

The Local Party Branch and the Council Party Group: Who Governs?

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Abstract

The relationship between the local party branch organisation and local councillors has been left largely unexplored in the party literature. We explore how this relationship varies within the case of Norway – a multi-party system with large variation in municipal size. Based on a survey of leaders of municipal party branches and local lists, as well as qualitative interviews with branch and list leaders, we analyse the causes of variation regarding two dependent variables: the degree of integration between the party branch and council group and the involvement of party branches in council work. The overall picture is that work in branches and council groups is strongly integrated. However, local branches of left-of-centre parties are likely to be more involved in council work and less likely to be fully integrated with their council groups. The left-of-centre tradition of giving more power to extra-parliamentary organisation seems to prevail.

KEYWORDS

Local democracy, Municipal council, Norway, Party branches, Party organisation

Zusammenfassung

Die Beziehung zwischen lokalen Parteiorganisationen und Gemeinderäten ist in der Parteienliteratur weitgehend unerforscht. Wir untersuchen Variation dieser Beziehung im Fall Norwegens, einem Mehrparteiensystem mit großen Unterschieden in der Gemeindegröße. Basierend auf einer Befragung von Führungskräften kommunaler Parteiverbände und lokaler Listen sowie qualitativen

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Interviews mit Verbands- und Listenführern analysieren wir die Ursachen der Variation hinsichtlich zweier abhängiger Variablen: dem Grad der Integration zwischen Partei und Gemeinderat sowie der Beteiligung der Parteigliederungen in der Gemeinderatsarbeit. Insgesamt ist die Arbeit in den Parteiverbänden und Ratsgruppen stark integriert. Lokale Verbände linksgerichteter Parteien dürften jedoch stärker in die Ratsarbeit eingebunden und weniger vollständig in ihre Ratsfraktionen integriert sein. Die linksgerichtete Tradition, außerparlamentarischen Organisationen mehr Macht zu verleihen, scheint sich durchzusetzen.

Résumé

La relation entre l'organisation locale des partis et les conseillers locaux est restée largement inexplorée dans la littérature du parti. Nous explorons comment cette relation varie dans le cas de la Norvège, un système multipartite avec de grandes variations dans la taille des municipalités. Sur la base d'une enquête auprès des dirigeants de sections municipales de partis et de listes locales, ainsi que d'entretiens qualitatifs avec les dirigeants de sections et de listes, nous analysons les causes de cette variation concernant deux variables dépendantes: le degré d'intégration entre la section du parti et le groupe communal et l'implication des sections du parti dans le travail du conseil. L'analyse montre qu'en général le travail dans les branches et les groupes de conseils est fortement intégré. Cependant, les sections locales des partis de centre-gauche sont susceptibles d'être davantage impliquées dans le travail du conseil et moins susceptibles d'être pleinement intégrées à leurs groupes municipaux. La tradition du centre-gauche consistant à donner plus de pouvoir aux organisations extraparlimentaires semble prévaloir.

Riassunto

Il rapporto tra l'organizzazione locale del partito e i consiglieri locali è rimasto in gran parte inesplorato nella letteratura sui partiti politici. Questo articolo esplora come questo rapporto varia nel caso della Norvegia, un sistema multipartitico con grandi differenze nelle dimensioni dei comuni. Sulla base di un sondaggio condotto tra i leader delle sezioni comunali e delle liste locali, nonché di interviste qualitative con i leader delle sezioni e delle liste, analizziamo le cause di variazione rispetto a due variabili dipendenti: il grado di integrazione tra sezione del partito e gruppo in consiglio comunale e il coinvolgimento delle sezioni del partito nel lavoro dei consigli. Il quadro generale è che il lavoro nelle sezioni e nei gruppi in consiglio

comunale è fortemente integrato. Tuttavia, è probabile che le sezioni locali dei partiti di centro-sinistra siano maggiormente coinvolte nel lavoro dei consigli comunali e abbiano meno probabilità di essere pienamente integrate con i rispettivi gruppi. Sembra quindi prevalere la tradizione del centro-sinistra di dare più potere alle organizzazioni extraparlamentari.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the three organisational ‘faces’ of political parties (Katz & Mair, 1993) – the party on the ground, the party central office, and the party in public office – has received much attention in the party literature. In Katz and Mair’s conceptualisation, the *party central office* refers to the national leadership of the party organisation, whereas the *party in public office* refers to party representatives in parliament and the executive branch.¹ While the latter – in principle – includes local office-holders, Katz and Mair (2002, 2018) focused on office-holders at the national level. The *party on the ground* refers to members and activists.

The aim of this article is to open up the ‘black box’ of the party on the ground, that is, at the local level. From a national perspective, local councillors and local branch leaders can easily be regarded as parts of the party on the ground – they are all local activists. From a local perspective, however, they have clearly separate functions. Katz and Mair (2018) note that regional party organisations reproduce the three faces found at the national level (pp. 71–72). We extend this perspective to the municipal level, and our starting point is that downscaled versions of all three faces are present there. A municipal party branch has its own ‘*central office*’ (i.e., its executive committee) and representatives in *public office* (i.e., the party group in the local council and, if in office, the mayor, deputy mayor, etc.), as well as rank-and-file *members*. We focus on the first two of these. In other words, we investigate horizontal relations at the municipal level, employing concepts from the literature on parties at the national level. Using data from the municipal level enables us to test hypotheses with a larger number of cases than national-level studies allow while keeping several institutional factors constant.

Whereas there is an extensive literature on horizontal relations at the national level, the relationship between the local party branch organisation and the local party in public office has been left largely unexplored (but see Copus & Erlingsson, 2012, 2013; Razin, 2013). There is reason to believe that the relationship between the party organisation and the party in public office may look quite different at the local and national levels. Local politics is less professionalised and, to some extent, more dependent on individuals.

