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Do party organizations integrate multi-level states? The case of the Norwegian Local Government Reform

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ABSTRACT

Party organizations are often said to integrate the territorial levels in a political system. This article analyses how party organizations handled a specific issue – municipal amalgamations initiated by the state – in a unitary state – Norway. Two types of organizational linkage are explored. First, bottom-up influence: to what extent did party branches attempt to influence national party policy? Second, top-down coordination and control: to what extent were party branches tools for implementing national party policy? Based on qualitative interviews in five Norwegian parties, the analyses show that party organizations provided linkage in different ways. In the most united parties, low levels of internal disagreement enabled the parties – at all levels – to promote their national policies. In divided parties, the party organization became an arena for competition between opposing views. These parties chose to emphasize local self-determination. Accordingly, they had less of a national policy to implement.

KEYWORDS Multi-level parties; municipal amalgamation; Norway; party organization; party unity

Introduction

Party organizations are often said to provide linkage across territorial levels and thus integrate the different levels in a multi-level political system. The literature on the nationalization of politics (e.g. Caramani 2004) describes the political integration of states, leading to a territorial homogenization of electoral behaviour. In this perspective, the party organizations ‘provide a linkage between [the] levels, presenting voters with easily identifiable labels and with a degree of programmatic cohesion across the polity’ (Fabre and Swenden 2013, 343).

However, the party literature has questioned the actual coherence between party units at different levels. A common label does not necessarily imply much interaction. Some party scholars (e.g. Katz and Mair 1995; Carty 2004) describe a stratarchical model of party organizations, where the

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different elements of the party organization are relatively autonomous of one another.

There is a growing body of literature on multi-level party organizations (for overviews, see e.g. Deschouwer 2006; Fabre and Swenden 2013) and the extent to which these organizations provide linkage between the levels. In this article, I aim to contribute to this field of research in three ways.

First, I look into a *unitary state*: Norway. The literature on multi-level parties tends to focus on federal or regionalized states (with some exceptions, e.g. Bolleyer 2012; Feltenius 2016). Unitary states are somehow seen as less interesting. For example, Fabre and Swenden argue that the regional level is important for understanding party politics in federal states, while ‘focusing on the national level may make sense for studying parties in quite centralized states such as Norway, Portugal or Japan’ (Fabre and Swenden 2013, 343). Thus, studying a unitary state enables us to see whether it actually is sufficient to focus on the national level in these cases.

Second, I include *municipal branches* and their relations with other levels. Relations between the municipal branches on one hand, and the national and regional levels on the other, are rarely included in the literature on multi-level parties. Studies tend to focus on the relationship between the national and regional levels (again with exceptions, such as Copus 2004, Ch. 5).

Third, I focus on how party organizations handled a *specific political issue*: the Norwegian Local Government Reform (NLGR). Earlier studies tend to map the general organizational structure and patterns of communication within multi-level parties. This is also the case with Norwegian party research (Allern and Saglie 2012; Aarebrot and Saglie 2013). We know little about how organizational linkage works with regard to specific policy issues: how do parties link and integrate policy across levels (cf. Fabre and Swenden 2013, 352)? Existing studies of the party politics of territorial reform (e.g. Feltenius 2016; Toubreau and Massetti 2013) mainly deal with the regional level, not municipal reform. Research on the politics of municipal reform (e.g. Balderheim and Rose 2010), in contrast, tends to focus on factors other than party politics and party organizations.

The chosen issue – the NGLR – was a large-scale attempt to merge municipalities, initiated by the central government, and was therefore important for the municipalities and municipal party branches. National parties and their local branches were central actors in the decision-making processes. The municipal councils were to recommend whether their municipality should be merged, and, if so, with whom, whereas the Parliament should make the final decisions. Some parties were generally in favour of amalgamation, some were against it and some were internally divided – but these constellations varied between municipalities.

The aim of this article is to explore *whether party organizations functioned as arenas for the coordination of party actors at different levels*. More precisely, if

such coordination took place, the question is whether this was *top-down*, *bottom-up* or both. To what extent were local and regional party branches tools for implementing the party's national policy on the NLGR (either promoting or opposing the reform), and to what extent did local and regional party branches attempt to – and succeed in – influencing the party's national policy? The selection of a specific issue enables me to focus on the role of *issue-specific party unity*: to what extent did coordination work differently in parties that agreed and disagreed on this particular issue?

In the next section of the article, I discuss perspectives on linkage within multi-level party organizations in a unitary state and the role of issue-specific party unity. I then present Norwegian party organizations, as well as the NLGR, before the data – qualitative interviews in five of the largest Norwegian parties – are described. In the first part of the analysis, I explore the extent of bottom-up influence before I turn to top-down processes in the second part. The five parties are divided into three groups based on the extent of internal disagreement on the NLGR issue.

Vertical integration in a unitary state: Top-down or bottom-up?

