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RECEIVED 18 August 2023
ACCEPTED 02 October 2023
PUBLISHED 02 November 2023

CITATION
Aylott N and Bolin N (2023) Editorial: Party
leader selection in Europe: concepts, processes
and outcomes. *Front. Polit. Sci.* 5:1279488.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2023.1279488

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Editorial: Party leader selection in Europe: concepts, processes and outcomes

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KEYWORDS

leader, political party, case study, selection, process

Editorial on the Research Topic

[Party leader selection in Europe: concepts, processes and outcomes](#)

How do political parties choose their leaders? Thanks to important collaborative research efforts in recent years (of which [Pilet and Cross, 2014](#) is just one example), we have a better appreciation of how European parties, in particular, say that they choose their leaders and how that has changed over time. We know, for example, that the “selectorate,” the section of the party that has the formal right to appoint the leader, has become more “inclusive” in recent years. Put simply, more people take part in the decision. However, what parties stipulate in their statutes—the “official story,” as [Katz and Mair \(1992\)](#) described it—is only part of the picture and sometimes not even the most important part. The “real story,” which unfolds within and sometimes around the rules, is still insufficiently understood.

Brief consideration of a certain outcome of selection, a “coronation,” confirms that crucial parts of the process occur away from the public eye. A coronation occurs when the selectorate finds itself with only a single candidate to approve as the leader ([Kenig, 2009](#)). Somehow, potential rivals have been sifted out before the selectorate gets involved ([Aylott and Bolin, 2021](#)). Who does the sifting and how?

This Research Topic addresses such informal processes in leader selection. We felt that case studies would be an effective research strategy for illuminating the sorts of contexts, actors, techniques and mechanisms that we were after. We wanted cases that were, as we wrote, “revealing—perhaps especially conflictual, or innovative, or unusual in some other way.” The topic attracted a quartet of case studies that fit precisely that template.

The cases comprise Christian democratic parties in Flanders and Germany and liberal parties in Sweden and Wallonia. The Christian democratic cases feature two or three leader selections each, differentiated by time and/or the type of leader being selected. Each of the liberal cases involves a single observed selection process. All the studies employ the method of process tracing, in which a sequence of events is recounted in some detail. All relied on data collected from media reports and—especially for the studies of Belgian parties—elite interviews. Earlier versions of the articles were presented at a digital workshop that we hosted in October 2021.

Probably the most well-known case is that of the German Christian Democratic Union. As [Jun and Minas](#) recount, it began with the selection of a new party leader in early 2021. There followed an additional selection, held jointly with the Christian Social Union, of a chancellor candidate. This one misfired, at least if the outcome of the subsequent federal parliamentary election is any guide. That debacle, in turn, occasioned another

party leader selection. In the Flemish case, meanwhile, [Luybaert et al.](#) compare and contrast two leader selections from 2003 and 2019. The former was a coronation—the norm in the party. The latter was ostensibly much more competitive. Yet it too was subject to intensive behind-the-scenes negotiation by the party's various power centers.

The two liberal cases exhibit similarities and contrasts. In both, there were deviations from formal procedures. In Wallonia, where, according to [Legein and van Haute](#), the liberal party “is characterized by a low level of institutionalization,” the two main “personalized factions” agreed to “bend” the party's rules in order to facilitate a certain person's candidacy. This candidate got nowhere near winning. Yet the concession served to maintain cordial relations between the factions—a fascinatingly delicate balancing act. In Sweden, where the Liberal Party is, by contrast, highly institutionalized, no rules were broken or even bent. Nevertheless, and as [Aylott and Bolin](#) show, a grassroots revolt undermined the party establishment's control over the selection. Interestingly, the act of candidacy itself had varying meaning and significance across our cases. Among Swedish Liberals, a leadership bid was regarded as damaging and egoistic if it continued once it was perceived as having no realistic chance of success. This did not apply in the Wallonian party.

We would need a full article to examine fully all the inferences and implications that flow from these four rich case studies. Preliminarily, though, we may consider two general points here.

The first point is largely empirical and uncontroversial. Evidently, the selection of party leaders is complex. Even the official story varies markedly between our cases. The process is often unpredictable, too. Much depends on contingent factors: the political context (including, to cite [Luybaert et al.](#), the “general feeling” in a party about what “general profile” is required in a new leader at a given moment); the respective abilities of the aspirants; and also just chance events. Yet regularities across cases are still discernible. Our studies illustrate, for example, that elite intra-party negotiation remains a vital part of what shapes an outcome. At the same time, the party on the ground, to use another of Katz and Mair's terms, cannot be discounted. In some circumstances, the membership really does decide.

The second overarching point is about concepts. Conceptual development should remain a high priority in our research.

In the course of assembling our topic, we have made progress, we believe, in pinning down an important concept. It concerns a type of actor, a “steering agent” ([Aylott and Bolin, 2017](#); [Bolin and Aylott, 2021](#)). Put very briefly, and referring back to the coronations mentioned above, the steering agent is the sifter. It assumes the task of overseeing and manipulating the field of potential leaders in order to induce a coronation. We saw some steering agents in

action in our case studies, but not in all. It is also a fragile category. The steering agent exists only when the main intra-party power centers accept its legitimacy. That acceptance can melt away quite suddenly, as could be seen in two, maybe three, of our cases.

Finally, we must reflect on another concept: the causal mechanism. When thinking about mechanisms, we lean toward [Elster's](#) (1989) cogs-and-wheels metaphor (see also [Hedström, 2008](#); [Backlund, 2020](#)). Mechanisms are not causes of social phenomena, but they facilitate causal effects. They should also be generalisable.

In our own study of the Swedish case, we propose a mechanism, a “shift in the perception of procedural legitimacy,” through which a general intra-party understanding of appropriate procedures is upended by its becoming entangled in a separate ideological and strategic conflict. In the Flemish Christian democrats' selection, meanwhile, we saw the effect of the “last person standing.” This mechanism operates after an electoral disaster has befallen a party. A leadership vacancy is one consequence. Another is that a rare survivor of the disaster among the party's leading figures suddenly enjoys enhanced weight in the selection of the new leader. There may well be more mechanisms in our case studies, but they need even more elaboration than for the two introduced here.

Author contributions

NA: Writing—original draft. NB: Writing—review & editing.

Funding

Research for this article was funded by a project grant issued by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (ÖSS dnr 19/18).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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