In this article, we explore the relationship between these two local party ‘faces’ in the case of Norway. In the Norwegian context, the municipal branch executive committee and the party group in the municipal council are the main representatives of these two faces. Previous research has shown that in Norway, there is a strong mutual influence between local party organisations and their council groups (Razin, 2013, p. 60). However, less is known about variation *within* a single country. On the one hand, the high level of mutual influence in the Norwegian case could give less room for within-country variation. On the other hand, the country has considerable variation in municipal size and a multi-party system in which parties have emerged at very different points in time and experimented with different forms of party organisation. This should provide a good opportunity to study such variation. We investigate the (variations in) organisational and power structures using a unique data set collected in 2021. The data

¹Katz and Mair (1993) explicitly included elected office-holders in legislative bodies in the term ‘party in public office’ (p. 595), since a narrow focus on governmental bodies would exclude parties in opposition.

comprise a web survey that was sent to all leaders of municipal party branches and local lists represented in Norway's 356 municipal councils as well as qualitative interviews with 19 branch and list leaders in four selected municipalities. While our main focus is on the relationship between the local party executive committee and the party group in the municipal council, the qualitative interviews also provide some information on the involvement of ordinary members.

We analyse the causes of variation regarding two dependent variables: 1) whether the party branch and its municipal council group are *fully integrated* and 2) *the degree of involvement* of the party branch in the activities of the council group.

Degree of involvement ranges from complete autonomy to high branch involvement, where the party branch makes major local decisions while the council group implements party policies. The degree of involvement reflects power distribution between these two organs. However, if the executive committee and council group are fully integrated – with the same people in both – this distinction does not exist in practice; hence, we need a binary variable (full integration) to capture cases where it does not make sense to measure the relationship between separate organs. We thus rely on two different dependent variables in our investigation of hypotheses.

We test hypotheses on three main explanatory variables: party, municipal size, and membership size. Regarding municipal and membership size, we assume that large parties and parties in large municipalities have more members to fill the various offices. This situation may facilitate a stronger division of labour within the local units and a stronger separation between the two 'faces'. Regarding party, left-of-centre parties have traditionally given more power to the extra-parliamentary organisation, following the mass party origins of the Labour Party.

In the first sections of the paper, we discuss our theoretical starting points, present our hypotheses, elaborate on the case of Norway, and describe our data. To give an overview of the relationship between the party faces at the local level in Norway, we then turn to descriptive analyses of survey data combined with insights from the qualitative interviews. Next, we carry out multivariate analyses to test our hypotheses. The final section sums up the main results and discusses the democratic implications of the findings.

PARTY ORGANISATIONAL FACES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL: INVOLVEMENT AND INTEGRATION

In this section, we discuss our theoretical starting points and present our hypotheses. We start out from the fact that parties are complex entities. They have hierarchical structures linking party organisational units at multiple levels, such as national, regional, and municipal, and can be even more decentralised with wards, precinct, within-municipal districts, etc. At each level in the hierarchy there are usually several party units, depending on the party, for example, a youth branch and special organisations for students, pensioners, or various occupational groups. For larger parties, there are elected representatives in local and regional councils, national parliaments, and sometimes in government or as supporting parties in parliament. Parties comprise active and passive members and are headed by a party leadership that itself may be divided into several offices (e.g., a general secretary and a chair of the parliamentary group).

To examine this variation, the analytical distinction between the party in office, the party as an organisation, and the party in the electorate is instructive (Key, 1964; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002). However, in a European context with mass membership, Katz and Mair's (1993) distinction between the three organisational faces – the party in public office, the party central office, and the party on the ground – is more useful for our purpose, since it emphasises the role of the members rather than party voters (who are beyond the scope of this article). As we discuss in the following paragraphs, much of the comparative research on party organisations in Western democracies, which generally focuses on the national level, revolves around the relationship between these three faces.

First, party organisations tend to become structurally similar over time (Katz & Mair, 1994; Krouwel, 2006). However, they started out quite differently. Duverger (1959) described the difference between parties of parliamentary origin, where the parliamentary group became the main centre of power, and parties of extra-parliamentary origins, where the party organisation became more influential. Socialist parties were often examples of the latter type; they were labour-intensive rather than capital-intensive (Strøm, 1990). Although parties converged toward the so-called mass party model in the mid-20th century (Duverger, 1959), the extent to which they actually developed mass memberships varied considerably (Scarrow, 2002). More capital-intensive, media-centric ‘catch-all’ campaigning in enlarged electorates and membership decline may have moved parties farther away from the mythic mass membership model (Kirchheimer, 1966; Epstein, 1967; van Biezen et al., 2012; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). In terms of the relationship between the party faces, this has been described as ‘the ascendancy of the party in public office’ (e.g., Katz & Mair, 2002, 2018, ch. 3).

Second, following from the first point, party organisations change over time, either in the short run to improve their electoral prospects (Kirchheimer, 1966) or in a long-term perspective to improve their ability to survive gradual but unavoidable changes in their environment (Duverger, 1959; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Again, we should expect considerable empirical variation; some works emphasise that parties are rather conservative institutions that are not amenable to frequent or dramatic change (Panebianco, 1988; Harmel & Janda, 1994; Mair, 1997).

Third, parties may bear the imprint of their formation even decades later (Panebianco, 1988). Left-of-centre parties may still be more (at least ideologically) committed to the mass party model, while green parties may be more committed to some form of decentralised, participatory, intra-party democracy (Poguntke, 1993). By contrast, far-right parties – the other main addition to Western post-war party systems – have historically been characterised by having under-institutionalised, leader-centric party organisations (Art, 2011; Harmel et al., 2018). Finally, parties usually reflect the specific systemic structure of the polities they operate within (Katz & Kolodny, 1994; Deschouwer, 2006).

How these trends have influenced local party organisations is less clear. As pointed out by Copus and Erlingsson (2012, 2013), little research has been done on local party organisations and political parties in local government. Their study of England and Sweden, however, indicates that local party power is concentrated in the hands of a small elite of councillors at the expense of individual councillors as well as ordinary party members (Copus & Erlingsson, 2013) or, in other words, that ‘the ascendancy of the party in public office’ also takes place at the local level. Copus and Erlingsson do not, however, explore the role of the branch executive committee. Furthermore, comparative studies have found considerable cross-national variation in the relationship between local councillors and their party branches (Razin, 2013). Moreover, local party organisations are not necessarily structurally uniform; rather, they can be expected to organise themselves and their activities in different ways and be shaped by factors outside their own control (Selle & Svåsand, 1983).

