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Intra-party democracy beyond aggregation

Introduction

In contemporary scholarship on intra-party democracy, two aspects of the topic usually receive attention. The first is candidate or leadership selection methods (e.g. LeDuc, 2001; Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Cross, 2013; Rahat, 2013; Spies and Kaiser, 2014); the second opportunities for party members directly to influence internal decisions, such as membership ballots (e.g. Sussman, 2007; Scarrow, 2014: ch.8). Contemporary scholarship on intra-party democracy is in other words primarily concerned with procedures of aggregation—procedures in which votes (for a candidate or a policy) are taken and counted. What is widely ignored, on the other hand, are procedures of *deliberation* within parties—discursive exchanges among party members, in which they form their preferences about particular policies or candidates by weighing arguments for and against. Some scholars mention deliberation in passing—as something that may or may not occur prior to candidate selection, for example (Hazan and Rahat, 2010: 163-164). But they take little interest in studying deliberative procedures as systematically as aggregative ones.

This neglect is somewhat surprising given the central role of deliberation in democratic theory (e.g. Dryzek, 2002; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004; Thompson, 2008; Mansbridge et al., 2010). Most contemporary democratic theorists believe that deliberation is an indispensable democratic practice, and there are very few respectable theorists who would dispute its positive contribution to democratic life. Moreover, even though parties generally suffer from disregard in democratic theory (Biezen and Saward, 2008), it has been suggested by a (small) number of scholars that intra-party deliberation is normatively desirable. Some emphasise that it can enhance democracy on a large scale, since it increases citizens' knowledge about complex political affairs and encourages them to debate about matters of common concern (Cohen, 1989: 31-32; Teorell, 1999; Biezen and Saward, 2008: 30-31; White and Ypi, 2011: 387-389; Weinstock, 2015. Others point out that intra-party deliberation can powerfully aid the empowerment of party members and strengthen the capacity of parties to link citizens and government, as it provides those who engage in parties with a channel to exercise critical judgment concerning concrete courses of action and hold the party elite accountable for their decisions (Teorell, 1999; Wolkenstein, forthcoming). All of this suggests an understanding of intra-party democracy that differs quite starkly from that which dominates the prevailing research programme, one that sees talk as complementing voting in important ways.

If we take up the challenge of democratic theorists to explore parties as vehicles for deliberation, at least two relevant empirical research questions arise. One asks how the deliberative dimension of intra-party democracy interacts with the aggregative one. For example, does it alter the outcome of a membership ballot if party members deliberate about the issue on which the ballot is held? Another, more fundamental, question is whether parties actually provide favourable circumstances for deliberation, and if so, how partisan deliberation looks in practice.

My concern in this article is with the latter question, for before we can address more complex issues we ought to get a fix on whether intra-party deliberation is in any way an empirically viable idea. This is by no means clear. After all, there is also plenty of scepticism in democratic theory concerning the deliberative capacity of partisans. Partisanship is often said to undermine deliberation, insofar as strong political commitments may prevent individuals from considering issues from multiple angles (see Rosenblum, 2008: chs. 6 & 7). Furthermore, experimental research in social psychology suggests that discussion among like-minded people—and partisans of the same stripe certainly classify as 'like-minded'—is likely to cause 'group polarisation,' where views are reinforced without weighing alternative evidence (Sunstein, 2002 and 2009). Do problems of this kind arise in intra-party deliberation, or can party members be said to 'deliberate'?

To find out, I want to explore the deliberative credentials of political discussion among party members. Drawing on group interviews with party members in two Social Democratic parties in Germany and Austria, I will look at (1) the preconditions for deliberation, and (2) practices of reason-giving within parties. The central point that emerges from the analysis is that intra-party deliberation exhibits many of the characteristics deliberative theorists would like to see present in political discussion: participants hold a diversity of viewpoints and enjoy a relatively equal standing; and their exchanges are marked by the mutual provision of reasons. These findings, while tentative and preliminary, suggest that parties can indeed be promising platforms for deliberation. This, I argue in closing, points towards a research programme concerned with intra-party democracy 'beyond aggregation.'

Before turning to the empirical analysis, I will briefly recapitulate the arguments in support of intra-party deliberation that can be found in the democratic theory literature and ask in what kinds of parties we may expect deliberation to prosper.

Why care about intra-party deliberation?