Vertical links in party organizations connect the national, regional and local party levels. There are, however, different aspects of the concept of 'vertical links', and a specification is needed. A basic dimension is the degree of vertical integration: to what extent are the different organizational layers independent of each other (Thorlakson 2009, 161)? In a unitary state, there is reason to believe that party organizations are tightly integrated. This is especially the case in a state like Norway, where the same parties compete at the national, county (regional) and municipal levels.

Another dimension deals with the direction of influence within the party: unless the party is completely disintegrated, is it governed from above or below? It is possible to present a more fine-grained distinction between different aspects of this relationship (Thorlakson 2009, 162–163; Allern and Saglie 2012, 949–951). I concentrate on the top-down versus bottom-up distinction, but distinguish between two types of top-down influence: control and coordination.

Top-down influence can amount to central control over local decisions. The central party leadership may try to affect local decisions directly by means of, for example, sanctions or informal contacts. However, top-down influence can also take the shape of coordination rather than control. The central party organization may encourage and facilitate local activity, nudging the local branches in directions that will benefit the party as a whole rather than trying to control what they do. Bottom-up influence, however, mainly amounts to local attempts to influence decisions at the central party level, either through formal party channels or informally.

What, then, can we expect to find in a unitary state with regard to the balance between top-down and bottom-up influence? First, as Bolleyer (2012, 330) argues, regional elections are less important in unitary states. The need for central interference to improve the party's performance in the next national election may more readily be accepted. This is certainly plausible, but the centralization and tight integration of unitary states may also provide incentives for stronger bottom-up influence. In federal states, where a larger share of the major decisions are taken sub-nationally, the sub-national branches can – to a greater extent – focus on influencing decisions at their own level. In unitary states, where many decisions are taken at the national level, it is vital for municipal and regional branches to influence their party's national policies – and thereby decisions in the national Parliament. In short, unitary states may provide stronger incentives for *both* top-down and bottom-up influence.

There is nevertheless reason to believe that the degree of internal unity will lead to differences between the parties. The literature on party unity generally focuses on either voting unity in Parliament (e.g. Little and Farrell 2017) or the role of organized factions (e.g. Boucek 2009). These topics are less relevant in the Norwegian case, where party unity in Parliament is high and internal disagreement rarely leads to the formation of institutionalized factions. However, studying a particular issue makes it possible to explore the importance of issue-specific party unity. The nature of the issue in question will presumably affect the way party organizations function, but the potential for both bottom-up and top-down influence will also depend on the formal organization: which formal instruments of control are available for the central level and the local branches?

When an issue unites a party, the party leadership has fewer incentives to influence the political decisions that local branches make. But while there is less need for top-down control, there may be more room for top-down coordination. The organization may enter something resembling an election campaign mode. In a party-centred political system such as in Norway, a centrally initiated election campaign strategy is implemented locally and translated to local contexts (Karlsen and Skogerbø 2015). Likewise, a united party can use its organization to implement its policies locally. Moreover, a united party can also use this policy as a campaign issue in local elections. In short, party unity may enable the party leadership to use the party organization as an instrument for top-down coordination. This does not mean that the party lacks democratic bottom-up processes but that internal decision-making processes receive less attention when there is little disagreement.

When an issue divides a party, top-down coordination is less likely. It is difficult to use a divided and partly unwilling organization as an instrument for policy implementation. The situation may be conducive to both bottom-up influence and top-down control, but this depends on how the formal organization is designed. On one hand, in a context where the party leadership enjoys

a high level of control over local branches, the leadership may use its power to ensure that the lower level follows the national mandate. This may nevertheless be a dangerous strategy since such attempts would aggravate the internal conflict. On the other hand, if the formal organization enables local branches to influence the central level, bottom-up influence becomes crucial. In that case, we can expect the party organization to function as an arena where the adversaries – including municipal and county branches – promote their views in order to influence the outcome.

The case of Norway

Norwegian party organizations

The Norwegian political-administrative system has three tiers of government: the national level, counties (regions) and municipalities. At each level, decisions are made by an elected assembly (Parliament, county councils and municipal councils). The organizational structure of the political parties follows the state structure closely, with a national organization, county branches and municipal branches.

Norwegian parties basically have the same organizational structure, with only minor variations (Allern, Heidar, and Karlsen 2016, 39–48). Comparative data show that Norwegian parties score highly with regard to *assembly-based* intra-party democracy, with minimal party differences, but have notably lower scores on *plebiscitary* (i.e. direct) intra-party democracy (Bolin et al. 2017, 171). Before the NLGR, the network of local branches was relatively fine-meshed in a comparative perspective, with few party members and registered electors per basic unit (Webb and Keith 2017, 47). The old parties maintain their presence in local politics, while new parties establish new branches and run candidates in an increasing number of municipalities (Aars and Christensen 2013, 157). The activities of Norwegian local party branches seem to revolve around the municipal agenda and the party's local councillors (Offerdal and Ringkjøb 2002, 131). National parties dominate local politics; local lists received less than 3% of the votes at the 2015 municipal election.