Bringing in the municipal level makes organisational size an interesting variable. The literature on party organisations describes a number of potential effects of size, usually measured as membership numbers. Size is said to influence variables such as internal cohesion, participation and mobilisation of members, and bureaucratisation (Panebianco, 1988, pp. 186–190). For our purpose, organisational complexity is most important: an increase in membership may require a greater division of labour. However, both Panebianco (1988, pp. 189–190) and Tan (1997) warn against assuming a simple causal relationship between size and organisational complexity. For example, a decline in membership does not necessarily mean that the organisation becomes less complex, with less division of labour.

Panebianco and Tan studied party organisations at the national level, but Panebianco (1988) also mentions the possibility that there may be a threshold effect: increasing membership may

require a greater division of labour up to a certain point (p. 189). That is especially relevant for municipal party branches, which are often small in terms of members. Panebianco (1988) reminds us that the environment in which a party branch operates is also important for how an organisation works (ch. 11). Therefore, we expect municipal size to matter in addition to the size of the local party organisation.

Hypotheses

Our starting point is the literature on the faces of party organisations, which describes the relationship between the party central office and the party in public office at the national level. The question is then what the corresponding relationship at the local level – between local party branches and council groups – looks like.

In our study, we distinguish between two dimensions in the relationship between party branches and council groups: *integration* and degree of branch *involvement*. These two dimensions serve as our dependent variables. We can regard the involvement of the party branch in the work of the council group as a scale that ranges from complete autonomy for the council group on the one hand to a high level of branch involvement on the other. The latter would mean that the party branch took all major decisions on local matters and that the role of the council group was to implement party decisions. The degree of involvement thus describes the distribution of power between the two organs. However, this distinction assumes that there is, in fact, a differentiation between the executive committee and the council group. If these organs are completely integrated in practice (i.e., the same people sit in both organs), the distinction becomes purely theoretical.

Regarding independent variables, we focus on *party family* and organisational size. Furthermore, we distinguish between two aspects of size – *municipal size* and *party branch size* – as both the size of the local branch itself and the environment in which it operates may have an impact.

The basis for our hypotheses on *party family* is that social democratic parties were usually founded as mass parties and traditionally gave more power to their extra-parliamentary organisation, as described by Duverger (1959). This model may also be an ideal for newer socialist parties. Even though party organisations have converged over time, we – following Panebianco (1988) – assume that party origins still matter. Furthermore, we expect the relationship between the party branch and the council group within a specific party to reflect the corresponding relationship at the national level. This expectation builds on the assumption that all organisational units of a party – regardless of administrative level – share a common party culture. Moreover, the national party organisations can influence how their local branches organise by means of party statutes and guidelines for local branches (see Copus, 1999, for the British case).

Accordingly, we assume that the traditional emphasis on maintaining an extra-parliamentary organisation in socialist and social democratic parties prevents the full *integration* of council groups and party branches. We also assume that their labour-intensive traditions and emphasis on extra-parliamentary work is associated with greater party branch *involvement* in municipal council work. Hence, we formulate our first hypotheses as follows:

H1A. *Local left-of-centre parties are less likely than other local parties and lists to be fully integrated across their local units.*

H1B. *Local left-of-centre parties are more likely than other local parties and lists to be more involved in the activities of their municipal council groups.*

Our hypotheses on organisational size are based on the fact that local politics is quite different from that at the national level. Local politics is less professionalised and usually less ideological and less party-centred. Moreover, the same factors separate small municipalities (in terms of population) from larger ones (see, e.g., Kjær & Elklit, 2010). Politics in large municipalities is more similar to politics at the national level.

For our purpose, the most important difference regarding organisational size concerns organisational capabilities. Whereas the party central office and parliamentary party group have considerable resources at their disposal, including full-time party employees, local politics is largely carried out as voluntary work and depends much more on the commitment of individuals. This is especially the case in small municipalities and small party branches.

Regarding *municipal size*, we assume that parties in large municipalities will have more members and a more specialised organisational structure and thus a greater division of labour within the local units. This will impact both our dependent variables and result in both a separation between the two ‘faces’ (full integration is less likely) and a need to coordinate activities across units (more involvement). Moreover, local government may be more complex in large municipalities (in terms of population), which further increases the need for coordination. Hence, our next hypotheses are formulated as follows:

H2A. *Local parties and lists in large municipalities are less likely than local parties and lists in smaller municipalities to be fully integrated across their local units.*

H2B. *Local parties and lists in large municipalities are likely to be more involved than local parties and lists in smaller municipalities in the activities of their municipal council groups.*

Regarding *membership size*, we should also test the argument on membership size and specialisation directly, since small parties are also present in large municipalities. We assume that the more members a party has, the greater the capacity and ability – and perhaps desire – to practise a stronger division of labour within their local units. Likewise, the need for coordination will be stronger, leading to the following hypotheses:

H3A. *Local parties and lists with the largest memberships are less likely than local parties and lists with smaller memberships to be fully integrated across local units.*

H3B. *Local parties and lists with the largest memberships are likely to be more involved than local parties and lists with smaller memberships in the activities of their municipal council groups.*

THE CASE OF NORWAY

In a comparative perspective, the mutual influence between local party organisations and their local council groups is strong in Norway. In Razin's (2013) survey of local councillors in 16 (mostly European) countries, 84 percent of the Norwegian respondents said that the local party organisation had much influence over the council group's decisions, whereas 86 percent agreed that there was much influence in the opposite direction (p. 60). Such high levels of mutual influence were also found in Spain and Sweden. In contrast, the corresponding figures for France, Greece, and Israel were between 30 and 50 percent. Countries like the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Germany occupied a middle position. However, even though we can assume a relatively high level of integration and influence in Norway, there may still be variation between parties and municipalities, as we explain below.

Parties

Nine nationwide parties (together with a small regional party) are represented in Norway's national parliament. This multi-party system is, to a greater or lesser extent, reflected at the local level. There is large variation in municipal size, resulting in considerable variation between the local party systems. Different combinations of the nine parties, together with minor parties and non-partisan local lists, make up the different municipal party systems.

