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Political parties and deliberation: from challenges to opportunities

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Abstract

This special issue contributes to the burgeoning literature that connects political parties and deliberative practices. It answers two related research questions: why do parties engage in deliberation? and what are the ways in which the deliberative practices can address the challenges faced by political parties in responding to a changing internal and external environment? Its articles cover both theoretical concepts and practical aspects that emerged in different political settings. The results illustrate how different forms of deliberation can contribute to reshaping parties as instruments to represent the people by allowing them to express their demands in a non-mediated form. As such, deliberation in party politics—within and outside party organization—can positively contribute to citizens’ attitudes towards politics and to democratic life.

Keywords Political parties · Deliberation · Democracy · Organization · Attitudes

In the last decades, extensive research sought to identify to what extent and under what circumstances deliberation can address the difficulties and challenges of representative democracies (Cohen 1989; Chambers 2003; Smith 2009; Fishkin 2011; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012; Bächtiger et al. 2018). The latter have witnessed over time increased levels of distrust in politicians and institutions of representation, voter apathy, limited political interest, misinformation and disinformation, political violence, or polarization (Diamond 2015; Dalton 2017; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018;

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Przeworski 2019). Rooted in the ancient Athenian democracy, deliberative practices have recently flourished around the world across all areas of governance from local to national politics, from communities to organizations, from the Global South to the Global North. The “deliberative wave” gained momentum in parallel with the diffused implementation of practices aiming to make political decision-making talk-centric rather than voter-centric (Elstub and McLaverty 2014; OECD 2020). These procedures were intended to empower citizens and to make them engage in inclusive mutual processes of reason-giving with the politicians (Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019). They provide ordinary citizens the possibility to deliberate and participate in public decision-making, engage with stakeholders, co-create solutions to the societal needs, achieve consensus, and improve the quality of democracy (Dryzek 2000; Bächtiger et al. 2018; OECD 2020).

The repertoire of deliberative practices reflects the relationship between political institutions and citizens. Political parties are institutions that lie at the core of representative democracy for roughly one century (Schattschneider 1942; Stokes 1999; Diamond and Gunther 2002; Dalton 2019). One key role that parties play in contemporary democracies was that of “channels of expression (...) an instrument, or an agency, for representing the people by expressing their demands” (Sartori 2005, p. 24). Through the process of political representation, political parties guaranteed those channels that articulated, communicated, and implemented the demands of the sovereign people (Sartori 2005; Mair 2013). The critical attitudes of citizens towards representative democracy involved also important changes for political parties: fading membership, lower trust in parties, weaker capacity to mobilize voters, and new competitors openly challenged the equilibria of the traditional party systems (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Vries and Hobolt 2020; Gherghina and Soare 2021; Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2022; van Haute and Ribeiro 2022). Part of the explanation was connected to broad cultural, social, economic, political, and technological developments that have progressively frayed their capacity to convey the will of their electoral bases (Mair 2013; Hutter and Kriesi 2019; Ignazi 2020). On this ground, some questions emerged about parties’ ability to fulfil the intermediating role between society and state and about their fit for post-industrial and postmodern society (Ignazi 2020). Other explanations focussed on the organizational changes and the power relations between the basic organizational units and the top leadership (Poguntke and Webb 2005; Gherghina 2014; Pilet and Cross 2014; Scarrow et al. 2017; Rahat and Kenig 2018).

One of parties’ reactions to these developments is the use of resources to reinforce the connection with the public, i.e. party members and voters in general (van Haute and Gauja 2015; Scarrow et al. 2017; Gherghina et al. 2018). Many parties modified their internal decision-making process, adopted rules and mechanisms aiming to increase the intra-party democracy and coherence, finetuned their affiliation options, and relied on technology to communicate with voters or manage their party organizations (Scarrow 2015; Close and Gherghina 2019; Ignazi 2020; Barberà et al. 2021). The reforms towards more direct involvement of people in the intra-party decision-making process included the increasing use of primaries, the adoption and implementation of internal referendums, and further means to reach



unmediated decisions (Scarrow et al. 2017; Wuttke et al. 2019; Oross and Tap 2021a).