The county branch is a crucial nexus in Norwegian parties, coordinating political processes upward from local branches and downward from the national party (Allern and Saglie 2012; Aarebrot and Saglie 2013). The counties are also constituencies for parliamentary elections, and the county party branches control the candidate selection for national elections. This increases their political weight. Moreover, the county level has full-time staff (county secretaries), which may increase its capacity for political influence.

Party programmes (manifestos) and various policy resolutions are adopted by the national party congress. These programmes are fairly detailed documents, containing specific policy positions on a large number of issues.

Although the decision itself is centralized, municipal and county branches are involved in two ways. First, there is a comprehensive hearing procedure in which drafts are sent to local branches. Second, most congress delegates are local politicians, elected by the county branches (Allern, Heidar, and Karlsen 2016, 46–47).

Some differences exist between the parties.¹ In the Labour Party, all congress delegates are elected by the county branches. In the four other parties, congress delegates also include the executive committee, national council, MPs, cabinet ministers and delegates elected by sub-organizations (e.g. youth organizations). This difference should not be exaggerated. Although the Labour party leadership cannot vote at the congress, they have the right to speak and propose motions and may exert influence behind the scenes. In the other parties, a majority of the delegates are elected by county branches. In addition, most of the national council is elected by the county branches, whereas the MPs depend on the county branches for reselection. The formal party structure thus implies a fairly high level of bottom-up influence in all parties, although municipal branches have no *direct* influence over national party affairs. Their potential influence is indirect, through their county branches.

However, top-down control is also present. In four of the five parties, party statutes prescribe (to a greater or lesser extent) that party representatives and/or branches at all levels should be loyal to the national party programme. The Christian Democrats are the exception. The statutes do not say much about potential sanctions against local branches, but individual members can be expelled in all five parties. The Labour Party and Progress Party statutes mention breaking with the programme as a potential reason for expulsion. In contrast, this is not on the list of reasons for expulsion in the Christian Democrat statutes. The Conservative Party and Centre Party statutes are less specific on this point.

The Norwegian Local Government Reform

The Solberg Government took office after the 2013 Norwegian parliamentary election as a right-wing minority coalition between the Conservative Party and the Progress Party, with parliamentary support from two centrist parties: the Christian Democrats and the Liberals. One of the main ambitions of the Solberg Government was to implement a comprehensive local government reform, with an amalgamation of municipalities as well as counties (see Klausen, Askim, and Vabo 2016). The approach was partly top-down and partly bottom-up. Although the process was initiated from above, each amalgamation should be locally anchored, and the municipalities themselves should seek and find partners. The final decisions, however, were made by the Parliament in June 2017. By January 2020, the number of municipalities will be reduced from 428 to

356 and the number of counties from 19 to 11. Most of these mergers were voluntary, but some municipalities were merged against their will.

The NLGR issue can be regarded as three separate but related questions. First, are fewer and larger municipalities good or bad? The government and other proponents of the reform argued that larger municipalities would enable the municipalities to produce better services for their citizens. The opponents, including the Centre Party, argued that local democracy would deteriorate, that the distance between citizens and local politicians would increase and that local public services would be centralized.

Second, how should the citizens be heard during the process? The Local Government Boundaries Act (§ 10) states that ‘the municipal council should seek the view of the inhabitants on proposals for any boundary change’. The Ministry of Local Government recommended that such consultations should be carried out as citizen surveys (i.e. opinion polls). More than 200 municipalities, however, chose to hold a consultative referendum instead of, or in addition to, a citizen survey (see Folkestad et al. [forthcoming](#)). Based on experience, there was reason to expect that a citizen survey more often would yield a pro-amalgamation result compared with a referendum. It is therefore unsurprising that pro-amalgamation politicians were against referendums, while anti-amalgamation politicians were in favour.

Third, should the Parliament force municipalities to merge against their will? Voluntary mergers were preferred, but what should the Parliament do when municipalities rejected amalgamation? This is partly a matter of different views on local government: are municipalities regarded as independent polities or just a part of the national public administration? It is also a question of priority: even if one is in favour of larger municipalities, is amalgamation important enough to set aside the principle of local self-determination?

Expectations for the Norwegian case

The choice of Norway – a unitary state – leads us to expect tight integration. However, without comparable data from other countries, it is not possible to draw conclusions about the level of integration, top-down coordination and bottom-up influence in Norwegian parties. The main focus is thus on comparing the divided parties with the more united parties.

I expect the united parties to display more top-down coordination. The leadership of such parties have little need to exercise any direct control, but they may seize the opportunity to encourage and coordinate local activity.

In contrast, I expect the divided parties to be marked by attempts at bottom-up influence. The formal structure of Norwegian parties gives the county level the opportunity to influence the party programme, and informal channels of influence from below exist as well. Moreover, the NLGR issue was important for local party activists. The future of their municipality was at stake.

