

CHAPTER 7

Boundaries of free speech in the political field

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Building on in-depth interviews with the leaders of Norway's political youth organizations, this chapter focuses on two types of barriers to free speech that are at work in the political field: First, external barriers resulting from harassment and threats related to identity markers like gender, sexuality, disability and ethnic background. Second, internal barriers stemming from informal party cultures characterized by conformity pressure and silencing mechanisms. These barriers constitute boundaries of free speech which influence some politicians more than others. On the one hand, individuals who bear 'marks of difference' seem to be the major recipients of external harassment and threats, raising the cost of engaging publicly in controversial issues. On the other hand, politicians embedded in informal party cultures characterized by 'cultures of expression' which discourage political dissent, seem to face social sanctions potentially leading them to silence their voices. Implications for free speech legislation and the future recruitment to politics are discussed.

Introduction

Being a public figure is risky business. Any public engagement involves the risk of receiving unpleasant comments, harassment or even verbal and physical threats (Meloy et al., 2008). Politicians, in particular, are sometimes subject to extreme exposure in the media (Thompson, 2000). In part, this is a consequence of their deliberate choice of political commitment: In democratic societies, people in positions of power should be exposed to criticism, and they must consequently be expected to handle unpleasant comments and satire. However, the exposure may sometimes be extreme, and it may have unforeseen negative consequences on the personal level (Thorbjørnsrud, 2003). In turn, this can lead to a democratic problem if individuals choose to withdraw from politics or if negative experiences make them less willing to take a stance in controversial issues due to considerations of their own safety or fear of isolation in the political community they belong to.

This chapter centers on the role of young politicians in Norway and their experiences while acting in public. Being the leader of a political youth party entails, of course, a range of positive aspects: It is a testament to broad political involvement which is crucial for democracy; it is a position of power and influence; and it may – as is the case for many previous leaders of political youth organizations in Norway – result in a life-long political career. However, the visibility of political leadership also involves the danger of negative experiences. Indeed, the comprehensive survey in the first round of the *Status of freedom of speech in Norway* project demonstrated that a large share of the Norwegian population tolerate politicians being subjected to negative characterizations, and that they are much more tolerant of negative characterizations of politicians than of minority groups such as Muslims or LGBT people (Enjolras and

Steen-Johnsen, 2014). Previous research has also showed that Norwegian politicians are sometimes subject to extreme exposure in the media (Allern, 2001; Thorbjørnsrud, 2009), and that they are significantly more exposed to stalking than ordinary people (Narud and Dahl, 2015). Negative feedback from the outside is, however, not the only factor that can affect politicians' willingness to speak their mind on topics of importance to them. Politicians are embedded in specific party organizations characterized by formal structures and informal cultures which may influence what they say and how they act (Barrling, 2013; Barrling Hermanson, 2004). While formal structures are of obvious importance for understanding the functioning of party organizations, informal party cultures play a crucial role in defining the room for dissent and open conflict – and the social sanctions involved when crossing the line. Both of these factors – one external, related to the outside world, and one internal, linked to the inner life of the party – constitute boundaries of free speech in the political field. To the extent that these barriers negatively affect politicians' willingness to engage in controversial issues or even in politics altogether, they represent challenges to the processes of deliberation and – in the long run – to democracy itself.

This chapter builds on in-depth interviews with the current leaders of the political youth organizations in Norway, as well as with a selection of their predecessors. It considers their subjective experiences acting in the public sphere, distinguishing between, first, their experiences with harassment, libel and threats after speaking in public; and second, whether they find the informal culture in their respective party organizations to be open or closed to points of view which deviate from mainstream opinions in the organization. In the final part of the chapter, the implications of barriers to free speech in the political field are

discussed by highlighting how negative experiences may affect the politicians' general views on free speech legislation and their wish to pursue a political career.

Why youth politicians?

Politically active youth are the key to the development of democracy. The history and influential position of the Norwegian youth party movement suggest that political youth organizations are of particular interest in this context. In Norway, every political party has its own youth organization and the power and position of these organizations are larger and more central than in most other countries (Halvorsen, 2003). Most leaders of the youth organizations are visible actors on the public scene. All youth organizations are represented – with voting rights – in the parent party's executive committee, and they are active participants in the national congress meetings (Heidar and Saglie, 2002 p. 223). Even though conflict occasionally occurs – the youth organizations are often more ideologically anchored, and have historically tended to propose more radical political solutions to social problems than do their parent parties (Svåsand et al., 1997 p. 111) – there is no real debate about the close relationship between the main parties and their youth fractions in Norway (Heidar and Saglie, 2002 p. 58).

