Political Parties as Electoral-Professional Machines
An Empirical Research Agenda

Pieter Moens, pmoens.moens@ugent.be
Ghent Association for the Study of Parties And Representation
Department of Political Science, Ghent University (Belgium)

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Section 16: Party Politics – Party Structure and Organization

1. Introduction

Political advisors appeal to our imagination. Ranging from Machiavelli to spindoctor Kasper Juul in the Borgen TV series, they inhabit a peculiar but powerful place in collective memory. Political scientists are no exception to that rule. Political professionals are often considered influential figures close to the center of power: “Political consultants do not limit themselves to executive duties, technical support or specific skills: rather, in many ways, they substitute for what used to be the very essence of the party, at least at election time, namely decision making and organization. (...) Often, a source of tension between the politician and the consultant is the consultant’s desire to be given full decision-making authority in all aspects and all phases of the campaign, to the point where the politicians and outsider observers may wonder who is in charge” (Mancini, 1999, p. 237). Oddly enough, these recurrent claims about the professionalization of party politics remain largely unverified empirically. Research on staff in political parties remains scarce (Webb & Kolodny, 2006).

Therefore, this paper stipulates an empirical research agenda on the professionalization of political parties. We start by introducing the role of professionalization within our theoretical frame of reference: the literature on party transformation – a conscious choice. Although a variety of disciplines deal with the concept of political professionalization, political parties remain the main focus of this research. Our interest lies in what the process of professionalization can tell us about the nature of today’s political parties. After this theoretical orientation, a preliminary conceptual framework will be introduced. Taking the work of Panebianco (1988) as a starting point, we’ll try to translate concepts into empirically applicable research instruments. As will soon become clear, that conceptual work isn’t finished. The author welcomes suggestions on how to further develop this framework. The same goes for the final section, in which a preliminary empirical research strategy is presented.

2. Professionalization in Party Transformation Literature

Political parties are widely considered to be professional entities. Scholars have described present-day party organizations as ‘capital-intensive’ (André Krouwel, 2012), ‘professionalized electoral machines’ (Scarrow, Webb, & Farrell, 2000) and ‘well-resourced, professional campaign organizations’ (Mair, Müller, & Plasser, 2004). As Krouwel (2006) argued that the follow-up of party models can be considered as a general theory of part transformation, it’s clear that professionalization has increased every step of the way. Bearing in mind that these theoretical models were inspired by historical evolutions within West-European parties, we’ll discuss how seminal authors have related to professionalization in their contributions on party transformation.
2.1. Catchallization: the origins of professionalization

Launching a distinct model centered around the phenomenon, Panebianco (1988) was the first author to focus explicitly on professionalization. The author formulated a new party model by contrasting the electoral-professional party with the traditional mass party along five aspects: the role of party staff, electoral appeal, leadership, funding and ideology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mass bureaucratic parties</th>
<th>Electoral-professional parties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central role of the bureaucracy (political-administrative tasks)</td>
<td>Central role of the professionals (specialized tasks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership party, strong vertical organizational ties, appeal to the “electorate of belonging”</td>
<td>Electoral party, weak vertical ties, appeal to the&quot;opinion electorate&quot; pre-eminence of representatives, leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-eminence of internal leaders, collegial leadership</td>
<td>Pre-eminence of representatives, personalized leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financing through membership and collateral activities (party cooperatives, trade unions etc.)</td>
<td>Financing through interest groups and public funds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress on ideology, central role of the believers within the organization</td>
<td>Stress on issues and leadership, central role of the careerists and representatives of interest groups within the organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The electoral-professional party (Panebianco, 1988, p. 264)

For Panebianco (1988), the increasing employment of professionals signified an important departure from the organizational DNA of parties up that point. “Professionalization is the distinguishing feature of the organizational change political parties are currently undergoing; it implies the decreasing importance of the old bureaucracy and the increasing importance of the staff” (Panebianco, 1988, p. 231). Although earlier accounts, like Epstein’s ‘contagion from the right’ (1980), had explored these organizational innovations before, Panebianco (1988) offered an elaborate view on what professionalization entailed and explored its consequences for party organization, the distribution of power within parties and electoral competition. We’ll return to these anticipated effects in 4.1., where the impact of professionalization on political parties will be discussed.