Normative arguments

To date, concern for intra-party deliberation has primarily come from a small number of democratic theorists who have suggested that deliberation within parties may serve multiple normatively important functions. Fundamentally, there are two lines of argument. One holds that intra-party deliberation can be instrumental in educating citizens and sharpening their civic skills. Perhaps most ambitiously, Cohen (1989) contends that because parties are usually required to present policy proposals on the whole range of issues that are of concern to the electorate, citizens who engage in parties will be incentivised to look beyond their narrow self-interest and try to deliberate about policy platforms that serve the political community at large, which is normatively more attractive than competing for the promotion of the private good of each (on this point, see also White and Ypi, 2011; Weinstock, 2015). For White and Ypi (2011), a central virtue of intra-party deliberation is that partisan deliberative fora like 'party conventions, branch meetings, assemblies, and protests' provide citizens with the opportunity to learn about political practice, refine their own political standpoints through exchanges with other partisans, and gradually develop confidence in their

views, all of which increases their ability to make reasoned and autonomous political decisions (387-388).[1]

The second type of normative case for intra-party deliberation argues intra-party deliberation is crucial for the empowerment of party members and for maintaining the 'linkage' (Lawson, 1988) between citizens and government. Scholars suggesting arguments to this effect have put forward concrete institutional design proposals. Most prominently, Teorell (1999) argues that making parties more internally deliberative can help minimise the distance between representatives and represented. '[B]y opening up channels of communication within party organizations, the deliberating bodies of the state could be made "porous" (…) to the influence of deliberations expressed within civil society and the public sphere' (Teorell, 1999: 373). In addition, Teorell recommends that regular deliberative meetings between party leaders and ordinary members should be held, allowing members to demand justification from the party elite for their decisions. This would provide the membership with a mechanism to hold party elites accountable (in terms of requiring elites to 'give an account' of why they decided as they did) and so strengthen the members' position within the party.

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[1] This argument plays on the much-discussed finding that deliberation produces more informed preferences as it confronts citizens with new facts and viewpoints and encourages them to re-examine and update their beliefs in light of this new information (see, e.g., Gastil and Dillard, 1999; Fung, 2003: 349-350; Goodin, 2008: ch. 5; Fishkin, 2009: 134-146).

Relatedly Wolkenstein (forthcoming) suggests that empowering particular sites of deliberation within parties can counteract the tendency of purely aggregative forms of intra-party democracy to silence internal opposition and cement the power of the party elite. The problem, in a nutshell, is this: since aggregative forms of intra-party democracy are merely about counting votes, they tend to empower the large numbers of marginally committed members, who are more docile and therefore more likely to endorse the candidates or policies proposed by the party leadership (this problem has been noted e.g. in Katz and Mair, 2009: 759 and Hopkin, 2001). Wolkenstein's remedy against this is encouraging the marginally committed members to deliberate the party leadership's proposals by empowering local party branches, where deliberations of this kind routinely occur among party activists. If party branches are more directly connected to decision-making power, the proposal goes, this could generate an incentive for the passive party members to engage in the branches' debates and critically examine the party leaderships' proposals together with the activists. This in turn could sensitise them to alternative positions and help them to develop proposals of their own.

Linking normative and empirical worlds of intra-party deliberation

The second category of argument for intra-party deliberation is more directly relevant for contemporary political science work on intra-party democracy since it invites a quite different understanding of the concept from that which is usually employed: one on which the ordinary members' deliberations can usefully complement aggregative mechanisms of intra-party democracy, and correct for the shortcomings of these mechanisms, if they are designed in the right way. Rather than relegating deliberation to a peripheral qualification of the intra-party organisational dimension, as existing approaches to intra-party democracy do, this perspective views deliberation as a key vehicle for strengthening and sustaining the link between parties and citizens, which is often said to be *the* central democratic function of parties (e.g. Lawson, 1988; Sartori, 1976). To be sure, this deliberative conception of intra-party democracy is a distinctively *normative* vision: it describes parties as they should be, not parties as they are. But it is certainly intended as what one may call a 'workable ideal,' i.e. a proposal for institutional reform that is viable even if its realisation faces practical challenges and requires hard work.

The first question this raises, as I have noted in the introduction, is whether intra-party deliberation as such is an empirically viable idea. Does communication among party members reach deliberative standards? This is what I want to find out in

this article. An intimately related question that needs handling before proceeding is in what kinds of parties we may expect to find the sort of deliberation democratic theorists talk about? It seems that one essential condition parties must meet is that they have a relatively *active membership base*. For insofar as the just-outlined normative arguments specify among whom deliberation within parties ought to occur, ordinary party members (presumably this means: *active* party members, since the passive and uncommitted members are unlikely to engage much in political debate) are singled out as the key deliberative agents. A second important condition that must be fulfilled is that the *deliberations of party members (e.g. in local branches) are connected to political decisions*. Otherwise deliberation will likely fail to perform the discussed 'linkage' function and remain purely local in focus (and presumably members will lack 'deliberative incentives' when their judgments have no bearing on decisions whatsoever). In sum, whether intra-party deliberation can serve its normatively desirable functions would seem to depend on the availability of deliberating members who engage politically and sustain dialogue with non-partisan citizens, as well as the party's perviousness to the influence of its membership base.