One reason for the preservation of these strong ties is probably that the youth organizations have always been important channels for recruitment to the political elite. The former leaders of the youth organizations tend to gain influential positions in the parent parties at a later time. In the case of the Labour Party (Arbeiderpartiet), for example, all elected leaders of the party until 2014 have had a position of trust in the Labour Party Youth (the current leader, Jonas Gahr Støre, is the exception),

and the same goes for all of the Labour Party's prime ministers since World War II (Halvorsen, 2003). Similar ties between the youth organizations and their parent parties are found across the political spectrum. In fact, as Svåsand and colleagues point out (1997 p. 111), the top leadership in Norway's political parties is mostly recruited from the youth organizations. Hence, the general statement that 'youth can be expected to (co-)determine the further evolution of democracy and its institutions' (Forbrig, 2005 p. 13) holds particularly true in the Norwegian context. The leaders of the political youth organizations have the formal power to influence the parent parties while holding their leadership positions, as well as being likely to become important figures – if not leaders – of the main parties in the future. How the young politicians both describe their own public experiences and reflect on how the public 'rules of the game' should be defined in the years to come is consequently of great interest.

Boundaries at work in the political field

Theoretically, this chapter takes as its point of departure that the public sphere is a locus of 'boundary struggles', concerning which groups and what opinions are offered a legitimate space in the public sphere (see Ch. 1). Some individuals are more vulnerable to negative comments and harassment than others, depending on their actual or alleged group membership, as well as on the topics they choose to engage in (Midtbøen and Steen-Johnsen 2016; Midtbøen 2016; see also Nadim, Ch. 8). Additionally, certain points of view are more contested than others. Individuals who choose to take on deviant positions in the public sphere, by challenging mainstream opinions on controversial issues, may experience social sanctions resulting in their voices being silenced, withdrawal from the public

sphere or the development of echo chambers (Sunstein 2003; see also Thorbjørnsrud, Ch. 9). Brought together, these barriers to public participation constitute social boundaries of free speech.

How social boundaries of free speech play out in the political field is of great interest. In a democratic perspective, political decision-making should be based on the dissemination of competing perspectives on a given issue, which subsequently should be followed by processes of deliberation. Of course, decision-making processes in politics are always characterized by conflict and contestation. As Bourdieu (1991) schematically pointed out, the political field may be defined as a semi-autonomous social field organized around a binary logic in which the heterodox and the orthodox, the transformists and the conservatives, represent the main opposing poles. These poles exist both between parties and within each party organization, and the dynamics between them is crucial for political debates and decision-making. Under ideal conditions, the dissemination of standpoints is made without fear of other consequences than receiving rational counter-arguments and losing a vote. However, politicians may sometimes face barriers to free speech; both externally – by harsh responses received e.g. in social media, and internally – by silencing mechanisms operating within the party organization.

The external barriers to politicians' free speech are linked to the dynamics of the public sphere. Although politicians act and argue in their role as politicians, they are also individuals carrying markers with significance in the wider social context in which they operate. Markers of difference can be, for example, skin colour, ethnic or religious background, gender, disability or sexual orientation. These markers are not objective facts with a given 'effect' on individual identity or life chances, but become

meaningful through individual self-identification to group categories, and by the categorization made by others through symbolic and social boundary-work (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 1997; see also Nadim, Ch. 8). Regardless of the role individuals play, markers of identity may affect the experiences of single individuals, making some more vulnerable than others. Analyzing how markers of difference may result in the extreme exposure of some politicians while others can concentrate exclusively on their role as politicians, and how these barriers affect politicians' willingness to disseminate their perspectives or keep engaging in politics, is therefore crucial.

The internal barriers to free speech are located within the party organizations. While political parties are organizations operating in accordance with formal structures (not to be considered in this chapter), they are also characterized by different party cultures and traditions of individuality and conflict, historically developed and intrinsically linked to political ideology (Barrling Hermanson, 2004). Party culture 'determines the actual freedom of group members, the expectations about how they are to act and the means by which they are able to obtain social status' (Barrling, 2013 pp. 178-179). Whether a party culture is open or closed to dissent and dissemination of deviating points of view may be decisive to politicians' ability or willingness to speak their mind. Of course, challenging the ideological or topical foundation of a political party may be considered taboo in most parties. However, what these taboo areas consist of differs across the political spectrum, and so also might the real or perceived sanctions experienced by those crossing the line. Challenging the core foundation of a given party – what 'we' agree upon – can in some organizational contexts lead to social isolation and deprive individuals of future opportunities. In turn, this

can lead to ‘spirals of silence’ (Noelle-Neumann 1974) keeping others from raising critical questions or presenting deviating perspectives. Such silencing mechanisms may result in the absence of open debates, which would benefit the public and democracy itself (Sunstein, 2003), because it can lead to a cementation of party organizations and programs that are not adapted to rapidly changing societies.

In sum, politicians may experience both external and internal barriers to free speech, potentially affecting whether they engage in controversial issues in the public sphere and how they adjust to or challenge the real or perceived party culture. This chapter explores both of these dimensions by analyzing interviews with the leaders of Norway’s political youth organizations.