The roots of this organizational transformation within parties run parallel with insights on the emergence of catch-all parties. Kirchheimer (1966) observed a broader societal transformation marked by individualization, decreasing class identification and rising living standards. This forced parties to reinvent their strategic orientation: trading in the narrow electoral appeal of their classe gardée for a broader electoral appeal, parties became increasingly vote-seeking (Strom, 1990; Wolinetz, 2002). These socio-economical shifts coincided with the democratization of mass media (especially television), providing politicians with a new and direct form of linkage with voters. It’s fair to say that these evolutions generated a far-reaching shock for political parties, with effects rippling out until today. Puhle (2002) has even argued that recent changes within parties reflect Kirchheimer’s (1966) theory, labeling these developments as catch-allization plus.
2.2. Cartelization: professionalization accelerated

Early electoral-professional parties were innovators seeking a competitive advantage over their competitors. Yet cartelization turned professionalization into the new normal. “Campaigns are now almost exclusively capital-intensive, professional and centralized, and (...) rely increasingly for their resources on the subventions and other benefits and privileges afforded by the state” (R. S. Katz & Mair, 1995, p. 20). Since parties tapped these resources collectively, their organizations grew more alike as a result.

For example, Katz and Mair (2003) identified a general transformation taking place in party politics: the ascendancy of the party in public office. The authors drew a direct connection between this evolution and staff employment: “By the end of the 1980s a clear shift had begun to take place within party organizations in terms of the allocation of party staffs. Such time-series data on party staffs as are available contain clear evidence of a common trend across countries and parties whereby the growth in the numbers of staff employed by the parliamentary parties, and hence by the party in public office, has significantly outstripped that in the numbers employed by the party headquarters. (...) Given that staff constitute a crucial organizational resource, these data also therefore confirm an increasing bias in favour of the party in public office” (R. S. Katz & Mair, 2003, p. 123).

As a result of this shifting internal balance, scholars have labeled the organization of cartel parties as strataarchy or franchise systems: a loosely-coupled network of relatively independent subunits (Bolleyer, 2012; Carty, 2004). As the seat of increasingly powerful leaderships, the party in public office accumulates resources (staff, funding), while the party in central office is gradually reduced to a marketing vehicle focused on campaigning.

2.3. Business firm parties: unchecked professionalization

Scholars of party change have acknowledged that innovation clashes with organizational inertia in established parties (Appleton & Ward, 1997; Harmel & Janda, 1994; Panebianco, 1988). Existing parties can therefore be understood as a compromise between a reluctant ‘wall of resistance’ (Harmel & Janda, 1994) and the pressure to professionalize their activities. Yet Hopkin and Paolucci (1999) have argued that this doesn’t apply to business firm parties. Unimpeded by a stable party infrastructure, business firm parties embody “the electoral-professional model of party organisation (...) taken to its logical conclusion” (Hopkin & Paolucci, 1999, p. 311).

As these parties lack sharply defined social objectives, professionals are enlisted to shape a market-adjusted product. “Policy positions are elaborated by reference to opinion polling which sounds the electorate’s views on contentious issues and provides information on those policy proposals most likely to attract the target electorate. The party’s election campaign uses standard marketing and advertising procedures in order to ‘sell a product’ (political representatives arguing for public policies) as an enterprise would use them to sell private consumer goods” (Hopkin & Paolucci, 1999, pp. 310-311). Using political ideas as carefully constructed instruments to get leadership elected, the approach of business firm parties conforms to Olson’s view (1965), who described policy as a ‘byproduct’. This context has specific implications for how such parties deal with staff employment: “Party bureaucracies are kept to a bare minimum, with technical tasks often ‘contacted out’ to external experts with no ties to the party” (Hopkin & Paolucci, 1999, p. 333).
3. Professionalization as a concept

What does professionalization mean, exactly? The concept is used so commonly that we seem to take its meaning for granted. In this section, we'll try to carve out a conceptualization of how it can best be understood by scholars of party politics. First, we'll introduce our understanding of the concept, based on the existing theoretical work written by scholars of party politics. After that, we'll take a closer look at three aspects characterizing political professionals: independence, skills and organizational roles. Pinning down an explicit definition involves clear choices. We'll therefore conclude this section by discussing what is not included in our view on professionalization.

