The geography of the political party: Lessons from the British Labour Party's experiment with community organising, 2010 to 2015

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A B S T R A C T

This paper highlights the geographical contributions made to academic debate about democracy, representation and the role of the political party. It argues that while geographers have made important arguments in relation to the structure and operation of representative democracy, there is scope for paying greater attention to the internal spatial dynamics of the political party. A successful political party requires a balance between the national party machine and its local membership base. This paper draws on research to explore the way in which the British Labour Party sought to renew its local membership base by adopting community organising techniques and establishing a new arms-length organisation, Movement for Change (M4C), between 2010 and 2015. It uses this research material to highlight the importance of the internal balance of power within any political party, and the need for a multi-scalar approach to understanding the successful operation of any political party.

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1. Introduction

In the after-shock of Donald Trump winning the American Election, coming so soon after the British people voted to leave the European Union (EU) in June 2016, political commentators and academics are asking themselves big questions about the operation of representative democracy. In a number of countries in Europe and North America, insurgent populist parties, movements and leaders have been successful in winning elections and influencing public opinion. Long-established political parties have been left on the side-lines as new voices enter the stage and win over the people. The five-star movement in Italy, Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, the Front National in France, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Donald Trump's success are all manifestations of new movement-oriented and populist forms of political organisation that now threaten established political parties (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Ford & Goodwin, 2014; Taggart, 2004). Moreover, these insurgents are often breaking down established partisan divides and capturing voters and supporters from across the political spectrum, posing a threat to mainstream parties on both the left and the right. They have made a point of challenging the established elite and much of their appeal rests upon their 'outsider' status. Many longer established political parties have been losing members, influence and partisan support for some time (Mair, 2013) and it is not yet clear if — and how - these older parties will be able to renew themselves for the future.

While many bemoan the threats posed to the political system and its established order by such insurgent political movements, there are others who argue that these developments represent an important democratic corrective, forcing the political elite and the mainstream parties to mount an effective response (Chawalisz, 2015; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). As such, the contemporary situation raises important questions about the continued dominance of established political parties, the evolution of political culture, the relationship between political parties and social movements and the future of political representation. Traditionally, 'the people' have been represented by politicians who belong to different political parties and who, if in government, can then legislate and shape the future of the polity. Political parties have been the key mediating institutions that facilitate representative democracy and in his seminal book on the political party, Schattschneider (1975, 1) famously argued that "modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties". If traditional political parties are now much weaker and less able to play this role, they either need to renew themselves and their relationships with voters, or other political movements, parties and practices are likely to grow in their place.

In this regard, it is worth remembering that forms of representative democracy that incorporate all adult citizens are still relatively new (Arblaster, 2002; Held, 2006). In a country like the

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United Kingdom (UK), the institutions of democracy have their origins in forms of government that pre-date the advent of universal suffrage and this aristocratic history has tended to mute expectations associated with citizenship (Jefferys, 2007; Whiteley, 2012). In many other places, democracy has developed only after periods of war, and/or the experience of fascism, communism and colonialism, and this too leaves its mark on political practice today (see Buchanan & Conway, 2002; Müller, 2011; Tilly, 2007). The differential sedimentation of political institutions and associated practices is an important backdrop to debates about the challenges facing political representation today (Fukuyama, 2014). While there is no certainty about the future of any particular political party, it is also clear that any party has the potential to change its fortunes through its leadership style and message, its propaganda, its policy profile, its attention to its own membership and its connection to the wider society. Political parties are organisations that can make their own history albeit in conditions that are not of their choosing.

In the UK, the three mainstream parties — Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats — have been experimenting with new forms of party organisation, recruitment and mobilisation ever since they were founded (Bale, 2016; Jefferys, 2007; Seyd & Whiteley, 1992, 1996). Political parties have sought to retain and increase their membership, develop leadership, and secure sufficient local support to campaign effectively during elections. Moreover, although the 'spaces of interaction' between voters and their representatives have changed with the increasing role of the media and new technology (Clarke, Jennings, Moss, & Stoker, 2017), elections still provide an important opportunity for political parties to engage with the public. Without sufficient local activists, political parties are less able to make a personal appeal to voters during elections (Johnston, 1987). It is thus imperative that political parties retain a local base of supporters who will turn out to campaign for their candidates during elections. While such an activist base is not sufficient to winning, and the wider context and campaign plays a major part in determining the appeal of any party, there is evidence that local activity still makes a significant difference to election results (Field, Johnston, Cutts, Pattie, & Fieldhouse, 2014; Field, Fieldhouse, Johnston, Pattie, & Cutts, 2016).