For the opponents, amalgamation meant that their municipality would disappear and, accordingly, that the interests of their local community would suffer. For the proponents, amalgamation meant a stronger basis for providing municipal services – and for wielding local political power.

Top-down control, e.g. sanctions against local branches, seems less likely in divided parties. This would be risky, as the potential costs (exacerbated conflicts) were high. Moreover, municipal amalgamation is not strongly linked to party ideology and core values (except for the Centre Party).

Data: Interviews with national and regional party employees

The article is based on qualitative interviews with employees in five of the largest Norwegian parties – two government parties (the Conservatives and the Progress Party), two opposition parties (Labour and the Centre Party) and one party supporting the minority government (the Christian Democrats). The two government parties were of course in favour of amalgamation, but it should be noted that the minister in charge of the reform represented the Conservative Party. Therefore, more was at stake for the Conservatives. The Centre Party, which speaks for the rural periphery, was the staunchest opponent of municipal amalgamation. The two remaining parties, the Christian Democrats and Labour, were both, in principle, in favour of larger municipalities. Labour has traditionally been the strongest supporter of municipal amalgamation in Norwegian politics, and the municipal reform was included in a formal agreement between the government and its supporting parties, including the Christian Democrats.² However, as we shall see, both parties increasingly came to emphasize the principle of voluntariness during the reform process.

As my focus was on organizational matters – how the party organizations handled the issue – I chose to interview party staff who deal with organizational matters on a daily basis rather than party officers. Fourteen interviews with party staff were carried out from November 2017 to January 2018, with one supplementary interview in June 2018.³ In each party, I interviewed one employee at the national headquarters. The Secretary-General of each party was asked to pick the interviewee to ensure that it would be a well-informed person. At the regional level, I selected two counties and interviewed each party's county secretary.⁴ These secretaries play important roles in bottom-up and top-down intra-party communication (Aarebrot and Saglie 2013) and should therefore be well informed about how their party handled the NLGR process.

The interviews were semi-structured, with a fairly detailed list of open-ended questions.⁵ The interview guide was divided into two main parts, following the distinction between bottom-up and top-down influence. Both these sections started with rather general questions followed by questions on the use of specific channels of influence. The first section included

questions on what the municipal and county branches had done to influence national party positions through formal channels, such as the party congress, and informally. The second section aimed to map top-down influence. These questions had to be carefully worded as central attempts to influence local branches may be seen as illegitimate. The interviewees were first asked to briefly describe their national party policy on the NLGR and then whether the central party had worked to coordinate the policies of the municipal and county branches to bring them in line with this national policy. Specific questions were also asked, for example about spreading information on the reform and giving advice about the use of local referendums.

The interviewees at the party headquarters were asked about the party in general, and the county secretaries were also asked about what their own county branch had done – both upward and downward. The interviews primarily covered the period from the 2013 party congresses, which adopted the party programmes in force when the Solberg Government launched its reform, to the parliamentary amalgamation decisions in 2017.

The interviews were transcribed and sent to the interviewees for corrections. Other sources, especially party programmes, are also used. When no other source is explicitly stated, the information comes from the interviews.

Bottom-up processes in Norwegian parties

Relatively united parties: The Centre Party and the Conservatives

The Centre Party and the Conservative Party had diametrically opposite views on all the three above-mentioned aspects of the NLGR. The Conservatives were in favour of amalgamation, were against referendums and accepted enforced amalgamation, while the Centre Party took the opposite positions. There are, nevertheless, many parallels in how the party organizations handled the issue. The reason seems to be that both parties were relatively united on this issue.

The high degree of unity in these two parties makes it difficult to assess the degree of influence from below. As one of the Centre Party interviewees remarked, 'There were few discrepancies between the attitudes in the local branches and the policy of the central party. It is therefore difficult to measure their influence'. Even though local Centre Party branches had no reason to try to change the party's policy, the NLGR seems to have activated the party's grass roots. Decentralization is a core issue for the party, and the amalgamation of municipalities (combined with other administrative reforms that also entailed centralization, e.g. of police services) mobilized party activists.

Whereas the Centre Party's position has been stable over time, the Conservative Party has changed its policy. In 1995, the Centre Party put forward a parliamentary motion stating that changes in the municipal structure

should not take place if the municipal council, or the citizens in a referendum, was against it. A majority – including the Conservatives – voted for this motion, and the ‘voluntariness principle’ was thus established.⁶ The Conservative party programmes document a clear shift during the early 2000s. The 1993 programme stated that the municipal structure should ‘develop naturally, on the basis of local considerations [...]’. The 1997 programme said nothing about municipal structure. In 2001, however, the programme argued in favour of larger municipalities and that there should be incentives for amalgamation. In 2005, the voluntariness principle was definitely abandoned. Even though voluntariness was preferred, the ‘Parliament must [...] be able to make decisions on municipal amalgamation’.⁷ According to one of the Conservative Party interviewees, this change was a result of pressure from below. Accordingly, the Conservatives should not be considered to have been united on this issue during the 1990s.