3.1. Defining the ‘political professional’

Our understanding of professionalization within parties is based on the parsimonious definition by Webb & Kolodny: “professionalization refers to an institutional process by which professionals become more central to an organization (in our case, a political party organization)” (2006, p. 339). Basically, their approach boils down to the increasing presence and importance of a key actor: the political professional. Therefore, the weight of our conceptual exercise will center around defining the ‘political professional’. One of the first scholars to write on this subject was sociologist Max Weber (1921). His approach focused on the traits of individuals he described as political professionals. Weber’s conceptualization rests on two key elements. First, a political professional is exclusively dependent on politics for his or her income. Second, this person possesses “a specialist’s knowledge of political mechanisms and processes” (Mancini, 1999, p. 232). However, it wasn’t until Panebianco’s seminal work (1988) that political professionalism would be developed as a full-fledged theoretical framework.

To illustrate the nature of the electoral-professional party, he drew a clear distinction between the traditional bureaucrat and the newly merging experts or professionals. Adjusting the sociological ‘ideal type professional’ to the inner workings of political parties, Panebianco (1988) described differences along five dimensions: social background, skills, organizational role, relation to leadership and control system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bureaucrat</th>
<th>Professional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social background</td>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>Higher middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills - education</td>
<td>Running the party machine</td>
<td>Extra-political expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less-educated</td>
<td>Well-educated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational role</td>
<td>Line role: administrator</td>
<td>Staff role: expert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation to leadership</td>
<td>Easy to control: dependence</td>
<td>Hard to control: independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control system</td>
<td>Hierarchical system: subordination</td>
<td>Dual control system: hierarchy vs. peer judgement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Distinction Bureaucrat – Professional, Panebianco (1988)

3.2. Dimensions of political professionalism

Although we’ve differentiated between political professionals and bureaucrats, these theoretical features aren’t plainly translatable into empirical categories. Partly because certain aspects feel a little outdated – newly emerging electoral-professional parties were obviously different from today’s
political context – but mostly because the level of abstraction remains too high. Three dimensions in particular need closer attention: relation to leadership (independence), skills (expertise) and organizational role. As we’ll illustrate soon, there’s no established consensus on how these dimensions should be interpreted. Yet our ambition to study the phenomenon empirically compels us to make conceptual choices. Creating conceptual clarity along these three dimensions will be a prerequisite to take stock of professionalization patterns within political parties.

3.2.1 Independence: internal vs. external professionals

Most descriptions political professionals are dominated by the image of an industry of political consulting, external to party organizations. According to Mancini (1999), Panebianco’s description points in that direction, too: “the technicians about which Panebianco speaks are mainly advertising and public relations experts, media experts, journalists, and pollsters who not only work for the parties but also apply their expertise in fields such as business communications and commercial advertising. (...) their life does not depend exclusively on politics (...) When they work for political parties, politics becomes a secondary field in which to apply knowledge developed in other fields” (Mancini, 1999, p. 234). In concreto, it boils down to a fully independent body of political consultants with an own professional code, much like doctors or lawyers.

Yet there’s discussion on how these external consultants relate to professionalization. For some authors (Dulio, 2006; Scammell, 1998), it’s a process of consultants crowding out party personnel: “party strategists have been replaced by non-party ‘professional’ strategists. Employed at first for their expertise with the technologies mentioned above, the professionals become increasingly central to campaign strategy and even policymaking” (Scammell, 1998, p. 4). Because such approaches are primarily inspired by the American, candidate-centered context of campaigning, they don’t correspond with the European party-centered experience (Karlsen, 2010). As Strömbäck (2007) argued, we agree that “it would be wrong to view campaigns in countries where the political parties are strong, and where the expertise in polling, news management, and voter segmentation, therefore, is in-house, as inherently less professionalized than in countries where the parties are weaker and where they make more use of outside consultants” (Strömbäck, 2007, p. 63).