Data, method and ethics

The data underlying the analysis in this chapter consists of in-depth interviews with the current leaders of the eight political youth organizations whose parent parties are currently represented in the Norwegian Parliament (in the period 2013-2017): Labour Party Youth (AUF), Norwegian Young Conservatives (Unge Høyre), Progress Party’s Youth (FpU), Socialist Youth League of Norway (SU), Young Christian Democrats (KrFU), Young Liberals of Norway (Unge Venstre), Center Youth (Senterungdommen) and Young Greens of Norway (Grønn Ungdom). To include the entire spectrum from left to right, the current leader of the left-wing socialist youth party Red Youth (Rød Ungdom) was also included. Additionally, two former leaders – of the Socialist Youth League of Norway and the Center Youth – were interviewed. The latter two were included because they were unusually visible and controversial even within their

own party community throughout their periods as leaders, indicating that their experiences are of particular relevance to the questions asked in this chapter.¹

The interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours, were tape recorded and transcribed in full. The conversations were semi-structured using an interview guide. All interviews started by asking the informants to give an account of their political involvement and what topics they are particularly interested in, as well as the pathways to their leading positions. Further, they were asked to elaborate on the youth organization's relationship to the parent party; their own experiences participating in public debates; what topics they eventually avoid or are reluctant to engage in; and how they deal with questions that are considered controversial, 'difficult' or even taboo for the mainstream public and within their own organization.

The informants were between 20 and 29 years old when interviewed. All of them are well-known actors in the Norwegian public sphere. Some regularly participate in national and local media while others are somewhat less exposed. The extent of their visibility partly reflects the size and influence of the youth organization and how the parent party is positioned in current politics. However, visibility is also related to a distinct personal dimension in which some leaders tend to receive more attention, either because they take strong stances in controversial issues or because they have a background that fuels reactions from the media, mainstream society or particular social groups. A striking variety of

1 Unfortunately, two other former leaders who would have been relevant to include in the analysis – Eskil Pedersen, leader of the Labour Party Youth during the terrorist attack on July 22, 2011, and Himanshu Gulati, the first leader of the Progress Party's Youth who has immigrant parents – did not wish to participate.

backgrounds characterizes the current and former leaders of the political youth organizations in Norway. Among the eleven politicians interviewed, there are four women and seven men and they represent diversity in terms of ethnicity, sexuality and physical disability. Although the sample is small, the interview material presented in this chapter is well suited to explore whether public visibility in itself is a sufficient basis for negative experiences, or rather if public exposure needs to be combined with other markers of difference to create adverse conditions for public participation.

The interviews are to be regarded as elite interviews, as all informants have influential positions and are chosen because of who they are and the position they occupy rather than randomly or anonymously (Hochschild, 2009). As such, the standard anonymization offered to informants in qualitative studies was not possible to achieve. For this reason, I have chosen to use their full names when presenting direct quotes, while otherwise referring to them by the name of the political organization. This is acknowledged by all informants and my use of the interview material is made in agreement with all of them.

In the following sections, I analyze the interviews with the leaders of Norway's political youth organizations. The first section explores how markers of difference influence the experiences of the informants when they act as public figures, and how they handle and reflect on these experiences. The second section focuses on the significance of party cultures and how 'cultures of expression' affect the perceived freedom of speech offered to politicians in different parties. In the third and final section, I discuss the implications of the findings for free speech legislation and the future of democracy.

Markers of difference

Previous survey research from Norway has demonstrated that while individuals with an ethnic majority background usually experience negative comments related to the content of what they write and their political standpoint, individuals with an immigrant background report that negative comments are often related to religion, ethnicity, national origin or skin colour, and, having such experiences, they are far more likely to be hesitant towards public participation in the future (Midtbøen, 2016; Midtbøen and Steen-Johnsen, 2016; Staksrud et al., 2014, Ch. 5). These findings suggest that being ascribed membership in ethnic or religious minority groups leads to less favourable conditions for participation in the public sphere. However, experiences of this kind are not limited to ethnic or religious minorities. Negative comments, harassment and threats may be directed at other typical target groups or at particularly visible public figures, like journalists (Hagen, 2015) and politicians (Narud and Dahl, 2015).

Based on the interviews with young political leaders in Norway, this study suggests that there is great variation in the experiences individual politicians have when acting in the public sphere in the sense that some politicians seem to be more exposed to harassment and threats than others. Quite strikingly, none of the white, straight, male interviewees report experiences that suggest that their public participation led to serious forms of harassment or threats. To the extent that these politicians have negative experiences at all they are not linked to core identity features, but rather to their political points of view which – according to their own assertions – is ‘part of the game’ of political involvement. As Atle Simonsen, the leader of the Progress Party’s Youth, said when asked about his own

experiences: ‘When you are in the media, you get a lot of shit, a lot of negative stuff. But that’s part of the game and I think you should handle it.’

The leaders that are either female or have a minority background, report receiving external responses of a different kind than their majority male counterparts. Consider, for example, the current leader of the Labour Party Youth, Mani Hussaini. Hussaini was born in Syria and arrived in Norway in 1999 when his parents, political dissidents, had to flee the country for safety reasons. Although having a Christian background, Hussaini is continuously believed to be a Muslim. According to his own statement, he normally receives loads of negative comments and threats especially when debating immigration and asylum policies – not least in the context of the ‘refugee crisis’ which dominated Norwegian public debates in the fall of 2015. These experiences have led to a feeling of discomfort when discussing these issues:

I’m not comfortable with debating asylum policies, I must be careful about what I say. The reason is that people immediately make connections; Mani Hussaini, an asylum seeker, a Muslim. I am not a Muslim, but this is the assumption, that I’m a Muslim. That I’m going to introduce Sharia in our country, and that that’s why I’m the leader of the Labour Party Youth. It hasn’t prevented me from engaging in asylum issues. But I must be prepared for the shit I’m going to get, because of my name, my skin color, my alleged motivations for talking about immigration at all. And, also, because I’m from Syria. I thought it would be a good thing in the current situation [the refugee crisis], that I have a background from Syria. But it is perceived as if I’m helping my own people. For example, at the National Congress in April last year, we [the Labour Party Youth] proposed bringing ten thousand refugees from Syria, or from neighboring countries, to Norway. It was like... I’ve never gotten so much shit.