This points naturally towards traditional 'membership parties,' especially Social Democratic parties. First, even if the traditional role of membership in these parties has changed due to the major changes in the post–World War II economy and so-

cial structure, they ordinarily exhibit a relatively high level of organisation at the membership base, at least when compared with other parties (Bartolini, 2007: ch. 6). Second, the formal organisation of these parties often emphasises the important role of local party organisations in bottom-up will-formation. More particularly, Social Democratic parties tend to exhibit a decentralised territorial organisational structure where members are (at least formally) represented by delegates at all organisational levels—a relic from the time when these parties were mass membership organisations (Scarrow, 2014: ch. 3). Using the language of intra-party democracy scholarship, we may say that they tend to be (again, at least formally) *decentralised* in their decision-making structure and *inclusive* with respect to the preferences and judgments of their members (cf. Hazan and Rahat, 2010: chs. 3 and 4). Even though in practice internal power asymmetries often undermine these features (see e.g. Allern and Saglie, 2012), this makes them the most plausible candidates for meaningful internal deliberation.

Against this backdrop, the remainder of the article examines the deliberative credentials of party members' political discussions in two European Social Democratic parties. It looks at how party members experience the circumstances in which their regular discussions occur, and how they talk about political problems that are of significance to them.

The circumstances of partisan deliberation

The study presented here draws on group interviews with members of local party branches in Social Democratic parties in Germany and Austria. Members who are organised in local branches were chosen because they constitute the active part of the membership, which, according to the arguments discussed in the prior section, forms the 'nucleus' of intra-party deliberation. These party members are politically committed, engage actively in the party's internal life and seek to sustain a link with the (non-partisan) citizens on the ground. The aim of the interviews was double: first to explore whether party branches provide the preconditions good deliberation requires and second to examine the kinds of disagreement that arise within party branches, together with how members address their disagreements in discussion.

For this research, conducted between January 2014 and March 2015, members of party branches of the SPD (Germany) and SPÖ (Austria) were assembled in the constellation in which they usually convene for their regular meetings for one-hour

group discussions.[2] The size of the groups varied between 5-11 participants. The discussions took place in six different cities—Vienna, Linz and Gampern in Austria; and Berlin, Bonn and Theilheim in Germany. These cities vary considerably in size: Vienna and Berlin may be classed as large cities, while Linz and Bonn are mid-sized cities, and Gampern and Theilheim are small municipalities. This variation was included with presumed diversity in mind. For example, parties face different political challenges in cities of different size, and so party members will disagree over different kinds of issues. The aim of the study was to identify patterns of discursive practice that widely recur across the different sites, as well as salient variations between them.

The discussions were loosely structured and divided into two parts. In the first part, which lasted for approximately 20 minutes, participants were invited to reflect on their motivation to engage in the party, and on their experience of regular branch meetings. This gave speakers an easy opening to make contributions and so helped to get the discussion under way. Participants here voiced reasons for why they choose actively to engage in the party, and explained what their regular meetings look like. The clear advantage of discussing these themes in a group, rather than in individual

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[2] All participants were members of the respective parties. I shall use the terms 'branch members' and 'party members' interchangeably.

in-depth interviews, is that it affords an understanding of the group dynamics (e.g. whether participants are able to express their views openly vis-à-vis the others).

In the second part of the discussion, which lasted for approximately 40 minutes, participants were asked to identify concrete issues of disagreement between them—issues they argued over in the past, or issues on which they are yet to reach an agreement. This exercise was designed to make participants talk about differences of opinion within the group and how they recall resolving, or would resolve, these. Its purpose was to gain insight into the nature and depth of their disagreements, as well as the outcomes of their previous discursive exchanges. Drawing attention to disagreements in the group also made participants return to some of these disagreements and start deliberating them again. Thus the exercise had the happy effect of provoking actual deliberation among the party members. Using group discussions allowed me to keep interventions at a minimum in order to study the kinds of knowledge and ethical behaviour participants expect of each other (cf. Duchesne and Haegel, 2007). All interviews were conducted in German and translated into English at a later stage.

Let us now proceed to the analysis of the empirical material. What I want to look at in this section under the heading of the 'circumstances of partisan deliberation' is whether party branches provide favourable conditions for deliberation. This raises a prior question: what exactly are favourable conditions for deliberation, and why

would it matter that such conditions are given? Let me take the questions in reverse order, since if we do not know why good deliberation requires some preconditions we need not get into the intricacies of determining what exactly these preconditions are. To understand why deliberation requires a supportive environment, it is important to acknowledge that it is a very *demanding* democratic practice as it requires people to invest time and intellectual resources in formulating arguments and engaging with others' viewpoints in a reasonably respectful and reflective manner (see Fishkin, 2009). Deliberation therefore requires several things to 'fall into place': citizens ought to display an above average willingness to give thought to the arguments they give and hear.