Some parties took this unmediated engagement of the public one step further and introduced deliberative practices. This was especially visible in the movement parties (Deseriis and Vittori 2019; Gherghina and Stoiciu 2020) but also in mainstream parties (Fishkin et al. 2008). In the recent years, empirical evidence suggests that there has been an accelerated diffusion of deliberation within the intra-party decision-making processes or in relation to external processes that cuts across both established and newer parties (Barberà and Rodríguez-Teruel 2020b, 2020a; Gad 2020; Stoiciu and Gherghina 2020; Vodová and Voda 2020). Until recently, with several notable exceptions (Fishkin 1991; Gutmann and Thompson 1998; Teorell 1999), the research on political parties ignored widely the topic of deliberation and the rich corpus of (deliberative) democratic theory largely neglected the topic of political parties. It is only recently that a dialogue has been launched between the two strands of literature with explicit interest in studying intra-party deliberative procedures systematically (Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein 2017; Gherghina et al. 2020; Ignazi 2020; Heidar and Jupskås, 2022; Junius and Matthieu 2022).

On this ground, scholars have put forward different explanations—based mainly on single-case studies—for which parties may adopt deliberation and support democratic innovation. Several scholars see the diffusion of deliberative practices as opportunities to reinforce their legitimacy in a context of eroded electoral support and limited popular trust (Teorell 1999; Fishkin et al., 2008; Ignazi 2020). By altering their traditional image of hierarchical organizations, it is possible to assume that reasoned discussions in party politics can fix the feeble linkages between parties and society, better justify decisions made by party members while simultaneously increasing their civic skills, autonomous thinking, and political knowledge (Teorell 1999; Fung 2006; White and Ypi 2011; Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein 2017; Gherghina et al. 2020).

Different new parties implemented deliberative forms of intra-party democracy (Gad 2020; Stoiciu and Gherghina 2020; Vodová and Voda 2020; Junius and Matthieu 2022), while the established parties complemented their traditional processes and mechanisms of internal decision-making with it (Fishkin et al., 2008; Barberà and Rodríguez-Teruel 2020b). These diverse experiences of political parties with deliberation share the principle that the participants take part to open discussion on specific political issues with the aim to induce reflection in a non-coercive fashion. They involve argumentative exchanges of experiences and views with the aim to build collective decision that other participants that do not share a specific point of view can still find meaningful and accept (Dryzek 2000). Traditionally, political parties had similar arenas of discussion in their congresses or local branches, which were complemented by other arenas organized online or in person, open to different categories of members and even the citizenry (Gherghina et al. 2020; Oross and Tap 2021b). In line with Ignazi's approach (2020, p. 15), what becomes salient is not so much the specific goal of the deliberation and the achievement of consensual (reasoned) decisions, but the process based on argumentation and discussion in the different layers of the party organization. The deliberation provides an opportunity



to gather participants beyond the circle of the already active members/citizens and in the interactions with the practices of deliberation outside the party organization.

Contributions and content of the special issue

In spite of this burgeoning literature that connects political parties and deliberative practices, we know little about why and how political parties use deliberative practices. This special issue adds to the existing studies by answering two research questions: why do parties engage in deliberation? and what are the ways in which the deliberative practices can address the challenges faced by political parties in responding to a changing internal and external environment? Understanding the approach of political parties towards deliberation is important for three reasons. First, it reveals the multi-faceted purpose of deliberation, which goes beyond its use for intra-party democracy. The special issue illustrates that political parties can support and engage in deliberation that targets the broader public—and not only their members—for a variety of reasons that range from augmenting their electoral support to the legitimation of policy issues. Second, the studies in this special issue present different instances in which deliberative democracy can complement the mechanisms of representative democracy. So far, existing research focussed on the views of citizens regarding the complementarity between these two models of democracy (Gherghina and Geissel 2020; Talukder and Pilet 2021). The special issues shows that political parties are not as reluctant or incompatible with deliberation as considered for several decades. As such, these studies bring evidence about how deliberation can be used to improve the functioning of political parties and their performances in representative democracies.

