Not Applicable

A38SPONSOR Membership must be sponsored by one or more current members.

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

–888. Not Provided

–999. Not Applicable

A39GROUPMBB Member must also belong to another related organization, if eligible (such as trade union membership or church membership).

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

–888. Not Provided

–999. Not Applicable

A40AFFIRM Member must actively affirm agreement with party principles.

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

–888. Not Provided

–999. Not Applicable

A41EXCLUSIVE Member may not belong to another national party.

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

–888. Not Provided

–999. Not Applicable

A43MBRDUES Member must pay dues.

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

–888. Not Provided

–999. Not Applicable

A57CCONDEL According to party statutes, who is eligible to fully participate in party congresses?

- (1) Delegates only
- (2) Anyone who shows up/Any party member who shows up/All attending members

–888. Not Provided

–999. Not Applicable

B22CANSELC

Do individual members play a role in Selecting/Deciding on candidates?

- (1) No
- (2) Yes

–888. Not Provided  
–999. Not Applicable

B23CANSELC

Do local level organizations (meeting and/or local leadership) play a role in Selecting/Deciding on candidates?

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

–888. Not Provided  
–999. Not Applicable

B24CANSELC

Do regional/state organizations (meeting and/or regional leadership) play a role in Selecting/Deciding on candidates?

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

–888. Not Provided  
–999. Not Applicable

B25ACANSELC

Does a national party collective body (e.g. Party Congress or National Executive) play a role in Selecting/Deciding on candidates?

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

–888. Not Provided  
–999. Not Applicable

B25BCANSELC

Does/do the national party leader(s) play a role in Selecting/Deciding on candidates?

- (1) No
- (2) Yes

–888. Not Provided  
–999. Not Applicable

B26CANSELC

Do affiliated or other organizations (trade unions, religious organizations, etc.) play a role in Selecting/Deciding on candidates?

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

–888. Not Provided  
–999. Not Applicable

B27CANSELC

Do non-member supporters play a role in Selecting/Deciding on candidates?

- (1) No
- (2) Yes

–888. Not Provided

–999. Not Applicable

*Cluster 3 – Party Structures*

A83EXCLVL Number of layers between the party congress and the party's highest executive body. If the highest executive reports directly to/is elected by the party congress, the answer is 1.

(1) more than one layer

(2) one layer or less

–888. Not Provided

A85EXCSTATE Ex officio: Leaders of state/provincial or regional parties.

(1) Yes

(2) No

–888. Not Provided

–999. Not Applicable

A86EXCPM Ex officio: The prime minister or chancellor, when s/he is a member of this party.

(1) No

(2) Yes

–888. Not Provided

–999. Not Applicable

- A88EXCMIN Ex officio: Government/cabinet ministers, when they are members of this party.

(1) No

(2) Yes

–888. Not Provided

–999. Not Applicable

- A89EXCPPG Ex officio: Leader of the party group in the lower house of the legislature.

(1) No

(2) Yes-888. Not Provided

–999. Not Applicable

C13LDREXC Party statutes give the party leader the right to attend all meetings of the national party executive.

(1) No

(2) Yes

–888. Not Provided

–999. Not Applicable

C14LDRCON Party statutes give the party leader the right to attend the national party congress.

- (1) No
- (2) Yes

–888. Not Provided  
–999. Not Applicable

C16LDRSUM2 Party statutes give the party leader the right to summon the party congress.

- (1) No
- (2) Yes

–888. Not Provided  
–999. Not Applicable