[...] People wrote the most extreme things. There were death threats and... [...] In 2014, when I was nominated as leader of the Labour Party Youth, a man wrote that the entire election committee should be executed, because they had nominated a Muslim.

The case of Mani Hussaini illustrates some important features of public participation in Norway. First of all, his story suggests that Islam has come to be an important, if not the dominating, demarcation line in the public sphere, defining who are entitled the privileges of unquestionable belonging, and who are not. The role of Islam in Europe has been compared to the role of race in the US context and claimed to be *the* bright boundary that hinders individuals from achieving parity with majority peers (Alba, 2005; Alba and Foner, 2015). Empirical research from Norway has pointed in the same direction, suggesting that individuals of Muslim background – and particularly those who are religiously conservative or who have chosen to use their voice to criticize racism and discriminatory practices in Norwegian society – are more exposed to harassment and critique than others (Bangstad, 2015).

Second, Hussaini's experiences show that even individuals who have an *alleged* Muslim background may face the same barriers as those who in fact are Muslims. On the one hand, this underscores the role of Islam as an important lens through which ethnic minorities in the public sphere are observed and evaluated. On the other hand, as Hussaini points out in the interview excerpt, different features of identity – name, skin colour, alleged religious background – may in fact overlap and in combination shape individual experiences (Jenkins, 1997). Previous research suggests that individuals of various ethnic and religious minority backgrounds – including those who are not assumed to be Muslims – may have severe negative experiences participating in the public sphere, for example if they take

a strong stance in controversial political issues, but also that individuals of Muslim background do not necessarily have negative experiences (Midtbøen, 2016). While not downplaying the role of Islam as an important demarcation line in the public sphere, research on the conditions of public participation must be aware of the danger of ‘methodological Islamism’ (Brubaker, 2013 p. 13), implicitly assuming that the barriers facing individuals of Muslim background by default are greater than for other ethnic and religious groups.

Related to this latter point is the fact that other markers of difference, besides ethnicity and religion, also may be important determinants for the individual experience of public participation. Being gay, Nicholas Wilkinson, leader of the Socialist Youth League of Norway, for example, has not received direct harassment linked to his sexual orientation, but says that he avoids talking too much about LGBT issues in public. Wilkinson explicitly states that this strategy is a way of avoiding being transformed into ‘*the* gay politician’. This rationale is common among politicians with minority backgrounds and has previously been called ‘the curse of representation’ (Midtbøen and Steen-Johnsen, 2016 p. 25): In order to be able to express themselves as individuals and not be ‘locked’ in a minority category, these politicians tend to avoid commenting on minority-related policy issues (see also Nadim, Ch. 8).

The female political leaders in this study also report receiving negative comments related to their gender, personality and intelligence to an extent that their male counterparts, according to their own statements, do not. Especially when engaging in debates about gender equality or feminism, the female leaders report having negative experiences. Anna Serafima Svendsen Kvam, spokesperson of the Young Greens of Norway, for example, uses her experience of writing an article in a national daily

newspaper about the use of gender-neutral pronouns to illustrate this problem:

That was when I've gotten the most shit, both on Facebook and in comment fields. A fairly large amount of comments were only harassment, not to the point at all. Very much like, "you're stupid", you know, that I'm unintelligent and stupid. And then there was some characterizing of my looks or my personality or ... yes, of me being a woman.

Similarly, Linn-Elise Øhn Mehlen, leader of the Red Youth, reports getting comments like 'she has her period', 'she hates men', 'she is jealous', when talking about feminism in public debates. On a direct question of whether she has received concrete threats she confirms:

Yes. I got a text message when I was at summer camp in 2014, from a man who had read an article that I'd published in the newspaper. And he was like, "I know you're at summer camp" ... He threatened me and said that we were red bastards, and, like, 'enjoy yourselves at summer camp'. After Utøya, stuff like that is a bit uncomfortable.

Threats targeted at youth politicians at summer camp in Norway cannot be separated from the horrors of July 22, 2011, when 69 politically active youth at the Labour Party Youth meeting on Utøya, as well as eight individuals in the government offices in the Oslo city center, were brutally assassinated. In fact, the terror attack is mentioned by every informant in this study, although no direct questions about the terror attack were asked in the interviews. Often the reference to July 22nd was made when the interviewees were asked if they had observed other politicians being targets of hate speech, harassment or threats. Eskil Pedersen, the leader of the Labour Party Youth when the terrorist attack occurred, was then regularly

mentioned as an example due to his experiences in the days and weeks following the terror attacks.²

Although July 22nd remains as a key reference point for the Norwegian public and among the interviewees in this study, both as an extremely violent attack on political youth in Norway and as an example of the vulnerability attached to holding a political leadership position, the role as leader of a youth organization does not in itself determine how single politicians experience the public sphere. Rather, core identity features like the leader's gender, ethnicity or sexuality seem to be the target of much negative response, particularly when combined with a controversial style or when specific topics – like immigration and gender equality – are under discussion.