Norwegian parties have different origins. Some parties, such as the Conservatives and the Liberals, started out as parliamentary party groups before they built organisations. Others, such as the Labour Party, had extra-parliamentary origins. This led to different intra-party power configurations, with a powerful party organisation in the Labour Party and powerful MPs in the Conservative Party. However, the party organisations gradually became more standardised, resembling the Labour Party's organisational structure, in line with Duverger's (1959) 'contagion from the Left' (p. xxvii). New parties have started out with alternative organisational models. The Socialist Left Party originally aimed for a participatory, flat structure, whereas the Progress Party's founder strongly opposed formal structures outside of the parliamentary party group. Both these parties gradually adapted to the standard organisational structure (Svåsand, 1994). More recently, the Green Party replaced dual leadership (two spokespersons) with a single party leader. The outcome of these adaptations is that Norwegian parties today basically share the same organisational structure, with minor variations (Allern et al., 2016, pp. 39–48). The most radical organisational changes have perhaps taken place in the right-wing populist Progress Party, which discarded the founder's anti-party views and adopted the mass party organisational model and its strong extra-parliamentary structure to perhaps a greater extent than any other Norwegian party (Jupskås, 2016; Harmel et al., 2018).

Municipalities and Party Branches

Norway had 356 municipalities at the time of the survey. Their size varies considerably, from 700,000 to around 200 inhabitants. In most Norwegian municipalities, mayors are the only full-time local politicians. Some of the largest cities are exceptions, with larger political staffs employed by the parties and/or the municipality.

Proportional representation is used for elections at all levels in the Norwegian political system. In most Norwegian municipalities, the municipal council elects an executive committee by proportional representation. This corresponds to a consensual model of democracy, but more or less informal coalitions are, in many cases, built to elect a mayor and implement policies. In contrast, Norway's three largest cities, Oslo, Bergen, and (from 2024) Trondheim, have chosen a parliamentary system of government.

Except for the few cases of parliamentary rule, there is no separate political executive branch in Norwegian municipalities. In the non-parliamentary municipalities, a (non-elected) chief executive is the head of the administration. The mayor is also the leader of the municipal council and thus does not operate separately from it. This means that the local 'party in public office' in almost all Norwegian municipalities is the party group in the municipal council, including the mayor. All municipal councils have groups of representatives from parties and/or local lists. Some of those groups have only a single member but are still regarded as 'groups'.

The nine largest national parties also dominate local politics (Saglie & Seggaard, 2022, p. 56), and they have developed a comprehensive network of local branches. The old parties generally manage to maintain their municipal branches, even when they experience decline. Some new parties, such as the Greens, are establishing branches and running candidates in an increasing number of municipalities (Christensen et al., 2021, p. 71). Smaller parties, however, tend not to have branches in the smallest municipalities. Local non-partisan lists and minor parties ran

candidates in about half the municipalities in the 2019 local elections and won 7.5 percent of the aggregate vote (Saglie & Seggaard, 2022, p. 56).

The organisational structure of most municipal party branches is simple: an executive committee is elected by the annual meeting. Candidate selection for local elections is prepared by a separate candidate selection committee (or by the executive committee), which proposes a candidate list. The final decision on the candidate list is made by the members through a specific candidate selection meeting or a membership meeting. In large municipal branches (i.e., large parties in large municipalities), the structure is more complex. There may be several sub-municipal party branches, representing different neighbourhoods or special interests. If there are many sub-municipal branches, the branches elect delegates to a council of representatives. In these cases, decisions on matters such as candidate selection can be taken by the council of representatives rather than by the members. Local non-partisan lists work in much the same way as branches of national parties, with membership, meetings, and a local council group, except that they are the sole units of their organisations and thus lack ties to units at the regional and national levels (Saglie et al., 2023a).

While the annual meeting may be the supreme organ, there are – in practice – two bodies that handle most of the day-to-day party business in municipal party branches: the executive committee and the party group in the municipal council. There is little research on the relationship between these two bodies at the local level, but it is reasonable to assume that the balance of power at the local level reflects party traditions and practices at the national level. In other words, if the parliamentary party group plays a more important role than the national executive committee, there is reason to believe that this is also the case locally.

In their 1957 community study of Norwegian parties, Valen and Katz (1964) listed three functions of the local party organisation: enabling ordinary party members to participate in intra-party decision-making, organising local election campaigns, and ‘to some extent’ participating in local government decision-making (p. 63). Their empirical analyses made it clear, however, that important municipal council issues were often discussed in the party branch before the council meeting, especially in the Labour Party (pp. 80–83).

Later studies emphasised the importance of the municipal council agenda for party branch activity. Offerdal and Ringkjøb (2002) found that the level of activity in local branches was rather low but that the council group had a prominent role. Meetings in the municipal council party group could simultaneously function as executive committee meetings or members' meetings. On the positive side, this gave council members valuable input and ordinary party members an opportunity to influence policy decisions. On the negative side, council work could displace other local party activities.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA

The unique data used in this study comprise a quantitative web survey ($N=827$) that was sent to all leaders of municipal party branches and local lists represented in all 356 Norwegian municipal councils after the 2019 election as well as qualitative interviews with 19 branch and list leaders in four selected municipalities (Saglie et al., 2022; Saglie et al., 2023b).² Thus, all contacted respondents and interviewees were the elected chairs of their municipal party branches or lists. They may also – but not necessarily – be municipal councillors. The qualitative and quantitative data were both collected during the winter and spring of 2021. The web survey and interviews cover the same topics but were designed to complement each other: the questions in the web

²This article is a part of a larger project. The survey and interviews therefore include many questions on other themes that are beyond the scope of this article. The data collection has been approved by the Data Protection Official for Research under the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt).

survey are relatively general and provide a basis for statistical analyses, while the qualitative interviews provide in-depth information about both facts and leaders' experiences and attitudes.

The web survey was followed up with three reminders (emails) and resulted in a response rate of 36.3 percent (827/2278). If we compare the local parties and lists that responded to the survey with the entire population, the answers can be considered fairly representative of all municipal parties and local lists that were represented in Norwegian municipal councils regarding municipal size and geography. However, the branches of national parties are somewhat overrepresented compared to local lists, but this is as expected given that surveys of organisations generally receive the most responses among those with the most administrative capacity. We do not consider this overrepresentation to affect our research design since local lists are thoroughly covered by both the survey responses and in the interviews.