The five articles cover both theoretical concepts and practical aspects that emerged in different political settings. The special issue starts with a theoretical contribution, which is followed by four empirical articles that use specific case studies to bring in-depth analysis on specific aspects linked to spaces for deliberation in which political parties are central. This happens at an individual level (as in the Agora case), in the interaction with other parties (as in Hungary and Romania), or with regard to party elites' perceptions (the French-speaking Belgian parliamentarians at federal or regional level).

The first article identifies the reasons for which parties use deliberative democracy by putting together three strands of literature: intra-party democracy, parliamentary activity, and the connections with the citizenry (Gherghina and Jacquet 2022). It provides an innovative conceptual framework that distinguishes between the issues of deliberation (people and policies) and the goals (strategic objectives and normative goals) for which deliberation is initiated. Their framework has broad applicability beyond specific deliberative procedures and provide an extremely useful visualization of the relationships between actors and arenas of deliberation. The analytical framework can be “put to work” both in the literature on party politics and the normative theory of deliberative democracy by allowing a more fine-grained analysis of the interactions between issues and goals. It



also opens the door for further research to uncover distinct conceptualizations of deliberation systematically, efficiently, and consistently.

The second article draws on a thick description of the organization of the Agora party in Brussels treated as an extreme case of party promoting deliberative practices (Junius et al. 2021). It sheds light on the tensions between a party's deliberative ideals and its representative means. Drawing on an in-depth desk research complemented by 20 semi-structured interviews with a broad range of party members, this study shows that Agora deals with the competing demands of radicalism and pragmatism, together with pressure for deliberative inclusion and representative efficiency. In direct response to these competing demands, the party adopted a strongly decentralized stratarchical party organization in which the main policy-making powers are attributed to randomly selected citizens, without formal ties to the party. Each party supporter has an equal say in the party's internal decision-making process.

In the context of increasing practices of deliberation in Belgium, the third article focuses on parliamentarians as relevant political actors and the embodiment of representative democracy. It investigates how they conceptualize, evaluate, and apprehend deliberative mini-publics (Rangoni et al., 2021). This study complements the literature on explaining citizens' opinions about deliberative mini-publics and contributes to the existing evidence on the discourses of legislators about deliberation. Based on 91 interviews, their analysis identifies two argumentative frames structuring parliamentarians' discourses: competence and vision of political representation. The findings illustrate the existence of a gap between the (normative) positive vision of deliberation and the ways in which the legislators perceive deliberative mini-publics. This perception associates the mini-publics to a power-sharing instrument challenging the primacy of elections rather than as a process centred on the quality of deliberation.

The last two articles focus on the post-communist context and the ways in which deliberative practices interact with party politics. They reflect on the experiences of participatory budgeting, which are processes of co-governance where citizens can participate in deciding the allocation of public expenditure in a community. In their work, Oross and Kiss (2021) look at the politicians' reasons behind the use of participatory budgeting in Budapest. The 27 semi-structured interviews conducted with Hungarian politicians show that there is a widespread acceptance of the normative arguments for promoting citizens' participation in policy-making. The participatory budgeting is associated with an opportunity for increased linkages with the electorate, with newly elected local politicians interested in increasing their local support and promoting new experiments. However, there is a relevant contradiction between this acceptance of deliberation and politicians' critical assessment of citizens as incapable of reaching logical budget decisions. With a similar focus, the final article analyses how participants in participatory budgeting perceive the collective empowerment provided by this practice (Gherghina et al., 2022). The study focuses on the critical case of Cluj-Napoca and uses 25 semi-structured interviews. Their findings pinpoint to a diffused acknowledgement of the potential for collective empowerment, together with the identification of design issues and resource allocation as weakening elements of the empowerment potential.



These articles provide fine-grained analyses of the interactions between parties, politicians, party members, and/or citizens. The results illustrate how different forms of deliberation can contribute to reshaping parties as instruments to represent the people by allowing them to express their demands in a non-mediated form. They indicate why scholars and citizens should care about the changes in traditional party politics and how deliberation in party politics—within and outside party organization—can positively contribute to citizens' attitudes towards politics and to democratic life.

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