An example where identity features and a controversial style are combined is Sandra Borch, the former leader of the Center Youth. Being a woman and the first person of short stature to lead a political organization in Norway, while simultaneously being a strikingly outspoken politician at a point in time when the parent party, the Center Party (Senterpartiet), was undergoing massive debates about its leader and the future direction of the party, Borch reports several incidents of serious threats during her period as a leader:

I've never cared much about what others say and do. And at first it was okay, I did not care so much about what was stated in the comment fields online. But there comes a point when... The condition

2 Pedersen managed to escape Utøya immediately after the terrorist started shooting, while most of the other camp participants were left behind. These circumstances were never discussed critically in the professional media, but the incident received much attention on social media, including a range of severe attacks on Pedersen's person, his role as a leader and – being gay – his sexuality (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2016).

I have made the comments include many more than just myself, like my parents and grandparents. My mom got e-mails and comments on Facebook stating that I never should have been born. [...] In the election campaign in 2013, things were pretty rough. There were death threats, people called from hidden phone numbers and submitted threats. PST [The Norwegian Police Security Service] chose to surveil where I was at all times. And that was kind of unpleasant, because I had never thought of it that way. I had to go different routes home at night by order of the police. It was really a lot.

Borch's experiences are extreme, and demonstrate the potential costs of public involvement. Indeed, she was a controversial politician who enjoyed provoking party colleagues as well as political opponents, and taking on such a role does entail a certain amount of resistance. However, in her case, the line was crossed: 'It went too far. When my family at home cried because they received so many messages, it was just not worth it'. Striking, too, is her experience of receiving little support from the party organization, particularly not from the parent party. This stands in stark contrast to the experiences of the other youth leaders who describe the party apparatuses as crucial in providing protective shelters when the external pressure gets too high. For Borch, the consequence of her experiences was a temporary withdrawal from politics on the national level. Although she continued to be active in local politics in Northern Norway, she chose not to run for a new period as leader of the Center Youth in the 2013 election, and she has kept a low profile in national media ever since. However, she has recently stated in public that she wants a comeback in national politics and in the Parliamentary election in 2017 she is the top candidate for the Center Party in Tromsø County.

Summing up, there can be few doubts that political leadership may result in extreme exposure in the media.

However, the price paid for public engagement does not seem evenly distributed among youth politicians. Some are more exposed than others due to the size, influence or level of conflict in the parent party, but their individual characteristics seem to be decisive. The female politicians and politicians with a minority background interviewed in this study report having received harassment and threats targeted at their core identities, or that they avoid discussing in public topics that can be linked to their minority background in an effort to avoid being locked in a minority category. By contrast, the male politicians with majority backgrounds report no similar experiences.

Of course, being female or having a minority background could result in a higher awareness of the potential risks of negative experiences, indicating that male politicians with majority backgrounds may interpret otherwise similar situations not as incidents of harassment, but of criticism that follows naturally from public exposure (see Hagen and Drange 2016 for an interesting discussion of male journalists who experience sexual harassment). That being said, most of the male political leaders pointed out in the interviews that they are probably faced with different and less severe barriers to participation in the public sphere compared to their female and minority colleagues. The differences in experiences reported by the political youth leaders in this study are also reflected in recent survey research, demonstrating striking differences in the types of comments received by men and women, and by ethnic minorities compared to individuals of ethnic majority background (Midtbøen & Steen-Johnsen, 2016; Staksrud et al., Ch. 5). Although political leadership involves running the risk of extreme exposure, the stakes seem higher for some than others.

'Cultures of expression': The significance of party cultures

While experiences of receiving harassment or threats represent the most clear-cut examples of how single politicians face barriers when engaging in the public sphere, boundaries of free speech are also set by the organizational cultures in which politicians operate. Political parties are established to promote particular group interests or policy issues. Although many topics are open for negotiation and internal struggles, some core ideas about society represent a party's backbone. Whether or not parties formally or informally allow for public debates about these core ideas will vary, and so will the personal consequences of challenging the party line.

Political youth organizations represent an interesting case when assessing how party cultures define the boundaries of free speech for political leaders. On the one hand, the role of youth organizations is to serve as a radical or ideologically 'pure' opposition to the parent parties and their leaders are elected to translate this opposition into political practice. On the other hand, the leaders of political youth organizations will often have political ambitions of their own, which may make them cautious in challenging mainstream opinions in the parent party. Indeed, the informants in this study point to the existence of such considerations. However, the various parties seem to be characterized by distinct 'cultures of expression', defined by the ways in which deviating points of view are sanctioned.