The qualitative interviews with leaders of local lists and parties were carried out in four case municipalities. These were selected to ensure variation regarding size, geography, and the mayor's party as well as whether municipal amalgamation had taken place recently. In addition, municipalities with local non-partisan lists, minor parties, and parliamentary rule were included. Based on these criteria, we selected Bergen, Hattfjelldal, Heim, and Sandefjord. In total, 30 parties and lists were represented in the councils of these four municipalities. We selected 20 of these and obtained interviews in 19 of them.

The interviews were conducted over the phone or via Zoom as semi-structured conversations. In advance of the interviews, the informants received both an interview guide and written information about the project's purpose and focus and information about how their privacy would be safeguarded. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. The informants were given a transcript of the interview to review so that any mistakes and misunderstandings could be corrected.

In the analysis, quotations from the qualitative interviews are used illustratively to shed light on what lies behind the results of the descriptive quantitative analysis. To ensure relevant and valid information, the interview guide was partly prepared on the basis of the project's theoretically grounded research questions in parallel with the quantitative questionnaire. This process ensured a uniform structure in the semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2008, p. 196), which also formed the basis for the subsequent analysis and selection of illustrative quotes.³ Both the interviews themselves and analysis of the qualitative data material were carried out by several of the authors in order to strengthen the study's reliability.

In the following, we use a mixed methods design to thoroughly analyse the relationship we are interested in, namely, that between the party branch and the council group. We first provide the survey answers in a stand-alone descriptive analysis. The findings of this analysis are then discussed in the light of the qualitative material provided by the interviews. Second, we present the multivariate analysis: the operationalisations of the variables, the method used, and the results that follow from this.

THE PARTY BRANCH–COUNCIL GROUP RELATIONSHIP: DESCRIPTIVE AND QUALITATIVE ANALYSES

In this section, we draw an overall picture of the relationship between the party branch and the council group through a descriptive analysis of survey data combined with insights from the qualitative interviews. Through the conversations with local party leaders in the case municipalities, it became clear that it is common to have institutionalised arrangements for mutual

³The semi-structured interview guide included many different questions related to local parties, their organisation, and activities. In this article, we primarily use the informants' answers to the question 'How and to what extent is the party (the local branch) involved in the activities of the municipal council group?.'

TABLE 1 The involvement of the local party/list in the activities of the municipal council group. Percent.

Little involved – the municipal council group governs itself entirely or largely	8
Partly involved	26
Much involved	40
Completely involved – the municipal council group clears everything it does with the municipal party branch/list	9
Impossible to separate; the same people are in the two groups	17
<i>N (=100%)</i>	827

Question: To what extent is the local party/list involved in the activities of the municipal council group?

TABLE 2 Collaboration between the party branch and the municipal council group. Percent.

The municipal party branch/list provides training to municipal council representatives	19
Continuous dialogue on political issues	90
The municipal party branch/list provides administrative/practical help to the municipal council group	28
<i>N (=100%)</i>	772

Question: Do the municipal party branch/list and the municipal council group collaborate in any of the following ways? You can give more than one answer.

representation at the meetings of the council group and the board of the local party, respectively. Such institutionalised arrangements show that the work of the two bodies is coordinated, but they do not reveal where the greatest political influence lies.

In our web survey, we designed a question that measured the involvement dimension but also included complete integration as an option (Table 1). The results show that few local party leaders placed their party at the extremes of the involvement scale. Most of them believed that the party branch was much (40%) or partly (26%) involved in the work of the municipal council group. In a substantial number of local branches, however, we found full integration. Seventeen percent of the local leaders stated that it can be difficult to separate the two groups because they are (to some extent) made up of the same people. This was especially the case in the smallest municipalities and almost never in the largest municipalities (analysis not shown).

The close interaction and mutual cooperation are also reflected in the fact that 90% of the local leaders believed that there was ‘continuous dialogue on political matters’ between the party and the municipal council group (Table 2). In a minority of cases, the party branches also provided training and administrative support for the municipal council group.

The local party leaders in the four case municipalities explained – and thereby confirmed – how the close integration between the party and the council group is part of their everyday life in municipal politics. However, the ongoing dialogue on political matters can be carried out in many ways. Many local council groups are small, perhaps consisting of just one person. In such cases, it is particularly important to discuss matters on the council agenda in an extended group meeting before the council meeting. In some cases, party bodies can indeed decide what the municipal council representative should do.

In larger municipalities and parties, the council of representatives (i.e., an assembly of delegates from a party's sub-municipal branches) can play a role in important matters, as this quote shows:

When there are big and heavy issues that attract a lot of attention, in important policy areas [...], then it is often dealt with by the council of representatives. And of course, to a certain extent, it binds the city council group in its further work, although we probably try not to tie everything up.

(Party branch chair and municipal councillor)

In smaller municipalities, where the number of party members is limited, member meetings are a tool for getting wider involvement in large and important municipal council issues. However, there are limits on how far this member involvement can be extended:

There are also issues that are slightly outside of what we have an opinion about [in the party programme], and where we feel there is a need to involve the party organisation. Then, in an ideal world, we organise member meetings on those types of issues. There, members can participate, contribute to the discussion, and have their say. Then we arrive at decisions that way. It is up to us, who are closest to the situation, to figure out when we involve the party and when we feel that we have our backs covered by the programme. That's the way it has to be, because you can't exaggerate the involvement either, and we can't involve people in every little matter because then people get bored.

(Party branch chair and municipal councillor)

While involvement from the members or the council of representatives is limited to major matters, the executive committee can be involved as a matter of routine. Our interviewees, however, had different views on the division of labour between the council group and the executive committee. In some branches, there was a clear division: the executive committee should handle organisational matters, while the council group was responsible for policy-making. The division was less clear-cut in other branches. A municipal party leader took the executive committee's responsibility for organisational matters as a starting point but added that this was impracticable, because the executive committee members should have the opportunity to engage in policy issues. Even if they did not have the right to vote in the council group, they should be able to discuss council matters with the councillors:

People are involved in politics, not only to organise things, but also because they are interested in politics. [...] [When they are involved in council work,] the executive committee feel that they are not completely insignificant, because it is easy to feel that way in executive committees. Saying that 'we shall be manning stands, handing out coffee and buns and things like that. We shall not do politics' – but [politics] is what we shall do, very much so!

