From the Streets to the Party Lists: Challenges Faced by Movement Parties

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This report analyzes challenges faced by parties with origins in social movements by focusing on three contemporary cases organized at different levels of governance: the German branch of the international Pirate Party, national-level Podemos in Spain, and an inter-city Alliance of Urban Social Movements in Poland. I first examine activists’ motivations for seeking an electoral route and then discuss challenges in building party structures, and forming an ideologically coherent program.

Decision to institutionalize

For many social movements, success in achieving their aims hinges on their ability to move from the streets to spaces of governance. As Katharina Nocun, a data privacy activist turned Pirate Party politician in Germany, describes her motivation for political engagement: “I was thinking about my role as an activist and I just noticed that in a lot of situations I had a feeling that it would be much more easier to change politics if you were inside the parliament and not standing in front of it” because electoral promises from parties rarely result in changes advocated by the movements.

For others, entering formal politics might be a pragmatic organizational decision. Lech Mergler, an urban activist, and one of the founders of the Right to the City in Poznań, explains the decision to create an inter-city Urban Social Movements Alliance (PRM), whose members would run in local elections of their respective cities, as motivated by considerations of media access. “If national parties run candidates in local elections, this gets reflected in national media, and if local movements do, it does not. It was about an idea that would land us in national media,” he explains. This made PRM, which brought together 11 cities, a vehicle for “communications-PR and political marketing [more] than a factual political coaltion.” Anna Ratecka from Kraków against the Olympics, one of the PRM’s electoral committees, echoed Nocun’s statement: “It is easy to mobilize a lot of people [for a protest action], but that is decidedly insufficient. What is necessary is, so to say, groundwork, and then translating this mobilization into systematic action, which would engage a lot of people and which can then be translated into electoral success.”

A similar sentiment was expressed by Irene Montero, who was elected as one of the

1. I am grateful to the Council for European Studies (CES) for generously providing funding for this project.
2. All quotes come from personal interviews conducted June-August 2015 in various cities in Poland, Berlin, and Madrid, as part of exploratory research supported by the CES pre-dissertation grant. All translations are my own.
representatives of Podemos in the Spanish Congress in December 2015, and had previously been active in PAH, a movement against foreclosures: “What the introduction of Podemos shows is that social protest is essential, but a popular movement does not suffice to guarantee rights for social majorities (...) besides a strong popular movement, it is necessary to have representatives in institutions.” Podemos is a newcomer to the Spanish party scene, with roots in the 2011 anti-austerity mobilization of the so-called indignados.

In all of those cases, political party as an organizational form was chosen for practical reasons, as the most appropriate vehicle for achieving the desired goal of social change. However, as the example of the Green parties has shown,3 parties emergent out of social movements always face resistance from activists reluctant to become involved in institutional politics perceived as corrupt, to accept authority structures, or to make investments in mechanisms for conflict resolution and solving collective action and social choice problems.

These problems have torn apart the Pirate Party in Germany, an experiment in party transparency and digital democracy launched by netactivists. They have plagued PRM, a hybrid organization4 between a social movement and a political party, to a much smaller degree, likely due to its local scale5 and a recent emergence of Together, a party on the national level that might provide an institutional forum for those activists interested in pursuing a political route. Finally, they do not yet seem to greatly affect Podemos, which from the beginning decided to commit to a political party structure, in consultation with, but autonomous from, social movements.6

Resistance to party form and professionalization

The activists who chose to take a plunge into institutional politics were often well aware of those issues. “It wasn’t easy for us to convince people to run in elections because of the aversion to politics among engaged activists,” says Tomasz Leśniak, leader of PRM in Kraków. Michal Wszołek, also from Kraków’s PRM committee, puts it this way: “The campaign team was in large measure politically engaged, also in political parties, then in the Greens, but the others, people from the lists not so much (...) they, the flesh and blood activists who do not think about their activism in political categories, they approach this very skeptically, [thinking] ‘I do something pure working for a specific, small slice of reality’ [but if] ‘I get involved politically, then I automatically take on the baggage that is inseparable from party politics.’”

Fabio Reinhardt, one of the elected representatives of Pirates in Berlin, describes the

5. Many activists involved in PRM recognize that on the national level, political party is the desired – or necessary – organizational vehicle. As Tomasz Leśniak from Kraków Against the Olympic puts it: “On the national level the only form are party structures.”
6. As Irene Montero explains: “Political force and a popular movement are not the same thing, but there is a way of doing things together that might enhance both and help both grow and first of all, so that they are in sync.”
party as a group of people working on progressive themes, who “are not hierarchically organized… so, people who actually do not behave like a party, but call themselves a party.” This initially attracted Reinhardt to the party—the openness, the low barriers for someone who wanted to get involved but did not have much political experience. Arguably, however, this self-definition as a political party without acting like one was at the heart of Pirate problems. As Reinhardt himself puts it: “there was no effective process… how the party should be led and what the structures are and who, when, where, makes which decisions.”

This resistance did not seem present in Podemos. Even though “people who were initiating it were persons we had known for many years from the trajectories of popular movements,” there was not much opposition to building party structures on the ground. “We are a political force that in one year created management bodies and the structure of a political force in all cities and all of the communities and at the state level,” says Montero. “We are absolutely in favor of political parties as, so to say, tools for the democratic society,” she stresses. However, the party has already suffered some internal rifts—for example, when Juan Carlos Monedero, one of its founders, resigned over the direction the party was taking, urging it to go back to its roots.7

**Resistance to authority**

The tendency in the media to personalize stories and seek out leaders proves problematic for “leaderless” parties committed to horizontal structures, perhaps as a legacy of the movement they emerge from. For instance, the Pirate Party’s core consists of netactivists who value networks and eschew hierarchy. When German media, faced with a lack of designated representatives, chose to feature politicians, whom they found interesting, it generated conflict within the Pirate Party. Nocun describes it this way: “Before I joined the Pirate Party, there was this dogma of ‘Themen, statt Köpfe,’8 we don’t want to put so much people to the front, but the topics (...) At some point, it was that the media decided which candidates were most interesting (...) for example, we had one candidate who was a member, or was working for the Bundeswehr [the army] some years and then he quit because he said, ‘yeah, I hate war’. So he was like very young, very energetic and very good with press. He had, for example, many interviews. So we didn’t select, media selected.”