All informants confirm that the parties they represent have some core ideas which constitute their identity and ideological basis. The current leader of the Center Youth, for example, claims that no person in the organization would argue that Norway should apply for membership in the European Union. In this organizational context, EU resistance is part of the party

identity which is seldom challenged. However, not all issues have this ‘sacred’ character. Sometimes political leaders may be uncertain of where the party line goes – particularly in the case of new proposals or issues in which the party does not have any formulated policy. Tord Hustveit, leader of the Young Liberals of Norway, describes how he deals with such situations: ‘To me this is about what the organization thinks. I visualize four to five heads or faces in the organization, and then I think, like, how will they react to this?’ According to Hustveit, these ‘faces in the organization’ could be county leaders, particular party members or members of the party’s executive committee, whose reactions to a given proposition he tries to imagine. This way, he will cover the different viewpoints in the party organization and feel secure before making a public statement.

Kristian Tonning Riise, leader of the Norwegian Young Conservatives, states that when he says something in public about controversial issues, like immigration, he considers what words he uses to avoid being misunderstood. Similar to the leader of the Young Liberals of Norway, Riise thinks first and foremost about his own organization before making a public statement:

My role is to be a spokesperson for my members and it is important that my message appears in line with their opinions and values. And I am extra cautious in the immigration debate because you’re very easily misunderstood. If things come out in a different way than I meant it, my members will react to it and think what on earth is our leader up to now? And then I’ll think of how Høyre [the parent party, the Conservative party] will react. That’s the next thing I think about.

Considerations such as these are prevalent across the political spectrum. This should come as no surprise: The leaders of

political organizations are elected to represent the will of the organization and the extent to which they succeed in this representation defines their legitimacy as leaders. However, digging deeper into how the politicians in this study describe the organizational tolerance of open debates about controversial issues reveals some interesting differences.

In terms of organizational tolerance within parties, the dividing line in these interviews goes between the left and the right of the political center. While the politicians representing the youth fractions of the right-wing or center-to-right political parties describe their parent parties as relatively tolerant concerning what they as youth leaders can say in public, the left-wing parties describe a culture of expression characterized by a lack of room for internal critics. Particularly, this is the case when immigration is on the table. Nicholas Wilkinson, leader of the Socialist Youth League of Norway, for example, claims that challenging mainstream opinions on the political left, in an effort to create new policies through open discussions in the public, is very difficult:

There's a very strong internal justice on the left, where the right way to think is in accordance with what we've believed before. Take immigration, for example. I love immigration. I'm so glad that I can eat kebab when I go home from town, and not stock fish. But that's also why we can raise important issues without being accused of racism. But we keep our mouths shut. And that makes me angry. I think it's absolutely terrible. There's much disagreement on the left, about what is right and wrong, and there are a lot of emotions. The idea is that, "This is like the rhetoric of FrP" [the Progress Party]. And then it's vicious and dangerous by default. I think that's a pretty weak logic, to put it nicely. I'm really against the policies of FrP, but that doesn't mean that anything that sounds like something they could have said is automatically wrong and evil.

Another example of this same phenomenon stems from Andreas Halse, the former leader of the Socialist Youth League of Norway. Being an outspoken internal critic throughout his period as leader of the youth organization, Halse claims that the political left in Norway is characterized by a striking conformity:

We [the political left] have for a long time steered clear of topics that have been difficult or divisive. I think there are two things here. One is a fear of conflict. This is something we share with the rest of Norway. Norwegians don't like conflict; we don't like too much disagreement and we're always looking for compromises. And if someone thinks something's unpleasant, it's better not to say it out loud. The second is the legacy of an ideology where there is one right answer. The further you go to the left, the more pronounced is the idea that there is an answer that is right and that opinions deviating from the correct answer should be rectified. I often meet party members who see it as their role to correct other members' opinions.

Like his party colleague, Nicholas Wilkinson, Halse finds that immigration is the most difficult topic to discuss openly. Rather than debating existing challenges to immigrant integration, for example, he claims that members of the Socialist Left Party, as well as the political left in general, refrain from speaking their minds in fear of being sanctioned by the use of labels:

I believe that there are many people in the Socialist Party who keep opinions that they think are unpopular to themselves, that they are either reluctant to express themselves, or that they simply do not front these opinions in the open. And that's because you'll encounter some resistance that is not always based on facts. The left is very good at labelling. If discussing topics like racism and Islamophobia, everything is right-wing and reactionary, not solidaristic. In a number of issues, we simply hand out labels instead of discussing

political solutions and what's actually on the table. I've always felt that large fractions of the left are controlled by emotions. And if something *feels* wrong, it's very difficult to discuss rationally.