Although the use of advertising agencies is also considered widespread in Europe, Farrell and Webb (2002) confirm most parties employ their own ‘in house specialists’ because of a reluctance towards external professionals. This tendency is illustrated in Karlsen’s (2010) empirical study of Norway’s ‘Fear of the Political Consultant’. Although Norwegian parties did employ external experts when technical assistance was concerned, strategy assistance remained an exclusively internal affair. This lead the author to conclude that these in house experts have come to play a decisive role. “Norwegian campaigning may not be looking to see the introduction of the independent political consultant any time soon. However, it is evident that a new breed of campaign professional has emerged. Just as the independent political consultants are influential in American politics, these party employees are, as shown by this article, gaining much influence on politics and campaign development” (Karlsen, 2010, p. 210).

3.2.2 Skills: areas of expertise

The existing literature on political professionalization seems to overemphasize political marketing and public relations. However, Mancini (1999) claims that there’s another side to the process: “The professionalization of politics, as it has developed in recent years involves two fundamental fields of
political life, campaigning and decision making. The first field is certainly best known and the one that thus far has produced the most evident and macroscopic effects” (Mancini, 1999, p. 237). In other words: to have more complete understanding of professionalization, policy experts should also be included. Broadening this spectrum even further, Webb and Fisher (2003) added “another sphere of party work in which specialist professionals have become more prominent: that of fund-raising” (Webb & Fisher, 2003, p. 13). We argue that professionals can actually deliver expertise on a broad range of areas. Since staff can be considered a resource for political parties, decisions on what kind of expertise to attract will be dependent on political-strategic objectives. Inspired by the insights on party goals by Harmel and Janda (1994) we’ve identified four relevant areas of expertise: votes, office, policy and internal organization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Office</th>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Internal organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political marketing:</td>
<td>Networking:</td>
<td>Policy implementation:</td>
<td>Participation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Market research (polling, focus groups, data mining etc.)</td>
<td>- civil society, interest groups, lobbyists</td>
<td>- Legal: lawmaking</td>
<td>- dealing with members and non-members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Strategy: spindoctors, spokesmen, public relations</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Governance: public management</td>
<td>Income:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Content / product creation: mass media, social media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Fund-raising, donor relationships, public funding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Areas of political expertise

3.2.3. Organizational role: technical vs. strategic

The last dimension that deserves extra attention is the organizational role of professionals. In addition to their degree of independence and their area of expertise, professionals distinguish themselves from bureaucrats by their organizational role. Obviously, we shouldn’t automatically assume that every current day political employee is a professional. That would deprive the concept from most of its meaning. However, drawing that line is not as easy as one might expect. By just sticking to the ideal type professional (mostly applicable to American external consultants), we’d lose a lot of collaborators that should make the cut: “not all employees will display each of the core characteristics of the ideal-type professional – expertise, job autonomy, commitment, vocational identification, a code of
professional ethics and membership of a professional body that regulates its members. Nevertheless, it is plausible to suppose that a more flexibly defined notion of professionalism applies widely” (Webb & Kolodny, 2006, p. 340).

If this concept is to be used in an empirical research effort, such a flexible notion still needs some form of classification between professionals and non-professionals. As a solution, we’d suggest a distinction between technical and strategic expertise. For example: if a staff member specialized in graphic design (an area related to political marketing) designs content created by others, his contribution is of a purely technical nature – corresponding to the administrative line roll ascribed to bureaucrats by Panebianco (1988). In an effort to conserve the author’s initial philosophy, we’d only consider employees adding strategic specialist knowledge to one of the expertise areas as ‘political professionals’.

3.3. Conceptual implications: what professionalization is not

Previous paragraphs have offered an account of what professionalization can be understood within the context of political parties. By drawing those lines, our view on the concept runs counter to the everyday use of the concept, as well as the way in which research traditions other than party politics have approached the notion of professionalization. To clarify our approach to the concept, we offer three claims on what our conception of professionalism is not:

professionalism ≠ efficiency

For some scholars of political communication, professionalization is about effectiveness and efficiency. It has more resemblance to the everyday concept of professionalism used in popular conversation – which Webb & Kolodny (2006) have labeled ‘the soft notion of professionalization’. For example, Negrine et al. (2007) add elements of quality: “to be a professional or to act in a professional manner is to engage in a set of practices that are accepted, at particular moments in time as ‘the standards of the best’ and acknowledged to be the most appropriate in those circumstances” (Negrine, Mancini, Holtz-Bacha, Stylianos, & eds., 2007, p. 29). Although it is often assumed that specialists create a better functioning organization, we shouldn’t equate employing professionals with increasing efficiency or effectiveness.