The question then becomes under what circumstances citizens 'display an extraordinary willingness to give thought to the arguments they give and hear.' What properties must a group of people exhibit for their discussions to become 'deliberative'? If we follow the larger part of deliberative theory, we find that two prominent features of (designed as well as natural) deliberative fora are typically identified as favourable conditions for deliberation. The first is that a diversity of viewpoints is represented in the forum (e.g. Barabas, 2004: 689; Jackman and Sniderman, 2006; Mutz 2006; Hendriks et al., 2007; Thompson, 2008: 502; Sunstein 2002 and 2009: 145-148). I call this the *diversity desideratum.* The second is that participants enjoy an

equal standing (e.g. Cohen, 1989; Young, 2002: 24-25; Thompson, 2008: 501; Fishkin, 2009: 43-45; Mansbridge et al., 2010: 65-66; Morrell, 2010). I call this the *equality desideratum*. I will now take these demanding desiderata in turn, first briefly explicating their theoretical significance and then probing whether they are satisfied in the party branches. I will here draw mainly from the first part of the group discussions (where participants discussed their experience of engaging in party branches) paying particular attention to the references evoked to describe the regular debates and discussions in the group.[3]

Diversity

In deliberative theory, there are at least two arguments for why participants in deliberations should exhibit a diverse cross-section of views.[4] The first and more fundamental one is that deliberation presupposes disagreement, and disagreement presupposes that participants hold different views and opinions. As Thompson (2008: 502) argues,

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[3] A note on the presentation of the empirical material: the symbol '[. . .]' indicates where the text has been abridged; '. . .' indicates where a speaker pauses or trails away.

[4] Scholars use different terms for this, e.g. 'cross cutting exposure' (Mutz, 2006) or simply 'disagreement' (Thompson, 2008: 502).

'[i]f the participants are mostly like-minded or hold the same views before they enter into the discussion, they […] do not confront the problem that deliberation is intended to address.' (The 'problem' Thompson talks about is that a group of people have to make a collective decision about an issue they all disagree about.)

Of course, there are different degrees of like-mindedness, and not all of them forestall successful deliberation (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2006). As I will argue later in the article, like-mindedness concerning basic normative commitments can indeed facilitate deliberation, since it promotes equality among speakers and renders appeals to shared ideals immediately resonant. The point of the argument for diversity is simply that participants should hold different views about the issue under deliberation. Whether they agree on other issues or on normative principles is secondary, at least insofar as these other issues or principles do not play a constitutive role for their view on the issue under deliberation.

The second argument for diversity in deliberative fora contends that a diversity of perspectives 'ensures that the issue under deliberation is considered from multiple angles' (Hendriks et al., 2007: 366). On this view, diversity has two virtues. One, it makes deliberation a learning experience for its participants, since exchanging differently situated knowledge broadens the perspective of all participants (Young, 2002). Two, it reduces the likelihood of group polarisation, where views are strengthened—

perhaps even radicalised—rather than debated and refined due to excessive group homogeneity (see Sunstein, 2002 and 2009).

Now, how internally diverse are the party branches that were studied for this research? One of the first notable things about diversity is that, across the different groups, participants regularly point to the fact that their group is rather heterogenous. Usually different occupational backgrounds of the participants are identified as the source of diversity. Daniela from the Gampern group is not atypical when she stresses that 'it was not a circle of friends that got together because one shares hobbies in common. Rather it's a ragtag crowd [engaging in the party] in our municipality; from social pedagogues to locksmiths…to students.' This connection between occupational diversity and a diversity of viewpoints is often drawn when speakers reflect on group composition. Georg in Linz similarly makes a clear link to the different professions of the participants: 'I think we have a rather exciting cross-section [of people] from different domains of society. We all work in different fields, and when we discuss together one is being exposed to different points of view.'

Another source of diversity participants single out is age differences. It is a well-established empirical finding that party members tend on average to be older than the general population (Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010), and this age distribution is reflected in all of the party groups. Age differences are however not explicitly alluded

to as a feature of group composition, but singled out in an entirely different context, namely as the root cause of some recurring disagreements. Indeed, while sometimes an explicit positive connotation is attached to differences flowing from different occupational experiences, where present references to age differences tend to conjure an image of avoidable, indeed sometimes annoying, conflicts between young and old members. An example several groups mention (notably only urban groups) is age difference-related discord over cycling policy. The following statement from Julie in Berlin brings out the issues at stake:

> This is an everyday topic for me. And it is also a topic that annoys me massively in our party … and [it is a topic] where the difference is very big between the younger people, who cycle a lot, because that is their means of transportation, and the older [people], who never cycle, who also know this from the viewpoint of pedestrians … and [complain] 'again one of them almost knocked me over'. And this often leads to … really … these discussions can sometimes get out of control.

Antithetical interests and experiences among the younger and the older members are recorded here, and it is suggested that these differences provoke debates in which basic norms of mutual respect are sometimes transgressed. Speakers in the Vienna group express similar frustration with arguing over the cycling issue, which happened to sur-

face in their deliberations, too: Michaela notes for instance that 'one definitely can't reach agreement' on this issue. At best, one can agree to disagree—but any more progress in the debate seems out of reach. Such perceptions intensify the negative connotation of the relationship between age differences and diversity of viewpoints in some of the groups.