To be sure, this alleged intolerance of deviating opinions on the political left did not keep Halse from acting like an internal critic when he served as leader of the Socialist Youth League of Norway. It is also important to point out that leaders of other, non-Socialist youth organizations describe taboo issues which are difficult to debate openly. The current leader of the Young Christian Democrats, Ida Lindtveit, for example, mentions same-sex marriages as such a topic, in which liberal views within the party are 'dangerous' to voice in public. Still, only the politicians on the political left describe entire party *cultures* as conformist with little room for deviating opinions. Like Wilkinson and Halse, Linn-Elise Øhn Mehlen, leader of the Red Youth, finds that the political left is characterized by a conformist culture of expression:

You tend to get labelled as a right-wing deviationist [høyreavviker] if you are critical of your own people or have new ideas. It's probably a form of conformist thinking. I'm not sure if it extends as far as the Labour Party, I think maybe not, but at least in SV [the Socialist Left party] and Rødt [the Red Party], I think it is very like, 'This is how you should think'. And if you don't, then it's like, 'You can't sit with us'.

There are some paradoxes related to the left-wing politicians' statements about conformist cultures of expression in their respective parties. First of all, they are strikingly open about the issue in the interviews, which suggests that there actually is some room for voicing internal criticism. Indeed, both the current and former leader of the Socialist Youth League of Norway have made controversial statements in national media while still

being part of the party, pointing in the same direction. However, that internal critique is possible does not dismiss the possibility that conformist cultures of expression in fact may be present in these parties. Especially when the topics at hand are immigration and minority rights, there are even plausible reasons why it may be difficult to express critical perspectives as left-wing politicians. The parties on the left in Norwegian politics have been important in recruiting minorities to politics. They are generally concerned with discrimination, racism and hate speech, and they have traditionally argued in favour of liberal, inclusive immigration and integration policies, which is also probably a main reason why immigrants in Norway have tended to vote for the parties left of center (Bjørklund & Bergh 2013). The flip-side of this inclusive approach may be a fear that open discussions about the challenges of immigration to Norwegian society would feed into the rationale of immigrant-hostile social forces, resulting in a conformist culture of expression, at least on this specific question.

Of course, the limited set of informants in this study suggests that one should be cautious in making firm conclusions about the significance of party cultures in defining boundaries of free speech. Due to its salience in public debates, the immigration issue – which was used as an example of a controversial topic in the interviews – may also represent an extreme case which makes the differences between parties look more striking than would be the case if other topics had been in focus. One could even imagine that other topics would turn the findings up-side-down, demonstrating similar conformity pressure on the political right as was reported on the political left in this study. Finally, as only leaders of youth organizations were interviewed, the relevance of these findings for the cultures in parent parties is unknown. All of these precautions warrant future studies. Still,

the findings in these interviews suggest that party cultures may influence politicians' ability to speak their mind and this should be taken seriously. Fear of isolation and for being punished for failing to toe the party line may lead politicians to silence their voices. As such, conformist cultures of expression represent a type of boundary to free speech with important implications for political decision-making.

Implications for free speech legislation and democracy

The former two sections have suggested that individual markers of difference and informal party cultures represent two distinct factors which influence politicians' willingness to express their opinions openly. What might be the implications of these findings – for legal requirements and recruitment to politics? Do politicians who have severe negative experiences tend to engage in a stronger regulation of free speech? And may the negative experiences of some political leaders, from external threats or internal opposition, lead others to silence their voices or refrain from engaging in politics because they cannot bear the potential costs?

In terms of the regulation of free speech, one could expect that the leaders of Norway's political youth organizations, who represent the entire political spectrum from right-wing to left-wing, would display a variety of opinions on where the legal boundaries of free speech should be drawn. However, they are generally consistent in their approach to free speech: From right to left, all informants are in line with a liberal approach, arguing that they as politicians and potential future legislators should not restrict public utterances unless they explicitly encourage the use of physical violence. This even goes for leaders who have

severe personal experiences. Mani Hussaini, for example, uses his own family history to argue why freedom of speech is important: 'My family had to flee from Syria because we could not express what we wanted. It was forbidden to do so. So you can say that I have inherited the belief that freedom of speech is inviolable. You don't mess with freedom of speech.'

The only informant who argues that more legal protection against hate speech is necessary is the former leader of the Center Youth, Sandra Borch. Although educated as a legal scholar and principally in favour of a liberal approach to free speech, Borch believes that the current situation creates barriers to public involvement. As the only informant in this study who has decided to withdraw from national politics because of harassment and threats, Borch uses her personal experiences when arguing for a stronger legal protection against hate speech in Norway. Besides Borch, however, there is a strong consensus concerning the current legal boundaries of free speech. Although the politicians on the political left seem to have more difficulty in providing an ideological answer to why state regulation is not the solution to the dilemmas occurring when the execution of free speech by some may create barriers to participation by others, there is striking support for a liberal approach to free speech across the political spectrum.

Is this consensus surprising? On the one hand, free speech has been on the agenda throughout the political socialization of these young political leaders, and at times the debate has been intense (see Colbjørnsen, Ch. 6). In that sense one could expect that different points of view would be represented among the young politicians in this study. The fact that a wider range of positions does not seem to be reflected in the opinions of young political leaders in Norway is thus worth noting. On the other hand, consensus on this key principle of liberal democracy may

also indicate that debates over free speech usually are not about legal provisions, but about tone and conduct in the public sphere and the harsh climate that sometimes characterizes public debates in Norway, not least in social media and in the comment fields.