Divided parties: Labour and the Christian Democrats

Both Labour and the Christian Democrats were, in principle, in favour of larger municipalities. In both cases, however, the voluntariness principle was a matter of contention. The Labour Party voted *against* the voluntariness principle in the above-mentioned 1995 parliamentary vote. The Conservative Party and the Labour Party had thus swapped positions between 1995 and 2015: the Conservatives had left the voluntariness principle, while Labour had embraced it. It may be tempting to see this as a case of rivalry between government and opposition (cf. Toubeau and Massetti 2013, 305–306): in both cases the opposition party supported voluntariness. However, the interviews clearly indicate that influence from below played a major part when Labour changed its position. The same can be said about the Christian Democrats. Both parties were divided with regard to the voluntariness principle, and shifting positions may have been caused by shifting opinion at the local level.

Labour’s party programme for the 2013–17 parliamentary term, adopted at the 2013 party congress, stated that changes in the municipal structure generally should be based on local preferences. However, individual municipalities ‘should not be able to stop changes that are appropriate from a regional perspective’.⁸ In other words, the party was to some extent willing to merge municipalities against their will.

The Christian Democratic programme for the 2013–17 term took a similar position. Whereas the 2009 programme had established the voluntariness principle (‘Voluntariness must be the basis for municipal amalgamations’),⁹ a narrow majority at the 2013 party congress rejected it. According to the 2013 party programme, municipal amalgamation should be based on good local processes, but the Parliament should also contribute to bringing about

amalgamation. 'The greatest possible extent of agreement from the local level is a large advantage', according to the programme.¹⁰ Local agreement was thus an 'advantage' – not a requirement. One interviewee described this change as somewhat surprising – at least to some party members – in light of the party's traditional view.

Both parties soon adjusted their policies. The interviewees from the Labour Party point to the 2015 party congress as the turning point. There was disagreement at the congress, but the delegates agreed on a unanimous resolution stating, among other things, that the 'Amalgamation of municipalities shall be based on voluntariness'.¹¹ The 2017 party programme had similar wording: 'Changes shall be based on voluntariness and good local processes'.¹² The draft programme for 2017 was less categorical; this sentence included the reservation 'as a main rule'. The editorial committee at the 2017 party congress, which included the party's deputy leader, wanted to keep this reservation. A majority of the delegates, however, chose to delete this reservation when the final programme was adopted.¹³

The changes in the Christian Democratic policy came later and more gradually. The 2015 Christian Democratic party congress adopted a resolution stating that 'Good, voluntary local processes shall be the fundament of the local government reform' but with a reservation similar to Labour's 2013 programme: 'However, one single municipality must not be able to block good solutions'.¹⁴ The congress majority rejected an alternative wording that embraced the voluntariness principle.¹⁵ However, in 2017 – *before* the party congress – the party leader announced that the Christian Democrats supported the voluntariness principle.¹⁶ The party congress later confirmed this. The change was thus more of a top-down decision in the Christian Democrats, compared with Labour, even though both parties experienced a similar mobilization from below. When the Parliament voted on the amalgamations in June 2017, the Christian Democrats voted against the involuntary mergers.¹⁷

Local branches in both parties had widely differing views on amalgamation. While some branches were strongly in favour of the amalgamation of their own municipality, others were equally strong opponents. This is partly related to municipal size. A Labour interviewee pointed out that branches in small municipalities were more likely to resist amalgamation. The 'junior partners' in the merged municipality may end up with little influence in the merged municipality and perhaps lose municipal jobs. A Christian Democratic interviewee observed that this was an insufficient explanation. Municipal branches that were similar with regard to many relevant variables could nevertheless end up with diametrically opposite views on amalgamation.

Whatever the reasons were, the municipal branches were deeply divided. Thus, the principle of local self-determination stood out as a solution that could satisfy many branches (except those who wanted to merge with an unwilling partner). Some interviewees at the county level pointed out that

the voluntariness principle was important for their county branches. In the Labour Party, the mobilization for voluntariness was successful at the 2015 party congress. The corresponding mobilization was less successful at the Christian Democratic Party's 2015 congress and failed to reach a majority, but the party nevertheless ended up with unequivocal support for voluntariness in 2017.

A question remains: why did this mobilization for voluntariness gain momentum in 2015, *after* the process had started? Why not earlier, before positions became entrenched? A Labour interviewee offered an explanation: Many people within the party thought that there was a need for fewer and larger municipalities – in principle. When the reform proceeded from general principles to discussions of specific municipalities, and people saw the actual consequences for their own municipality, demands for an explicit voluntariness principle increased.