Notice though that even if participants express discontent with regard to some specific conflictual issues, they generally embrace the diversity of viewpoints present in the party branches and the arguments flowing from it. Maxim in Bonn is not the only participant to welcome on-going disagreement in the group: 'a party is actually not a place where I look for harmony. It is not a place where I look for consent, but where I want to [engage in order to] get positions "out on the street". […] Disputes are part of the trade. Disputes are important. It is important that we argue.' Disagreement is widely seen as valuable and productive, as something the groups profits from rather than a reason for despondency.

In sum, the dominant pattern across the party groups is that a diverse cross-section of perspectives is present, to do with different occupational backgrounds and age differences between the members. So it would seem that the party groups studied in this research sufficiently satisfy what I have called the diversity desideratum. Notable is that sources of diversity have different connotations. But although disagreements

arising from age differences tend to be seen as avoidable and indeed tiresome, differences in opinion are not generally viewed as problematic; rather, diversity is often celebrated as enriching the group experience.

Equality

In contrast to the diversity desideratum, the justification of what I have called the *equality desideratum* is not primarily empirical. On the contrary, this second desideratum derives mainly from a general principle of equality which, in the eyes of most democratic theorists, constitutes the bedrock of any plausible account of democracy (for a classic treatment, see Dahl, 1989: ch. 6).[5] In essence, this principle holds that democratic politics 'requires some form of *manifest equality* among citizens' (Cohen, 1989: 69), i.e. citizens should enjoy an equal standing in democratic procedures. This is instinctively familiar in the context of voting: everyone ought to count for one. What does it mean exactly in the context of deliberative procedures?

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[5] Some deliberative theorists operationalise this principle in terms of *reciprocity* (e.g. Thompson, 2008).

When asked how one should conceive equality in a deliberative procedure, deliberative theorists usually insist it involves participants treating each other with 'mutual respect and equal concern' (Mansbridge et al., 2010: 65-66), though there is considerable disagreement about what this entails. Some suggest it requires that participants to deliberation listen to each other emphatically and try to take seriously each others' concerns (Morrell, 2010). Others argue that speakers ought to refrain from asserting 'their own interests above all others'' or insisting 'that their initial opinion about what is right or just cannot be subject to revision' (Young, 2002: 24-25). Ultimately, writes Thompson (2008: 506), 'most [deliberative theorists] agree that the more the deliberation is influenced by unequal economic resources and social status, the more deficient it is.' Thus I shall employ a basic standard of deliberative equality *qua* discussion unaffected by status and resource inequalities.

To what extent do the party groups meet this standard? Overall, members describe their meetings as marked by equality and mutual respect. While no group of party members described their group dynamics in the same way, references to the fulfilment of different requirements of deliberative equality (e.g. empathic listening, mutual respect) were considerably more common than those to their non-fulfilment. Sometimes even an explicit connection between norms of equality and democracy as a normative ideal was established. An emblematic example would be a statement by

Meo from the Linz group, in which he explains that the disposition to 'put oneself into the position of other members and view things from their point of view' is common among the members of the group, suggesting that empathic perspective-taking be 'simply part of democracy.' But though the data contains a number of references to aspects of deliberative equality that involve an explicit link to democracy or democratic values, such references were altogether rare.

More frequent were references to equality which see it expressed in the equal weight that is given to everyone's opinion in discussion. Participants generally note that they consider the branch meetings a forum in which they can speak their mind freely and will be taken seriously by others—'everybody is entitled to an opinion here', as one participant in Bonn puts it. Yet it is often pointed out that the deeper purpose of speaking one's mind is contributing to the formation of a shared position on an issue. Venting opinions is not an end in itself, a therapeutic exercise in which participants 'blow off steam.' Rather, participants make efforts to persuade one another of the rightness of their point of view, and are ready to be persuaded by others: for Markus from the Gampern group, 'the best point of view crystallises out when one can really convince the others, or when one lets oneself be persuaded that one has oneself … thought, so to speak, in the "wrong direction", or that the direction in which one thinks doesn't receive the support of a majority in the party group.' Dispo-

sitions of this kind are palpably present in the groups. They become even more apparent in the deliberative exchanges that were analysed for this research, one of which is presented in the subsequent section.

If participants freely speak their minds in their regular branch meetings, this implies plenty of potential for conflict, not least because of the diversity of viewpoints represented in the groups. But though disagreement is indeed mentioned as persistent across groups, it is never seen as undermining the unity of the group. Instead, perhaps with the exception of the above-mentioned debate over cycling policy, even heated debates are generally described as being marked by the kind of good cheer that characterises minor squabbles among friends. Maxim in Bonn for example highlights with collective approval that 'it's great fun […] when we get on to [talk about] concrete topics and rant at each other in the end. And […] we hit the table with the flat of our hands. And in the end we get along again…this is how I envisage politics, this is how I envisage discussing, this is how I envisage opinion-formation.' Such statements signal that even an adversarial style of debate is not seen as violating mutual respect.