(Party branch chair and former municipal councillor)

The intention and ambition to make a clear division of work and responsibility is furthermore complicated by the personnel overlap, that is, integration:

Then it cannot be avoided that some of the executive committee members are also members of the municipal council group. We are well represented at the municipal council group's meetings, and we have good dialogue and cooperation between the municipal council group and the board – on courses, obtaining speakers, and the like. It's almost as if we were one. We should have been one – the municipal council group and the local party executive committee. They should have been one body, but by statute they are two.

(Party branch chair and former municipal councillor)

Summing up, our descriptive and qualitative analyses indicate some variation in the party branch–council group relationship with regard to how work and activities are organised and divided between the two groups. However, the general picture is that the work in the two local party 'faces' is strongly integrated. The municipal council group is not autonomous, and it is involved in continuous dialogue with the party branch, but it also has considerable latitude, especially in

less important issues. In some cases, it is difficult to make a distinction, since the same individuals make up both the local executive committee and the local council party group.

THE DIMENSIONS OF INTEGRATION AND INVOLVEMENT: MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

In the following, we present the operationalisations of our dependent and independent variables, the choice of regression models, and the results of our logistic regression analyses that, taken together, investigate our six hypotheses. See [Table A1](#) in the Online Appendix for the descriptive statistics of all the variables included in our analyses.

Operationalisations of Variables

We use two different dependent variables to measure how left-of-centre parties, large municipalities, and large membership bases impact the party branch–council group relationship. We rely upon the variation in the answers to the survey question ‘To what extent is the local party/list involved in the activities of the municipal council group?’, as presented in [Table 1](#),⁴ and look at two different sides of the party branch–council group relationship. While the first binary dependent variable measures whether the two party faces are fully integrated or not, the second measures the degree of involvement by the party branch in the activities of the municipal council group. The second measure nuances the first one (i.e., fully integrated) by zooming in on the local parties that do not report being fully integrated and their degree of involvement in council work. The first measure (i.e., fully integrated) is used to test H1A, H2A, and H3A, while the second measure (i.e., degree of involvement) is used to test H1B, H2B, and H3B.

Our first dependent variable, *fully integrated*, is coded 1 if the local party/list answered that the local branch and the council group are de facto impossible to separate. The rest of the categories are coded 0, since the degree of involvement varies, and they are not fully integrated but have separate ‘modus operandi’.

Our second dependent variable, *degree of involvement*, utilises all the variation in the answer alternatives reported in [Table 1](#) except for the alternative ‘impossible to separate’, that is, little involved, partly involved, much involved, and completely involved. The variable is thus measured on an ordinal scale (from 0 to 3). Hence, the local parties that reported being fully integrated are removed from the analyses when this ordinal measure is used as the dependent variable.

We include three independent variables and a set of control variables in our analyses. Our three independent variables, *left-of-centre party*, *municipal size*, and *large membership base*, are measured as follows. *Left-of-centre party* is coded 1 if the local party branch belongs to the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party, or the Red Party. Other local party branches and lists are coded 0. In the Online Appendix (see [Table A2](#)), we nuance the operationalisation of party type by investigating alternative specifications of this variable. The results show that comparing left-of-centre parties to other parties makes sense as the parties included in the ‘other parties’ category are all, on their own, more likely to be fully integrated across party faces than left-of-centre parties.

⁴The survey question on collaboration presented in [Table 2](#) could be an alternative dependent variable in our analysis, but an additive index of the three collaborative items correlates only 0.16 (0.13 if the observations that are fully integrated are omitted) with the local branch being *highly involved* (much and completely involved) in council group activities. This shows that [Table 1](#) (involvement) is something different from [Table 2](#) (collaboration). Still, analyses (not shown) show that if there is greater collaboration between the two party faces, the local branch is also more involved in council group activities.

Municipal size is a continuous variable measuring the number of inhabitants residing in each municipality. This information is taken from the databases of Statistics Norway for the year 2021.⁵ The variable ranges from approximately 200 to 700,000 and the majority of the Norwegian municipalities (71 percent) have 20,000 or fewer inhabitants. Due to a skewed distribution, we thus use the log of this variable in the subsequent regression analyses. *Large membership* is based on an item included in the survey administered to the local parties/lists and is coded 1 if the party/local list has 100 members or more and 0 if not. The correlation between *municipal size* and *large membership* is approximately .43, which shows that, in general, parties in larger municipalities unsurprisingly have more members than those in smaller municipalities. However, the correlation is moderate and indicates that party size also varies in larger municipalities.

Furthermore, we control for four variables that can influence the relationships that we seek to investigate. First, we control for whether the local party/list is in opposition or not in the respective municipality. This is based on the answers to a survey item that enquires about this matter in particular. Second, we control for whether the municipality was part of a merger in the municipal reform enacted in the period 2017–2020. Third, we control for whether the mayor belongs to the party/list or not. Note that the correlation between *opposition party* and *mayor's party* is moderate (−0.41), which illustrates one crucial point about Norwegian politics, namely, that municipal multi-party governing coalitions are frequent. All these three control variables tap into aspects of different needs for coordination. Being the mayor's party, being in office, or being part of a merger may increase the need for coordination and thus the degree of party branch involvement in the work of the council group. The need for increased coordination when local parties are in office is supported by, amongst others, Leirset (2020), who finds that in-office parties have more meetings than opposition parties in Norwegian municipalities.

Finally, we control for whether the local party/list reports in the survey that the local party finances are poor or not. If the party's finances are worrisome, it can be an incentive for tighter control (and thus more involvement) across units (party faces).

Method of Analysis

Due to the categorical and binary nature of the dependent variables, we employ logistic regression. The model diagnostics look good and indicate that the models are a good fit. The full model (Model 5 in Table 3) correctly classifies 83 percent of the actual outcomes of full integration. In terms of the receiving operator characteristic (ROC) curve, the area under the curve is 0.6, indicating that the model has some predictive power. There are no particularly strong influential observations or outliers. Two relevant and frequently used quantities that can be used to investigate individual variables for possible strong contributions to (near) multicollinearity, variance inflation factors (VIFs) and tolerance indices (TIs), show values clearly below the defined problematic thresholds of >10 and <0.1, respectively (see, e.g., Marcoulides & Raykov (2019)). The VIFs are between 1.01 and 1.43, and the TIs are between 0.70 and 0.99. There is thus no evidence of multicollinearity according to these tests.