professionalism ≠ about political officials

Weber’s seminal description (1921) doesn’t only fit political personnel – it also applies to political officials for whom politics is career. This explains why today, the term ‘political professional’ pops up in studies dealing with the remuneration of political officials, often making use of the term ‘political class’ (Borchert, 2003; De Winter & Brans, 2003) or the impact of politics being increasingly considered as a profession (Von Beyme, 1996). We acknowledge the value of this line of research for scholars of party politics, but our interest here is with staff and consultants.

professionalism ≠ exclusively American

The U.S. political system and its campaigning have clearly been the main inspiration for the existing view on professionalization. It isn’t surprising that the United States are often considered the most professionalized: “The attractions pile up to make the U.S. the Mecca of political campaigning: the burgeoning industry of political consultants with its associated and extensive campaign literature, and the extraordinary accessibility of these consultants and their willingness to proclaim their knowledge; the advanced state of communications technology and complexity of the U.S. media market; and the
multiplicity of electoral races and their relatively high international profile” (Scammell, 1998, p. 1). Yet we shouldn’t automatically assume that there’s one single model of professionalism. The specificities of the American political system aren’t easily transferred to other nations. Just as Strömbäck (2007) noticed that the concept of political marketing system-specific traits of the American experience, it shouldn’t be the case for professionalization, either. “While there is nothing wrong in theoretical concepts being affected by the context in which they are formulated, it is also important not to assume a generalizability that does not exist. At the same time, system-specific conditions that the parties or campaigns cannot themselves control, should neither be presupposed nor be part of the definitions or theoretical concepts.” (Strömbäck, 2007, p. 63).

4. Studying professionalization empirically

Studies on professionalization often have a descriptive, historical approach. Such case studies offer a view on the evolution of a single party’s political professionalism, focusing on political turning points (e.g. New Labour) that produced a professional party machine. The aim of this research project is to capture the impact of professionalization empirically on a more aggregate level, which calls for an international-comparative approach. Since we want to investigate the connections between professionalization and other phenomena, we can analyze the concept in two directions. As some others have already done (Farrell, 1996; André Krouwel, 2012; Poguntke, Scarrow, & Webb, 2015), professionalization can be addressed as a dependent variable. Yet exploring the opposite direction might produce interesting results, too. By assessing the impact of professionalization as an explanatory variable, one addresses fundamental questions concerning professionalization. Why should we care this subject? What difference does it make if party X is professionalized to greater extent (or in a different way) than part Y?

This section starts off with an overview of the theoretical insights on the potential causes and effects of professionalization. We’ll then focus on the empirical tests that authors have carried out on the variables explaining professionalization. To conclude, we’ll formulate a preliminary research strategy, consisting of two phases.

4.1. The causal web of professionalization

Table four contains the theoretical causes and effects of professionalization offered by existing literature. The potential systemic causes were derived from (Farrell, 1996), party-specific causes were adopted from the party-centred theory of professionalized campaigning by Gibson and Rommele (2001). Starting with the role of systemic variables, Farrell (1996) argues that presidential systems promote candidate-centered campaigning, leading to American style professionalization. In a similar vein, majoritarian electoral procedures can be considered confrontational and candidate-centered. On the other hand, the parliamentary, proportional systems dominating European politics leads to party-centered campaigning. Popular access to nationalized media (e.g. TV) is another boost to campaign professionalization. Heavily commercialized media markets and low (or non-existent) barriers to political advertising are another incentive to professionalize. Lastly, the author expects more throat-cutting confrontation in two-party (win-or-lose) systems than in multi-party systems where coalitions need to be constructed after election day. Adding party-specific variables to the discussion, Gibson and Rommele (2001) hypothesized that “the move toward professional campaigning is seen as most likely to take place in a well-funded, mainstream, right-wing party with
significant resources and a centralized internal power structure that has recently suffered an electoral defeat and/or a loss of governing status” (Gibson & Rommele, 2001, p. 37).