Marina Weisband was another one of those people—a young woman standing out against a group of predominantly male Internet activists, who became a media darling. This is what she said in the interview about the party’s resistance to more personalized leadership and media contacts: “Personally, I think that’s one of the reasons why the Pirate Party went back down again, because as soon as a new face appeared to the party, members were strongly against it. Just because they said we don’t need faces, we just need our program, our platform. But politics don’t work that way.”

The Pirates also struggled with resistance to professionalization of staff and finances, at least initially. Weisband says: “I also spoke out for it; for example, I think we should hire a fundraiser. Good fundraiser always gets the money back fast. But of course, there was resistance.” As Nocun describes it: “the sole thing, should we hire people or not was very controversial.” However, she’s quick to add that this is the case for many organizations:

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“Many NGOs I work for, or activist groups, where I was a very active member and this is always a very controversial question because this also implies a power shift” between volunteers and professionals. They both mention that with experience, many Pirates accepted the idea that professionalization was both necessary and beneficial.

Some of these issues are sidestepped if a party or electoral committee is formed solely by activists convinced of the usefulness of party as an organizational vehicle. As Wszołek describes it in the case of Kraków Against the Olympics, “here there was no issue, because we first had a discussion if we want to do it. We have large experience, because I also previously was in the Greens (…) we have large experience in media campaigns (…) people don’t debate obvious things, right, that some things must be done.” However, there still were “many problems (…) because I wanted to it more professionally, my friends more with wildness in their eyes.”

Podemos, led by a charismatic Pablo Iglesias, a political science professor and TV personality, raises more concerns about populist leadership than the absence of one. Yet the party does not seem to substitute reliance on leadership for organizational investments, diligently building party organization on the ground and on the web, relying on many online voting, participatory, and deliberation tools.

Rapid growth problem

The media can establish new parties as relevant, and provide critical visibility, but they also create a risk of a “hype effect”—generating a lot of interest around a party, only to bring it down later. This might happen either because media attention can lead to a “rapid growth problem”—an influx of members into unprepared party structures, in which vetting and norm socialization cannot happen fast enough to maintain party coherence, both ideologically and organizationally, or by excessive reporting of internal discussions, which makes parties committed to transparency particularly vulnerable to negative press.

Moreover, in the case of the Pirate Party “one of basic, very basic problems was that the party was founded on these things [data privacy, etc.] and considered itself unideological in it, and when you do that, you automatically run into a problem that you attract people from both sides,” says Weisband.

This also happened to some of the electoral committees in PRM: “Then new people appeared who I did not know, right, for instance all those students. This was really an explosion effect, with which the association did not deal, that was where, it sort of died, yes, it grew very quickly, twice as big, and didn’t understand that it needs to start operating differently (…) and it failed organizationally,” says Kacper Pobłocki, one of the coordinators of the Alliance, about the movement in Poznań.

Ideology

Attracting people who do not fit the ideological profile of a party is one issue with positioning the party above the ideological divide, especially if it has an anti-establishment flavor. Another is the lack of programmatic cohesion, which helps build a broad-based social movement, but might split a party that emerges from it from within. Weisband describes this for the Pirate Party: “It suddenly became clear that the party could not agree on anything. Like the topic of gender. We have many left people, who strongly supported feminism and we have many, say, male nerds, who strongly oppose it. And what happened last year was that basically most of
the most famous faces of the left wing left.”

For PRM, at least in Poznań, the solution was “a principle of self-limitation, meaning that the association serves certain aims; on its territory, no worldview, political, ideological conflicts take place,” says Mergler. He calls it “the concrete narrative”—focused on solutions to specific problems, which unite people from those “involved in organized church structures to atheists” and “from the left to moderate center-right, from feminists to conservatists.”

However, this likely is only possible because of the local scale of the activity of the Alliance. The phenomenon of urban social movements is based on agreement on everyday issues, a niche in which compromise is possible, but expanding to worldview issues—religion or economy—would likely quickly divide PRM.

Right now, according to Irene Montero, Podemos sees ideological inclusiveness in a positive light, as an opportunity to “create a project with people who had never participated, who do not have a clear ideological description; simply, they have been motivated to participate and can feel part of Podemos,” says Irene Montero. The strong focus on anti-austerity in the party program and its affinity to parties like the Greek Syriza, however, position it unequivocally on the left, potentially limiting divisive debate on ideology.

Conclusion

From an international party, which made a splash in German politics only to nearly disappear after highly publicized infighting, through a national party that came in third in Spanish 2015 and 2016 national elections, to an inter-city coalition of local parties which served as a stepping stone for a new left party in Poland, parties with roots in activism face dilemmas tied to their origins that have implications for party success. These origins also provide unique advantages such as links to civil society organizations that may be mobilized for electoral purposes, and creative repertoires of contention that may be adapted as electoral tools. Yet features of those new parties that make them particularly transparent and connected to constituents such as horizontal, network-like structures, or ideological inclusiveness, also make them vulnerable to the effects of institutionalization and politicization. At the same time, organizational, leadership, and programmatic choices might shape the degree to which that potential vulnerability impacts the movement parties’ chances of survival and success.