To account for interdependence within the parties/lists nested in the same municipality, we cluster the standard errors at the municipal level. Multilevel models could be an alternative to account for the hierarchical data structure. However, due to our research design and variables of interest as well as a low number of level-1 units (parties/lists) per level-2 unit (municipalities), clustered standard errors offer a better approach here. Note that in the ordered logistic regression models testing H4–6, the parallel lines assumption (also called the proportional odds assumption) is not violated. This indicates that the dependent variable, degree of involvement,

⁵Numbers retrieved from: <https://www.ssb.no/statbank/table/07459/>.

can be modelled on an ordinal scale (Long & Freese, 2014). Thus, the correlations between dependent and independent variables do not change for the categories of the dependent variable.

Regression Analyses

Table 3 and Table 4 show the results. In sum, we find support for all three hypotheses concerning *full integration*. For the hypotheses on *degree of involvement*, only H1B (left-of-centre parties) holds up in the bivariate and multivariate analyses. While left-of-centre parties, parties in large municipalities, and parties with a large membership are less likely to be fully integrated across party faces, left-of-centre parties are likely to be more involved in the activities of their municipal council groups.

Table 3 reports the results for our first strand of models investigating the hypotheses concerning the full integration of party faces across units. We see that the hypotheses are supported in the bivariate analyses (Models 1–3) as well as in the model including all three independent variables (Model 4). Left-of-centre parties (H1A), parties in large municipalities (H2A), and parties with large memberships (H3A) are less likely to be fully integrated. The same applies to the full model (Model 5). Regarding controls, *merged municipality* in Table 3 is negatively and significantly associated with the full integration of party faces. The other control variables are not significant.

TABLE 3 Logistic regression analysis with full integration as dependent variable^a.

	(1) Full integration	(2) Full integration	(3) Full integration	(4) Full integration	(5) Full integration
Left-of-centre party	−0.81*** (0.21)			−0.82*** (0.21)	−0.79*** (0.23)
ln(Municipal size)		−0.32*** (0.07)		−0.28*** (0.08)	−0.22** (0.08)
Large memberships			−1.33*** (0.31)	−0.86** (0.33)	−0.79* (0.33)
Opposition party					0.28 (0.20)
Merged municipality					−0.71* (0.29)
Mayor's party					−0.04 (0.31)
Poor party finances					0.10 (0.23)
Constant	−1.32*** (0.10)	1.37* (0.64)	−1.36*** (0.10)	1.34+ (0.71)	0.72 (0.74)
Number of cases	827	827	827	827	824
AIC	754	750	746	728	727
BIC	763	760	756	747	765

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Standard errors clustered by municipality.

^aCoded as 1 if impossible to separate activities of local party/list from activities of municipal council group; otherwise, coded 0.

TABLE 4 Ordered logistic regression analysis with degree of involvement (little, partly, much, and completely involved) as dependent variable^a.

	(1) Degree of involvement	(2) Degree of involvement	(3) Degree of involvement	(4) Degree of involvement	(5) Degree of involvement
Left-of-centre party	0.30* (0.14)			0.33* (0.14)	0.32* (0.16)
(ln)Municipal size		0.04 (0.07)		0.08 (0.08)	0.09 (0.08)
Large memberships			0.03 (0.13)	-0.12 (0.16)	-0.13 (0.18)
Opposition party					-0.07 (0.16)
Merged municipality					-0.12 (0.18)
Mayor's party					0.03 (0.23)
Poor party finances					0.20 (0.21)
Cut point 1	-2.20*** (0.15)	-1.89** (0.65)	-2.30*** (0.15)	-1.50* (0.72)	-1.37+ (0.74)
Cut point 2	-0.28** (0.10)	0.02 (0.63)	-0.39*** (0.09)	0.42 (0.71)	0.55 (0.74)
Cut point 3	2.19*** (0.13)	2.48*** (0.65)	2.07*** (0.13)	2.89*** (0.73)	3.02*** (0.76)
Number of cases	683	683	683	683	680
AIC	1614	1617	1618	1616	1617
BIC	1632	1635	1636	1643	1662

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Standard errors clustered by municipality.

^aObservations that are fully integrated across units are removed from this analysis.

In our investigation of our second dependent variable in Table 4, we employ an ordered logistic regression model with *degree of involvement* (little, partly, much, and completely involved) as the dependent variable.⁶ Parties that report being fully integrated across units are removed from this analysis.

In this analysis, none of the controls are significant, and only H1B (local left-of-centre parties are likely to be more involved in the activities of their municipal council groups) finds support. The expected positive association between left-of-centre party and degree of involvement is robust across models. However, parties in large municipalities (H2B) and parties with large membership bases (H3B) are *not* more likely to have local branches that are more involved in the activities of their municipal council groups than parties in smaller municipalities and parties with fewer members.

⁶Note that the cut points in Table 4 are the expected ratios of cases across the cut points in the distribution of the dependent variable when all independent variables are zero (Long & Freese, 2014).

We can look further into the impact of left-of-centre parties on our two dependent variables. In Model 5 in Table 3, the predicted probability of being *fully integrated* is reduced from 0.19 to 0.1 if we compare left-of-centre parties (H1A) to other parties and when the other variables are kept at their mean. Similarly, in Model 5 in Table 4, the predicted probability of being little and partly involved decreases if the party in question is left of centre whereas the predicted probability of being much and completely involved increases if the party is left of centre. This illustrates how the probabilities of membership of each of the four categories of *involvement* change as we vary *left-of-centre* parties and hold the other variables at their means. The predicted probability of being much involved, in particular, increases from 0.47 to 0.51 if the party is left of centre.