From which channels mutual respect in particular, and the equal standing participants enjoy more generally, might flow is seldom rendered explicit in the discussions. Only in the Linz group do references to a 'source' of equality appear: participants single out their joint commitment to the party as the 'foundation' on which their

discussions proceed. A shared sense of dedication to a collective political project is seen by participants as exercising a more general enabling and constraining effect on their interactions, shaping the way in which they relate to each other. But perhaps the fact that participants in other groups do not make explicit what exactly it is that promotes equality among them reflects that they take a common foundation of some sort for granted. Perhaps they presume (*ex hypothesi*) that those with whom they deliberate are driven by similar concerns simply because they choose to engage in the same political party. Lending support to this interpretation is the fact that, in each group, participants record a strong commitment to the party as the principal reason for their political engagement. Participants are unequivocal that they widely seek to promote the same normative commitments, and the value of these commitments is assumed without discussion.

The flip side of having shared normative commitments is having *common adversaries*, and the data contains material suggesting that this also strengthens equality among branch members. Rival parties or rival partisans (sometimes a whole organisation, sometimes specific individuals) are identified as adversaries in several groups, and participants often make explicit that the presence of these actors buttresses group unity, in the sense that it fosters an awareness that *all members of the group are equally committed to prevailing over their rivals*. Sometimes the unifying effect of common

adversaries is overdrawn. Asked whether the group experiences internal disagreements, for example, Marita in the Theilheim group responds, 'not at all,' to which Bernd adds that this is because of 'our common "bogeyman"', meaning the town's mayor, whose politics they passionately oppose. By and large, however, there is little evidence in the data that the existence of common adversaries can eradicate internal disagreements.

Accepting this reading of the material, can it be said that the party members' experience of equality in their group meetings satisfies the demanding equality desideratum? I think yes. What emerges from the above discussion is certainly a complex picture: equality among participants takes different forms across the groups, and it can hardly be said that one particular manifestation of it is dominant. But regardless of this variation, the evidence examined suggests that participants face a relatively 'level playing field' in their regular deliberations. They can freely speak their minds, and can expect others to listen respectfully, possibly even empathically. Sustained and enhanced is this basic sense of equality by a pre-deliberative agreement on certain political commitments, on the one hand, and by the corresponding awareness of common adversaries, on the other.

How partisans deliberate: disagreement and reason-giving

The conclusion to take from the analysis in the previous section is that the party branches studied in this research satisfy the desiderata of diversity and equality sufficiently well to be considered supportive environments for deliberation. In this section, I want to shift the focus from preconditions for deliberation to the actual deliberative exchanges that occurred in the group interviews, and look closely at their specificities. The purpose of this exercise is to complete the picture of deliberation in party branches that was drawn so far, and get a fix on how party members justify their views to each other in situations of disagreement. I will look at *reason-giving* in two exemplary deliberative exchanges, i.e. exchanges that were chosen because they present patterns that are dispersed more widely through the empirical material.

I concentrate on reason-giving because it is a central requirement in all theories of deliberative democracy (Thompson, 2008: 495). Reason-giving essentially means that participants to deliberation attempt to justify their views to each other, offering reasons for why they think as they do. In contrast to explanation, justification involves speakers 'recommending' their views to others, framing them in such a way that they can be appreciated even by those who are initially inclined to disagree. While classic

accounts of deliberative theory stress that speakers therefore ought to appeal to 'universal standards' (Dryzek, 2000: 69) or the 'common good' (Cohen, 1989), more recent iterations admit also highly personalised forms of reason-giving, such as 'storytelling and the non-cognitive evocation of meanings and symbols that can appeal to actual or imagined shared experiences' (Mansbridge et al., 2010: 67). Accordingly, what matters is not so much whether reasons can universally be shared, but whether they are resonant in the particular context in which they are evoked. Reasons may thus be thought of as culturally available justificatory resources, employed by speakers to render their considerations acceptable to others.

Deliberative exchanges in party branches

The first deliberative exchange I want to focus on is a debate in the Linz group over what one may call a *societal* issue, i.e. an issue to do with grievances that are manifest in the local community or society at large, usually with more or less direct policy implications. We join the discussion about 28 minutes into the interview, right after one participant explained that the group's regular discussions help him to get clear about 'what is really being discussed' in public discourse as opposed to what is being 'por-

trayed by the media as important.' Ernest, a party member in his mid-70s, who throughout the discussion emphasised the experience of poverty in his early life, reacts to this by articulating the problem that the general public is fundamentally misled about their material welfare and relative deprivation. His contribution immediately receives deliberative uptake by Maria, a social worker, who contests Ernest's moves on the basis of her day-to-day experience with deprived people in need of help.

Ernest: I believe there are many different viewpoints, or rather wrong points of view, misleading views, concerning the development of prices. I have a very good memory of numbers and I can tell you today how much which product had cost 40 years ago, 50 years ago. And if I compare that with how much [money] I earned back then, or how much others earned—because that I also still remember—then I find that we are extremely well-off today! And the feeling that we're not comfortably off today—happiness is after all a matter of being content—arises from being told by advertising and commercials: 'You need that [product]! And if you don't have it, then you cannot live properly!' … And I see my responsibility in telling people 'You're actually well off!'