In-between: The Progress Party

The Progress Party seems to fall between the Conservatives and Centre Party on one hand and Labour and the Christian Democrats on the other. As the Conservative Party's coalition partner, the Progress Party had committed itself to municipal amalgamation, and it supported the government's policy loyally. Nevertheless, the amalgamation reform work was led by a Conservative minister, and the Conservatives were more strongly involved in this work than their coalition partner.

To be sure, there was also some bottom-up activity in the Progress Party. The role of local referendums was a tricky question for the party, which traditionally had been a strong supporter of binding local referendums. The 2009 party programme, for example, stated, 'We want a system where the people, via referendums, get direct decision-making power, as well as the right to veto decisions made by political organs'. Regarding local government, the programme argued in favour of a 'democracy reform based on voluntary municipal amalgamation'.¹⁸ This strong support for local referendums was difficult to reconcile with the party's ambition to get fewer and larger municipalities, and the 2013 congress changed this policy. The party still regarded referendums as important (although the wording was somewhat toned down) but stated that 'The municipal structure shall be decided by the Parliament'.¹⁹

An internal opposition in favour of voluntariness nevertheless remained. At the 2017 party congress, for example, a minority within the National Council proposed to reintroduce the voluntariness principle in the 2017 party programme and delete a sentence that emphasized the Parliament's responsibility to adopt a 'modern and appropriate' municipal structure. A total of 96 of the 232 delegates voted in favour of this proposal.²⁰

Top-down processes in Norwegian parties

Relatively united parties: The Centre Party and the Conservatives

With regard to top-down coordination, there was much activity in both the Centre and Conservative parties. Both had taken a clear stand on the issue, so they had a *cause* to promote. The central level provided information, facts and arguments for local politicians, who were to take a stand on the amalgamation of their own municipality and fight a local election campaign in 2015 and, in many cases, also fight a local referendum campaign. The parties also provided training for local politicians on this issue, and the Centre Party even had local study groups. When the central party organizations arranged conferences for local politicians, the NLGR was an important topic. The central organization and parliamentary party group distributed information throughout the organization. MPs also travelled around the country and kept in touch with local and regional branches. In the case of the Conservatives, the Conservative Minister of Local Government and his political staff played a central role.

The Centre Party headquarters could also help local branches to find speakers for local meetings. One party activist, for example, had held speeches at more than 80 open meetings on amalgamations throughout the country.²¹ The fight against involuntary mergers also became a campaign issue for the Centre Party in the 2015 local elections and the 2017 parliamentary election.

The two parties also mirror each other regarding the use of local referendums. In both cases, the central party provided advice for the municipal branches. The Centre Party clearly advised its branches to advocate a local referendum in their municipality, whereas the Conservative Party advised against it and pointed at citizen surveys as a better tool for consulting the citizens.

In both parties, there was nevertheless a minority who disagreed with the official party line. The opposition did not challenge their party's national policy as such but the implementation of this policy in their own municipality. A number of Conservative mayors were strongly against the amalgamation of their municipality. Likewise, there were Centre Party mayors who advocated that their own municipality should be merged. This was tolerated in both parties, and sanctions were not used. One Conservative interviewee remarked that the party had a bottom-up culture and that the central party leadership could not decide what people at the local level should think. Attempts to interfere would be 'counterproductive'. Similar attitudes were expressed in the Centre Party.

Divided parties: Labour and the Christian Democrats

The division between pro- and anti-amalgamation branches in the Labour Party and the Christian Democrats was conducive to bottom-up influence,

but it seems to have weakened top-down coordination and control in both parties. To be sure, Labour's and the Christian Democrats' central party organizations and parliamentary party groups also produced much information directed at the county and municipal branches, their MPs travelled around the country and so on. This comprehensive reform process affected most municipalities, and the local branches certainly had a need for information. Nevertheless, there seems to be less argument production in these two parties compared with the Conservatives and Centre Party, where the central party organization had a cause to promote.

In Labour, and to some extent also the Christian Democrats, the voluntariness principle increasingly became a cornerstone of the NLGR policy. Accordingly, the central party organization was left with less of a cause to campaign for. Instead, it aimed to enable local branches to reach their own objectives. One of Labour's county secretaries described the situation in this way: 'If the Labour Party has very many municipal branches that are negative to the municipal reform, and very many that are positive, it is important [...] to be of assistance for both camps'.

These two parties' views on local referendums point in the same direction. In contrast to the Centre and Conservative parties, the central party organization did not offer any categorical advice on whether the branch should support or oppose a local referendum. The local branches were to consider the local situation and make their own assessment. To the extent that such advice was given (as was the case in the Christian Democratic Party), it was less definite and seemed to be promoted less strongly.