While the change in predicted probability is small, the finding is robust across specifications in Table 4. Furthermore, we find positive and significant interaction effects between left-of-centre parties and municipality size and left-of-centre parties and party size on the dependent variable (see Table A3 in the Online Appendix).⁷ Here we see that when parties are left of centre, parties in larger municipalities are associated with greater involvement in municipal council work. Moreover, when parties are left of centre, larger memberships are associated with greater involvement in the activities of the municipal council groups. This means that, with regards to our two size-related aspects (municipal size and party size), greater size results in more party branch–council work involvement but only for left-of-centre parties.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have studied the local organisational and power structures of political parties – more specifically, the relationship between the local party branch organisation and the local party in public office. This is an almost neglected research issue, as most research focuses on the three ‘faces’ of political parties: on the ground, the national central office, and in public office at the national level. The fact that the party on the ground also has different ‘faces’ has received little attention. More concretely, we have investigated two dimensions of this relationship: branch *integration* and *involvement at the local level*.

Our paper makes an original contribution by combining research on political parties and local democracy. By applying the party organisation literature at the local level, we show that organisational differences between the parties’ ‘faces’, to a greater or lesser extent, are also present locally. At the same time, the local level makes it possible to test hypotheses in the party organisation literature with a larger number of cases than is possible at the national level while keeping several institutional factors constant.

Copus and Erlingsson (2013) conclude that ‘the parties’ council groups are detached from party organisation and grass-root party members’ (p. 64). We find the opposite: the overall finding that emerges from our descriptive analysis and qualitative interviews is that work in the local party branch organisation and the local party in public office is quite strongly integrated. This may be interpreted as a result of the norm of party discipline – at the expense of the discretion of the (individual) representatives. However, our interviews also point to other explanations. First, a division of labour between the two party organs may be perceived as unsatisfactory by the party activists themselves, if this division means that the councillors do the political work while the local executive committee is left with administrative and organisational tasks. Second, a division of labour requires a certain number of active party members. Some branches simply do not have enough active members.

⁷Note that we do not find any other significant interactions between our three substantial variables and the dependent variables included in Table 3 and Table 4.

The multivariate analyses shed light on how this relationship varies depending on party, membership size, and municipal size. Our analyses show that local branches of left-of-centre parties are less likely than other parties to be completely integrated with the council group and more involved in council work. This finding was in line with our hypotheses, but it may nevertheless seem surprising for two reasons: first, because much of the international party literature has emphasised that even though parties have different origins, a considerable standardisation has taken place; and second, because the actual organisational structures of Norwegian parties are very similar. Nevertheless, the left-of-centre tradition of giving more power to the extra-parliamentary organisation seems to prevail, which could be related to the historical origins of the Labour Party as a mass party. There may be deeply ingrained party cultures – ideas about appropriate ways to make political decisions – that survive organisational standardisation and reflect, for instance, the egalitarian Scandinavian political culture more broadly. Furthermore, a key insight in the existing literature is that parties will generally not change unless they need to do so to win elections, and the Labour Party has been the dominant party in Norway for much of the post-war era. Party branch involvement in council work may thus be perceived as a part of the winning formula by facilitating accountability, deliberation, grassroots input, etc. Relatedly, given the deep institutionalisation of the Labour Party's party organisation in general, the local branches, as the spokes of the 'party wheel', may have simply come to expect and insist on a seat at the council table. Finally, the 'contagion from the left' may happen more easily or more profoundly among ideologically adjacent parties, leading other left-wing parties to cleave more closely to the traditional bottom-up ideal of intra-party decision-making than non-leftwing parties.

Size also matters, to some extent. Municipality size and membership size clearly affect the extent of integration. This is not surprising; it confirms that a large membership makes the division of labour easier. This finding nevertheless emphasises that local politics – especially in small party branches – works in a different way to politics at the national level. Our analyses show that parties that are *fully integrated* across units are, to a considerable extent, small parties in small municipalities. Furthermore, with regards to both size-related aspects (municipal size and party size), greater size results in more party branch–council work *involvement* but only for left-of-centre parties.

As mentioned above, comparative studies place Norway as an extreme case with high levels of mutual involvement (Razin, 2013). In spite of this, we found significant differences within the Norwegian case. It would therefore be useful to carry out similar studies in other countries that have lower levels of involvement and integration.

The main aim of this article was to map the relationship between party organs at the local level, but our findings have implications for local democracy in general and people's opportunities to influence local policy-making. Local parties operate as an organisational framework for representative democracy. Through their elected municipal councillors, such parties represent the interests of the voters. How such a 'contract' between the voters and their representatives is managed depends on how the role and mandate of the representative are viewed. The literature on representational roles distinguishes between three styles of representation, *party delegate*, *voter delegate*, and *trustee*, implying that the representatives either follow the party programme or the will of the voters or are free to use their own discretion in political issues (see, e.g., Önnudóttir & von Schoultz, 2020).

The fact that party branches are involved in and/or integrated with their council groups indicates that the party delegate model is important in Norwegian local politics. On the one hand, integration and involvement may empower the party branch at the expense of the individual councillors and the voters. In this respect, we agree with Copus and Erlingsson (2012, 2013): decisions in party branches are often made by small groups of people behind closed doors. This situation may be considered an obstacle to democratic openness and inclusion

and thereby constrain opportunities for the individual councillor to act as a voter delegate. Moreover, it may also be considered an obstacle to the representatives in the role of trustees due to the (social) control that may occur. On the other hand, small council groups – which may consist of a single councillor – may not feel that this integration is a threat to their individual freedom of action. On the contrary, precisely because the decision-making circles are small, councillors may perceive a need to consult others. Involving the party organisation may give councillors an opportunity to discuss municipal decisions with a somewhat larger group, at least to some extent, even though the number of active party members may be small. In this respect, our findings support Heidar and Jupskås' (2023) conclusion: that Norwegian parties still work as arenas for deliberative democracy. Other parts of our survey (not analysed here) show that such intra-party arenas are reserved for members when binding decisions on policies and personnel are made but that voters in general are sometimes invited to participate in other party activities.

To conclude, whether the implications of our findings are good or bad in a democratic perspective depends on one's ideals for political representation: should an elected representative primarily be a party delegate, a voter delegate, or a trustee? However, shedding light on and discussing the implications may nevertheless contribute to an awareness of how local democracy and policy processes work in practice and what consequences this may have for voters and their opportunities to influence and guide their representatives.

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The survey data used in the article are openly available from Sikt (Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research); see <https://doi.org/10.18712/NSD-NSD3125-V1>

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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