Maria: I have to disagree with you in one respect: I am in my job very often confronted with people who have been evicted from their homes. And I can tell you of cases of mothers with two children, who were evicted because of rent arrears of 3000

Euros. These are not big sums. It is getting tough at the moment…the last years in fact. And there are many things such as…many people cannot afford spectacles anymore. In the 1990s, I remember, that was not a problem. Back then everyone in Austria was able to buy new spectacles every 2-3 years. There are many people in Austria who are secretly really poor! And this is about heating, this is about having a piece of meat on the weekend, and so on. And some people are really not doing well in this sense. And I think one has to calculate again from a…from our secure position what it means to live off 700 Euros [a month].

Ernest: Well, that [to live off 700 Euros a month] is not possible.

Maria: I know, but many people have to do that.

Ernest: I know, but that is not normally possible. I have no illusions about that. […] But let me put it this way: there's no point in agreeing with people when they say they are poor, because that doesn't build them up. What much better builds people up is when I say 'well, whether I am doing well or not is ultimately never a question of money, but a question of comparison…with others.' And if I only compare the bad bits, then one will feel even worse afterwards. But that there are many who are not well-off or that many have [financial] problems, that I am aware of.

Maria: And for me it's clear: 500 Euros are relative. Whether I have 1500 Euros or 1000 Euros a month makes a big difference. Whether I have 4000 or 4500 Euros

makes no difference. And I utterly resist saying: it depends on you, whether you are doing well or not! Because such an argument is along the lines of 'Me Incorporated' [German: '*Ich-AG*', a term chiefly used pejoratively], where we are solely responsible for ourselves. And this is the exact opposite of the idea of the SPÖ, of social democracy, of solidarity, where there should be a certain standard of life for everyone. And beyond that everyone may consider aiming for more…but a certain shared basis for everyone.

Ernest: [Thinks] Well, yes. Solidarity. You're right!

Throughout this exchange, speakers offer reasons in support of their viewpoints, and reasons of different kinds, ranging from personal experience to normative principles. The most notable thing is arguably the immediate resonance Maria's appeal to solidarity finds: it compels Ernest to change his mind about the topic under discussion. Recall in this connection the pre-deliberative agreement on principles that was mentioned earlier. The fact that participants bring to the table such an agreement would seem to be an important *enabling condition* for arguments like Maria's to succeed: indeed, without it being in place, any appeal to shared principles might fall on deaf ears. For to accept Maria's argument, Ernest needs to recognise the value of solidarity and endorse it as a general principle that ought to guide political practice: he

needs to attribute to it the same (or at least reasonably similar) importance as Maria does. Otherwise Maria's reasoning would not be received as meaningful and persuasive. So in addition to enhancing equality among speakers, having shared normative commitments also facilitates reaching agreement and thus making decisions.

Let us turn now to a disagreement over what one may call an *organisational* issue, i.e. an issue relating to the strategy and organisation of the party. This occurs in the Theilheim group, and starts from one of the participants's questioning the appropriateness of membership ballots as a means to enhance intra-party democracy. To put things in context: the issue of membership ballots proved to be a particularly contentious issue in the German groups, since the legitimacy of the ballot over the coalition agreement between SPD and CDU/CSU that was held in the SPD after the 2013 *Bundestag* elections remains bitterly contested within the SPD's membership. In each group that participated in this study, there were supporters of the ballot (and of the 'grand coalition' between CDU/CSU and SPD) as well as opponents. In the following passage, which appears 38 minutes into the interview, the different priorities of supporters and the opponents of the ballot become manifest.

Bernd: Membership ballots are in principle a good thing. But of course, if one manipulates them and bludgeons [*niederknüppeln*] one's adversaries in gatherings where there should be discussion about [the issue on which the ballot is held] … then this has nothing to do with grassroots democracy and it has nothing to do with a democratic decision. […] One could have saved this money. … Since there was ultimately also the argument "this ballot was so expensive that we can hardly afford campaigning now" [if the members had voted against the coalition and forced a re-election]. This was, amongst other things, a reason that was given for why one must agree [to the coalition agreement]. I thought that was really questionable.

Hans-Peter: I have to say, Bernd, I absolutely disagree. Because there is certainly much more manipulation in the elected party committees than in a membership ballot. [That] is my opinion. So … I just cannot imagine that one can manipulate many people in the same way as when one wants a specific result in […] a committee.

Bernd: Whoever uses party funds to advertise in big newspapers, but does not offer the same [financial] means to adversaries [within the party] … is democratically highly dubious. I think this was a waste of party funds.

Hans-Peter: Then one has to abolish membership ballots, then one should have to say: "pointless!" … following your reasoning.

Bernd: Yes! If one does not conduct it in a democratic fashion, then one has to abolish it. Either everyone is provided with the same opportunity to argue with impact or not.