In-between: The Progress Party

As mentioned above, the Progress Party seemed less involved in promoting municipal amalgamation than its coalition partner. There was nevertheless also some top-down activity in the Progress Party. In line with the above-mentioned downplaying of local referendums, the central party organization gave advice on the use of such referendums. The party committee for local politics stated that the Progress Party did not *demand* local referendums on municipal amalgamation. In its recommendation to the local branches, the committee stated that it was up to the party's municipal council groups to decide whether or not they wanted a local referendum and emphasized that such a referendum in any case was consultative – not binding.²²

Thus, there were two differences between the Conservative and Progress parties in this respect. First, unlike its coalition partner, the Progress Party did not advise its branches against local referendums. That would have been difficult, considering the party's earlier enthusiastic support for local referendums. Second, the general impression is that there was less activity in the Progress Party's organization with regard to the NLGR.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The analyses show that party organizations indeed provided linkage between the national and local levels but in quite different ways. The results are summarized in Table 1. As expected, united and divided parties behaved differently. On one hand, we find the two most united parties: the pro-reform Conservatives and the anti-reform Centre Party. In both cases, the level of internal disagreement was relatively low. Top-down influence did not take the shape of control. Both parties had local branches that disagreed with national policy, and the national leadership tolerated this. However, top-down coordination took place. The local branches became an arena where the party's national policy could be promoted, helped and guided by the central party organization.

On the other hand, we find the most divided parties: Labour and the Christian Democrats. In these cases, bottom-up influence seemed more important. The party organization functioned as an arena for competition between opposing views, and the outcome was a greater emphasis on local self-determination. Accordingly, these parties had less of a national policy to implement or enforce locally. The voluntariness principle thus made both top-down coordination and control less relevant. Finally, the Progress Party falls between these extremes – less united than the Centre and Conservative parties, less divided than Labour and the Christian Democrats and apparently with less activity and enthusiasm.

These party differences are not found in earlier studies of multi-level parties in Norway, which focused on the general organizational structure. Formal

Table 1. Summary of party positions and processes.

	Centre and Conservative parties	Labour and Christian Democratic parties	Progress Party
Initial policy (2013)	Conservatives for amalgamations, Centre Party against	For amalgamations	For amalgamations
Internal unity	Relatively united	Divided	Somewhat divided
Attempted bottom-up influence	Less relevant, because of unity	Demands for voluntariness	Demands for voluntariness (weaker)
Top-down coordination	Party organization mobilized to promote policy	Increasingly irrelevant, owing to the voluntariness principle	Generally less activity
Top-down control	Leadership provided advice. Tolerance for opposition	Increasingly irrelevant, owing to the voluntariness principle	Leadership provided advice. Tolerance for opposition
Policy change 2013–2017	No change	Voluntariness principle established at Labour's 2015 congress and by the Christian Democratic leadership in 2017 (confirmed by the 2017 congress)	Demands for referendums abolished by the 2013 congress

organizations are similar, with the partial exception of somewhat more centralization in the Progress Party (Allern and Saglie 2012, 964). Nothing suggests that, for example, the Conservatives and the Centre Party *generally* are governed in a top-down-fashion. Likewise, nothing indicates that they generally are more united. They certainly have their share of internal conflict but on other issues. The difference between parties seems to be an effect of the *degree of party unity* on this *specific issue* and the extent to which party unity allowed the leadership to promote a specific position.

This case study thus illustrates the multi-level dynamics within parties in unitary states where parties dominate local politics. The centralization leads to a strong interdependence between the levels. Much is at stake for both the local and national party levels, and neither can afford to leave decision making and other activities to another level. The local branches need to influence party decisions at the central level because they are affected by them. The central level, in turn, needs cooperation from local branches to implement its policies. This certainly applies to territorial reform but also many other issues – including education, care for the elderly and other welfare services that the municipalities provide.

In any case, we can safely conclude that although the national level is important, focusing on the national level is not sufficient to understand political parties – even in unitary states. Ignoring the influence of local and regional branches can lead to an exaggerated focus on national-level factors and thus misleading conclusions on why parties adopt their policies. The role of local branches should therefore also be explored in a comparative perspective. Is there, for example, any clear difference between unitary and federal states in this respect?

Moreover, the interaction with national-level factors needs to be studied. Is there, for example, more room for influence from below in opposition parties than in government parties (cf. Fabre and Swenden 2013, 349)? The Labour Party is an interesting case in this respect. Influence from below contributed to changes in party policy – but would that have been possible if the party had been in government and committed itself to the amalgamation reform? Our data cannot give the answer to this counterfactual question, but further research on other cases will yield useful information.

The research fields of party politics and regional politics have gradually grown closer to each other. However, a similar rapprochement between party research and local government studies has not taken place. This is unfortunate if we are interested in parties as an arena for civic participation since the municipal level is the primary locus for grass-roots party activity. A stronger focus on the municipal level in party politics could also improve our understanding of the regional party level. The regional level is not only important in its own right but also as a coordinator of bottom-up influence from

local branches and as an instrument for party elites who want to influence local politics.