While the personal costs of public participation may not lead to a restrictive view on free speech legislation, another important question relates to the consequences of negative experiences for the willingness to engage in controversial issues – in public and in internal party processes of policy development – and for future recruitment to politics. Indeed, several of the political leaders interviewed in this study worry that young people, especially women and individuals with minority backgrounds, may be discouraged from engaging in politics because they observe the personal costs of engagement in politics. For Sandra Borch, who chose to withdraw temporarily from the public spotlight due to the extreme pressure she had experienced, the implication of the harsh debate climate for future recruitment to politics is an important reason why she argues that a stronger regulation of free speech is necessary. ‘I have received messages from people who do not want to get involved in politics because they cannot bear the consequences.’ Several of the other interviewees have had similar experiences, claiming that they know of young people, not least young women, who have chosen not to pursue their political commitment, at least not in party politics, either because of their own negative experiences or because they have witnessed what others go through.

Most of the interviewees in this study are aware of the potential risks of participating in public debates, and several of them have implemented structures within their own organization to protect and support party colleagues. Some leaders systematically send a supporting email or personal message on Facebook

to young colleagues who have participated in a public debate or published a feature article. Others have themselves received strong support from the parent party when they have had unpleasant experiences, referring to this support when explaining why they have implemented similar structures in their own organization. Such structures represent important bulwarks against the personal costs of public participation.

There seems to be far less attention to the silencing mechanisms operating internally in party organizations, however. This is probably a reflection of the fact that the external and internal barriers to free speech differ in at least one fundamental respect: External barriers – that is, experiences of harassment and threats coming from forces outside of the party organization – may create a feeling of internal solidarity and cohesion, strengthened by support provided by the political leadership or party colleagues. Internal barriers, stemming from conformity pressure within the party organization itself, on the other hand, represent a much more subtle type of barrier to free speech. If individuals fear the social sanctions involved in challenging mainstream opinions within the party, the consequence is more likely that they will act in accordance with the mainstream view, avoid controversial topics or simply opt out of politics, rather than addressing the sources of such sanctions. Challenging the internal barriers to free speech involves running the risk of creating conflict with friends and colleagues and potentially experiencing social isolation – that is, the opposite of internal solidarity and cohesion.

Conclusion

Building on in-depth interviews with the leaders of Norway's political youth organizations, this chapter has shown that

politicians may experience both external and internal barriers to free speech. On the one hand, political leaders are required to take an active role in the public sphere, by representing their members and fighting for their points of view. As such, political leadership is synonymous with power and influence, but public visibility also exposes politicians to harassment and threats. However, this chapter has shown that not all politicians are equally exposed to harassment and threats when acting in public. Despite their professional role as politicians, political leaders are individual bearers of identity markers which to a large extent seem to determine whether their path towards political influence will be easy or hard. Although most of the political leaders interviewed in this study have learned to live with being an exposed public figure – and many of them probably enjoy it – the chapter has shown that leaders who are either female or have a minority background of some kind do report having experiences with harassment and threats to a far greater extent than their majority male counterparts. This might suggest that women and minorities are more aware of the potential risks of public participation, but it probably also suggests that these politicians are in fact more exposed to harassment and threats than others – and quite surely that harassing comments directed at core identity features like gender, ethnicity or physical disability, have more severe consequences than comments related to political points of view.

On the other hand, boundaries of free speech also stem from the internal life of party organizations. Political parties are characterized by informal cultures with varying traditions for dissent and open conflict. In this study, an interesting distinction between the left-wing parties on the one hand and the center and right-wing parties on the other hand has come to the fore. The former and current political leaders of the left-wing political

youth organizations describe the party culture as conformist and labelling, downplaying internal differences and sanctioning deviant opinions on topics perceived as taboo. By contrast, the leaders of the center and right-wing political youth organizations describe their party cultures as more open and that internal conflicts are allowed to be played out in public. Of course, the limited number of interviewees in this study warrants future studies of the significance of party cultures in creating barriers to free speech in the political field. Not least, the focus on immigration in these interviews should make one cautious in assuming that the conformism holds for all taboo areas, or that focusing on other issues would not reveal a similar conformism on the political right. The key finding here is not necessarily that it is difficult to discuss openly the challenges of immigration in Norway's left-wing political youth parties, but that different cultures of expression in fact are present in the political field. Such cultures may prevent open debate and silence perspectives or arguments that deviate from mainstream opinions and as such function as *de facto* barriers to free speech.

What are the implications of barriers to free speech in the political field? Liberal democracies are preconditioned to the individual right and ability to participate in the public sphere unhindered by social markers, and political decision-making should be based on viewpoints disclosed without fear of social isolation. Barriers to free speech, either through harassment or threats in the public sphere or by silencing mechanisms within the party organization, may result in the withdrawal of certain groups or opinions from politics. Harassment or threats from the outside world may keep individuals from addressing topics of importance to them or from pursuing a political career. Social isolation within the party organization, or the fear of this dynamic, may silence critical voices. The consequence of both barriers may be that groups and

perspectives are excluded from political decision-making and as such serve as barriers to deliberation. Studying how boundaries of free speech play out in the political field is consequently of interest for the functioning of liberal democracy.

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