Marita: I have a different view. When I refer an issue to others for a direct decision, then I have a personal point of view on it. You have a different one [pointing at multiple others], you have a different one, you have a different one … suppose. Then everyone will try to win over the majority for his position … for whatever reasons. What I do not like is the thing with advertising in big newspapers. [But] I have made my decision on the grounds of my own reflections. And I am a realist, I am an entrepreneur, and I find it more important to hold public office and exercise influence than sitting somewhere on the opposition benches and be unable to exercise influence. And so I bit the bullet and said: yes, let's be part of this, so we can […] have a say and table our ideas and see … and if you look at the results today, then—

Bernd [interposing]**:** We have put some ideas into practice, yes. But how does the party benefit from it?

Herbert: Well, how does the party benefit? We have achieved things for the people!

Marita: We want to achieve something for the people, not for the party!

Herbert: The party is not an end in itself, Bernd!

Marita: Consider the [higher] minimum wage of €8,50. That's still not much but now it's been achieved!

Despite the evident divide between supporters and critics of the membership ballot, this discussion too is marked by participants' explicitly giving reasons for why they think as they do. Especially Marita and Bernd, the main protagonists in the exchange, explain their respective positions with remarkable clarity and try to recommend their position to one another, presenting it in a way that could be appreciated by the other side. In part it *is* appreciated: Marita endorses Bernd's argument about resource inequality in the debate preceding the ballot; so there is some partial agreement among the participants. Nonetheless, the exchange remains inconclusive as there is no sign that Bernd's arguments have managed wholly to persuade Marita (and Herbert and Hans-Peter) or vice versa.

Inconclusiveness is in fact a common pattern across groups when it comes to organisational disagreements. Rarely do deliberations over issues to do with party organisation or strategy result in the collective acceptance of some position, even if constructive proposals and attempts at justification are made by all parties to the debate. The reason for this might be that there is often simply no need for participants to

achieve agreement: organisational disagreements tend to involve quarrels about questions that have already been settled, or decisions on which participants have very little or no influence (like the design of a membership ballot). However, this should not be read as a 'failure' of deliberation. If anything, the spirited attempts at mutual justification and critical reflection that can be observed even when relatively negligible topics are discussed signal reason to believe that the groups' capacity to deliberate can be emphatically affirmed.

Discussion and conclusion

The just-examined passages are, to repeat, not isolated cases but reflect patterns observable across groups. A salient feature of political discussion among participants is that personal stories often invoked, ultimately more regularly than normative principles. When participants make appeals to principles like 'solidarity' and 'equality,' moreover, they do so much more frequently in disagreements over societal issues than in disagreements over organisational issues. This may be so because disagreements about societal issues are disagreements about how best to address certain grievances

in society. What's at stake is how to devise policies and programmatic positions that are consistent with the party's ideals; therefore, participants might be more inclined to render explicit why and how these ideals matter for their preferred course of action.

If this reading of the material is endorsed, what conclusions can be drawn about the deliberative potential of internal party organisations? The first and most important conclusion is that deliberation among ordinary party members exhibits many of the characteristics deliberative theorists would like to see present in political discussion. Not only are deliberating groups at the party base are internally diverse and equal. Also their exchanges are marked by the mutual provision of reasons. Thus, the deliberative potential of internal party organisations is certainly affirmed by the research presented here. Worries concerning the viability of intra-party deliberation seem unwarranted.

The analysis of group discussions between members of party branches in social democratic parties in Germany and Austria reveals a complex picture of partisan deliberation. A key takeaway point is that members' shared commitment to the party does not outweigh or counterbalance the groups' internal disagreements; rather, disagreement prevails *despite* widespread agreement on fundamental values. Indeed the partisan consensus on what values should predominate has proven to serve a different function in the party groups: instead of softening substantive disagreements, party

members' agreement on basic normative commitments (1) fosters and sustains a sense of equality among party members, and (2) facilitates reaching agreements and compromises, and thus making decisions, insofar as it enhances the resonance of appeals to shared principles. This might also be what distinguishes deliberation among partisans most sharply from deliberation among ordinary citizens, where speakers cannot reasonably expect their values to be shared by others due to the value pluralism that pervades post-industrial societies.

Insofar as the article's findings show that party members collectively exercise critical judgment in deliberative procedures, then, they certainly lend weight to the normative considerations about the value of intra-party deliberation that were discussed at the beginning of the article. And they also point towards an alternative research programme on intra-party democracy, which shifts the focus of attention from aggregative procedures to deliberative ones. Future research could for example look at political discussion in multiple internal sites, including online partisan fora and party conferences. It could consider the deliberative aspects of consultative mechanisms that are already in place in many parties. And of course, it could examine the relationship between deliberative and aggregative procedures, for instance whether more deliberation increases the perceived legitimacy of members' decisions. Future scholars will have to deal with these issues in order to do the multi-dimensionality of intra-par-

ty democracy justice, and deal with them in different kinds of parties, not just those whose organisational structure is likely to facilitate meaningful deliberation. Though intra-party democracy requires moments of aggregation, there is a lot to it beyond aggregation.

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