As the potential theoretical effects of professionalization turn up in a broad variety of publications, we’ve opted to arrange them in four arena’s, based on Strömbäck and Van Aelst (2013). Leaning on earlier work by Sjöblom (1968) and Nord (2006), the authors argue that strategic behavior of political parties takes place in four arena’s: an internal, electoral, parliamentary and media arena. The implications of professionalization in the internal arena center around two elements: organization and power. The most infamous hypothesis is that professionals themselves have become power players within parties (Harrop, 2001; Mancini, 1999; Wring, 2001). But the process is also assumed to have a wider impact on power distribution within parties: different scholars have claimed professionalization has caused increasingly centralized leadership (Mair et al., 2004; Scarrow et al., 2000; Wring, 2001), much like R. S. Katz and Mair (2003) described with ‘the ascendancy of the party in public office’. Professionalization is also considered to decrease the level of organization/institutionalization (Epstein, 1980; Hopkin & Paolucci, 1999; Panebianco, 1988; Puhle, 2002). However, this claim is connected to the reliance on external consultants, it’s unclear how this would apply to a party-centered context.

The anticipated effects of professionalization mostly concern the electoral arena. Panebianco (1988), the author who launched this field of research, explicitly referred to it by labeling his new party model electoral-professional. The underlying assumption is that political parties started investing in more capital-intensive forms of campaigning to grow their electoral base. To attract this bigger pool of voters, it is believed that parties have developed a more flexible ideological profile. This active vote-seeking behavior is also considered to induce increasing shifts in voter loyalty, creating electoral volatility (Hopkin & Paolucci, 1999; Swanson & Mancini, 1996). On an aggregate, party-systemic level, authors hypothesize that this move towards political marketing caused a loss of legitimacy with voters, resulting in the success of anti-establishment parties (Mair et al., 2004; Swanson & Mancini, 1996).
As for the implications in the media arena, professionalized political marketing is considered to produce a distorted image of politics, a “media-created, politician-manipulated reality” (Nimmo, 1996). As Zaller (1998) describes in his ‘rule of product substitution’, the attempts of political professionals to a certain image of officials is increasingly countered by reporting on the underlying campaign tactics of political professionals. This interplay between media and professional communication gives rise to mutual mistrust between journalists and politicians (Hájek, Vára, & Svobodová, 2015). As the impact of professionals on the actions of parties in the parliamentary arena isn’t explicitly mentioned in publications dealing with professionalization, potential effects in this arena will have to be developed further through literature review of publications on think tanks (Stone, Denham, & Garnett, 1998) and policy advice (Craft & Howlett, 2012, 2013). We welcome further suggestions to expand our understanding in this arena.

4.2. Research strategy

Existing studies on professionalization within parties either aim for a deep (single-case) or wide (large-N international comparison) focus. This research proposal aims to balance depth and width by working in two phases. We'll start out with a broad, large-N spectrum in phase one, in order to increase our focus by identifying statistical connections between professionalization and its potential causes and effects. These connections will be explored in depth in phase two, where a more detailed qualitative case-study will be carried out on a limited number of parties.

In the first phase, our intention is to get a grip on the big contours shaping professionalization. Applying statistical regression analyses on the staff level data provided by the Political Party Database Project (PPDB), we’ll identify the systemic and party-specific variables that best explain the variance in staffing patterns. These data, to be released in the fall of 2016, will contain staff levels at a single point in time (2014) for 62 parties in 15 countries (mostly European). The ambition of the PPDB is to further expand this database with the data gathered by Katz and Mair (1992) - covering 1965 to 1989 – and Krouwel (2012), which 1990’s and 2000’s. This integrated database would contain a time-series of staff levels. These data will enable us to approach professionalization as an independent variable, making it possible to test hypotheses on the impact of professionalization on other variables. Insights on the impact of professionalization on the four arena’s we’ve mentioned are either based on single-case studies of individual parties, or they rest on untested theoretical claims. For example, we’d be able to assess whether investing in professionalization translates into electoral success or coincides with ideological flexibility, as is often assumed.