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Notes

1. Information on the formal organizations are found in the party statutes. Accessed from <https://www.senterpartiet.no/Om%20SP/vedtekter-og-retning-slinjer> (Centre); <https://www.krf.no/partiorganisasjonen/lover/krfs-lover/> (Christian Democrats); <https://hoyre.no/om-hoyre/partiet/> (Conservatives); <https://www.arbeiderpartiet.no/om/vedtekter/> (Labour); <https://www.frp.no/organisasjonen/vedtekter> (Progress). All statutes accessed 11.6.2019.
2. 'Avtale mellom Venstre, Kristelig Folkeparti, Fremskrittspartiet og Høyre', 30 September 2013. Accessed from <https://www.krf.no/globalassets/vedlegg/avtaler/samarbeidsavtalen.pdf>, 19.7.2018.
3. I intended to interview three persons in each of the five parties. However, only two interviews were carried out with the Progress Party (one at the central level and one in a county). At the Labour Party headquarters, two different persons were interviewed.
4. The counties are Vest-Agder and Sogn og Fjordane. These counties were chosen for the sake of coordination with other parts of a larger research project.
5. The questions dealt with both municipal and regional amalgamation, but I focus on municipal reform in this article.
6. *Stortingstidende* (1994–1995), 3629–3638.
7. *Høyres stortingsvalgprogram 1993–1997*, 26. *Høyres stortingsvalgprogram 2001–2005*, 38. *Nye muligheter: Høyres stortingsvalgprogram 2005–2009*, 42. All programmes accessed from <http://www.hoyre.no/politikk/program/partiprogram/>, 23.7.2018.
8. *Vi tar Norge videre. Arbeiderpartiets program 2013–2017*, 66. Accessed from <http://www.nsd.uib.no/polsys/data/parti/partidokumentarkivet/>, 20.7.2018.
9. *KrFs program 2009–2013*, 97. Accessed from <http://www.nsd.uib.no/polsys/data/parti/partidokumentarkivet/>, 24.7.2018.
10. *Kristelig Folkeparti: Politisk program 2013–2017*, 99. Accessed from <https://www.krf.no/politikk/politiske-dokumenter/>, 20.7.2018.
11. *Sterke kommuner. Uttalelse nr 4 fra Arbeiderpartiets landsmøte 2015*. Accessed from https://res.cloudinary.com/arbeiderpartiet/image/upload/v1/ievv_filestore/19638b0c79ce47aea62b2f977d6a81775aeea41bd9d841f88c9690544fa19c3f, 20.7.2018.
12. *Alle skal med. Partiprogram 2017–2021*, 75. Accessed from https://res.cloudinary.com/arbeiderpartiet/image/upload/v1/ievv_filestore/712bd5b874e24958b84c14fbef5b1a98afbfc8ae1e464cac9bcad06f24f2a85f, 20.7.2018.

13. *Nationen*, 22.4.2017. Accessed from <http://www.nationen.no/politikk/ap-landsmotet-sier-nei-til-tvang-i-kommunereformen/>, 20.7.2018.
14. *Bedre tjenester og økt demokrati. Uttalelse fra KrFs landsmøte 2015*. Accessed from <https://www.krf.no/nyheter/nyheter-fra-krf/bedre-tjenester-og-okt-demokrati/>, 20.7.2018.
15. *Stavanger Aftenblad*, 9.5.2015. Accessed from <https://www.aftenbladet.no/lokalt/i/QPnRV/KrF-stotter-tvunget-kommunesammenslaing>, 24.7.2018.
16. *KrF sier nei til å tvangssammenslå kommuner*. Accessed from <https://www.krf.no/nyheter/nyheter-fra-krf/nei-til-a-tvangssammensla-kommuner/>, 20.7.2018.
17. This did not affect the outcome of the vote, since the Conservative, Progress and Liberal parties had a parliamentary majority.
18. *FrP fornyer Norge. Handlingsprogram 2009–2013*, 7. Accessed from <http://www.nsd.uib.no/polsys/data/parti/partidokumentarkivet/>, 23.7.2018.
19. *Fremskrittspartiets handlingsprogram 2013–2017*, 7. Accessed from <http://www.nsd.uib.no/polsys/data/parti/partidokumentarkivet/>, 23.7.2018.
20. *Landsmøteprotokoll – Fremskrittspartiets landsmøte 2017*, 8. For the adopted programme, see *En enklere hverdag. Prinsipp- og handlingsprogram 2017–2021*, 23. Accessed from <https://www.frp.no/hva-vi-mener/prinsipp-og-handlingsprogram>, 23.7.2018.
21. <https://www.nrk.no/nordland/reiser-landet-rundt-for-a-stanse-sammenslaing-av-kommuner-1.12971747>, accessed 23.7.2018. At the time of this interview – before the process had ended – Per Gunnar Stensvaag had held 77 speeches.
22. *Råd om enkelte forhold i behandlingen av kommune- og regionsreformen*. Note from the Progress Party committee on local politics, 11 May 2016.

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