This paper looks at the way in which between 2010 and 2015, the British Labour Party tried to use community organising techniques in order to prosecute renewal and reform. The experiment was pitched as a way to improve the internal culture of the party, to reconnect with movements for change, to use campaigns to foster political leadership and develop policy ideas, as well as improve the ability of the party to win at elections (see Stears, 2015). The bulk of this paper outlines this experiment and looks at the extent to which it succeeded on the ground in two very different areas of the country: Cardiff in South Wales and Southampton in Hampshire, England. In so doing, the paper is designed to explore this experiment as a means to consider the wider lessons for political parties, highlighting the importance of the internal geographical balance of power within the party. While the case is particularly relevant to social democratic parties, it has wider significance across the political spectrum as well as for those exploring party renewal in other parts of the world. It also has relevance for disciplinary debates about the intersections between geography and democracy, as outlined in the next section.

2. Democracy, geography and the role of the political party

Geographical research into the question of democracy has tended to be divided into three rather different but complementary camps. One approach has involved taking a social movement perspective to dismiss representative democracy as an oxymoron whereby representation is understood as necessarily antithetical to the individual autonomy and political equality required of real democracy. Most clearly represented by the work of Mark Purcell (2008, 2013), this is a vision of democracy rooted in self-organised social movements in which people speak for themselves without representation, driven by an aspiration for political power-sharing and equality rather than a form of political order or government (see also Graeber, 2013; Isin, 2002; Rancière, 2001).

A second perspective has involved focusing on political deliberation and the extent to which citizens are engaged in discussions about shared concerns. This work is most developed in relation to the practices of planning (Healey, 2006 [1997], 2012) and development studies (Chambers, 1994) but there has also been growing interest in the work of the American pragmatists and their ideas about the processes of public-formation and popular problem-solving (Barnett & Bridge, 2013; Barnett, 2014; Lake, 2017a, 2017b), as well as the politics of knowledge-creation (Harney, McCurry, Scott, & Wills, 2016). As a whole, this body of scholarship is concerned with the ways in which citizens can engage in the deliberation that underpins good decision-making, and the role of space and place in this process (Howell, 2003; Iveson, 2007).

A third focus for geographical research has involved exploring the structures and practices that underpin the operation of representative democracy. Geographers have been alert to the way in which geographical territory (constituencies or districts) and the location of boundaries between them can determine who ends up with political power (Bunge, 1966; Morrill, 2004; Sauer, 1918; Taylor, 1973). Using examples of the franchise in Iraq, South Africa and the USA, Forest (2008, p. 386, see also, Robinson, 1998) rightly argues that "the study of political representation … must involve not only how 'the people' vote but also how 'the people' are imagined and how their votes are transformed (or not) into political power".

It is also important to recognise the geographical division of power that underpins the jurisdiction of representative government at different spatial scales. The differences between unitary, federal and confederate forms of government have a profound effect on the spaces available for political organisation and action, but so too, the differential powers afforded to parish/neighbourhood, local, urban and regional government can also be critical in determining political opportunity structures for citizens and their representatives (Berry, 1987; Clark, 1984; Maas, 1959). As such, the geo-constitutional underpinning of government provides an important backdrop for political organisation and decision-making within any state (Frug, 1999, 2000, 2014; Wills, 2016). Citizens are embedded in a multi-scalar polity that affords them the opportunity to select their representatives and call them to account for a range of different decisions taken at a variety of overlapping scales such as the city, region and the pan-national scale in the case of the EU (Painter, 2008).

In addition, there is a strong tradition of electoral geography that focuses on mapping the outcome of elections, the distribution of votes across space, and the extent to which geography then shapes the formation and outlook of government (Agnew, 1987, 1996, 2014; Johnston & Pattie, 2004, 2006, 2008; Cupples, 2009; Warf & Leib, 2011). Geographers have highlighted the way in which parties both reflect and augment social, economic and cultural cleavages within any polity and its franchise. Moreover, as political parties win support in particular places they can start to shift the local political culture. Most obviously demonstrated in relation to the distribution of the Labour vote in elections in the United Kingdom (UK), several generations of voters living in what were once coal mining and heavy industrial areas have proved most likely to remain Labour voters despite dramatic shifts in the nature of work and associated societal change (Dorling & Henning, 2015; and for the early history of these trends see also; Pelling, 1967). While there