While these analyses will generate interesting clues on professionalization by themselves, we’ll use their results as a foundation for our case-selection of the parties that will be studies in phase two. These cases will be selected along the lines of variables with a measurable connection to professionalization (cause and/or effect). Depending on the results, relevant variables might be political system, electoral weight, ideological orientation, governing experience, etc. Having reduced our cases to about 5 to 10 parties from 3 to 4 Western-European nations, we’ll carry out a more nuanced measurement of party professionalization, making use of qualitative methods of data-gathering. The study will culminate in an explanatory, comparative case study focused on identifying the causes and effects of the different dimensions of professionalization.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Quantitative analysis of West-European parties</td>
<td>Explanatory: Prof. as dependent variable</td>
<td>*What systemic variables explain cross-party differences in staff levels?</td>
<td>Political Party Database</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Explanatory: Prof. as independent variable</td>
<td>*Impact of professionalization on electoral performance?</td>
<td>Data Handbook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Impact of professionalization on ideological profile?</td>
<td>Katz &amp; Mair + additional databases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Qualitative Comparative case study of 5 to 10 parties in 3 to 4 nations</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>*Where do selected parties stand on three dimensions of professionalization?</td>
<td>Primary data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Explanatory: Prof. as dependent variable</td>
<td>*Which theoretical causes of professionalization explain the position of selected parties on three dimensions?</td>
<td>Primary data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Explanatory: Prof. as independent variable</td>
<td>*How do the three dimensions of professionalization affect internal power distribution and organization?</td>
<td>Primary data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*How do the three dimensions of professionalization affect</td>
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Table 5: A preliminary research strategy

4.2.1. Data-gathering and operationalization

Gathering empirical data on professionalization is a challenge. Cooperation of political parties themselves is crucial: “this research depends fundamentally on the willingness of parties themselves to cooperate in granting access to data and employees. On previous limited experience, this is not a problem to be taken lightly, especially in so far as gathering survey data on party employees is concerned” (Webb & Kolodny, 2006). As a result, we plan to start off our analysis with the existing quantitative data we have at our disposal: staff levels. The second phase of our research will be based on primary, qualitative data.

Quantitative data on staff levels within parties is the most commonly used indicator for cross-national analyses of professionalization (Farrell & Webb, 2002; André Krouwel, 2012; Webb & Fisher, 2003). Staff levels have been used as absolute figures or have been combined with other figures in ratios. While absolute figures indicate how much staff is active within sub-units of a party (central office, parliamentary group), ratios like professionals/members or professionals/parliamentary seats are an expression of the organizational balance within parties. Working with data on staff levels has clear upsides. Most importantly, the availability of these figures allows for interesting comparison across nations and party lines. Furthermore, they can be connected to more variables than just members and seats in parliament (systemic variables, election results, resources,…). However, there are downsides to using staff levels. Since every employee is counted, staff data actually measures the combined effect of bureaucratization and professionalization. In addition to that, staff levels don’t capture non-
permanent collaborators like external consultants. This little formula illustrates which aspects are covered by staff levels:

\[
\text{Staff level} = \text{bureaucratization} + (\text{professionalization} - \text{external consultants})
\]

Moreover, by solely relying on staff levels in an empirical study, we’d only be scratching the conceptual surface of professionalization. As we’ve illustrated in our discussion of the dimensions of political professionalism, the concept is about more than their mere presence within political parties. Their skills, relation towards parties and their organizational role are just as significant. According to Webb and Kolodny (2006), a qualitative approach holds the key to a more intricate understanding of professionalization: “individual party employees are often willing to grant interviews and to discuss matters with a striking degree of candour, which suggests that qualitative methods may hold the key to unlocking this particular research programme” (Webb & Kolodny, 2006, p. 345).

For that reason, we’ll have to develop a qualitative measuring instrument that captures a multidimensional record of professionalization, while remaining applicable for international comparison. This is an element that certainly needs additional attention. The CAMPROF index developed by Gibson & Rommele (2009) might offer some inspiration. This 30 point index covers the technicality and intensity of campaign tools (high-tech, polling, ...), campaign style (aggressiveness, campaign permanence,...), interaction with electorate (interactivity, customization, ...) and the centralization of power relations within the party (Gibson & Rommele, 2009). However, such an index would have to be broader in its thematic scope, containing other area of professional expertise.

References


