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Rhythms, riffs, and rituals in political parties: An anthropological view of complex coalitions

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abstract

From an anthropological perspective politics is a form of work that involves power struggles in the face of difference. The discipline of anthropology has the potential to offer rigorous and in-depth accounts of politics by relying on reflexivity, attention to plurality and multi-disciplinarity. Within political institutions in democracies, these struggles take place in different sites but a key one is political parties and yet these complex coalitions have been relatively neglected within anthropology. To understand political parties it makes sense to go beyond the aggregation of individual behaviour or investigation into coalitions as systems, structures or culture, to look at relationships, processes of relating and change in these relations. To make sense of the endless contradictions and dynamism created by these relationships, it is necessary to focus on those patterns that reveal how politicians are similar and divergent. The key ones influencing political work, including that of political parties, are rhythms of performance, riffs of meaning, and rituals and symbols.

Introducing anthropology

From an anthropological perspective politics is a form of work that involves power struggles in the face of difference, walking and talking with friends and foes to realise aspirations, share resources and discipline people or thwart opponents' goals. Within political institutions in democratic systems, these

struggles take place in different sites but a key one is political parties. And yet parties – these complex, dynamic and partly hidden coalitions – have been neglected within anthropology with some notable exceptions.

Before I explain these exceptions, and summarise their conclusions so far, I should explain how anthropologists approach research in general. In contrast with political science literature on political parties, as summarised in the Oxford Handbook of Legislative Studies by Saalfeld and Strøm (2014) as a mix of methodological individualism and systems theory, anthropologists don't usually avoid what is difficult to measure. Anthropologists are close to those political theorists interested in performance, culture and history (such as Rai and Spray, 2019). To give another example, the spirit in which Rosenblum (2008) writes about political parties in the US, as the ordinary locus of political creativity, has much in common with anthropology because it is infused with philosophical questions, an interest in political traditions, and a reflexive approach to moral judgement. Political anthropologists tend to have a different perspective on objectivity to those, mostly political scientists rather than theorists, who assume that ethnography creates a greater problem of bias than other research approaches (e.g., Herzog and Zacka, 2017). Along the same philosophical lines as Dewey, anthropologists in contrast see reflexivity as an essential part of the task of working towards objective accounts – sometimes culturally specific but generalised where possible (Crewe, 2018).

The UK anthropologist Ingold (2014) explains that anthropology is philosophy but with the people still in, a participatory process of inquiry that gets under the skin of those we study to try and see and feel the world as it appears to them (Ingold, 2018). When researching with people in an open-minded way, relying on both imagination and analysis, the analyst has to be willing to change themselves in the process of learning. The main methodology that anthropologists tend to rely on is participant-observation – or immersion in a community, organisation or theme – pursuing questions, puzzles and disconnections in whatever way seems appropriate. This may mean interviewing, delving into archives, studying documents or social media, observing, shadowing, joining in, gossiping, watching online or undertaking a survey – usually a mixture depending on the nature of the inquiry – and then writing about what they have discovered. Eliciting responses from

informants, other practitioners or scholars on drafts of findings generates further data and insight. Anthropologists are like detectives but finding patterns and solving puzzles rather than crimes, using whatever techniques seem appropriate for specific research questions. Like detectives we hone our skills at searching for materials, tracking what has unfolded over time and talking to people with respectful scepticism. We take different informants seriously while recognising that different people will always offer different stories and, at the same time, take account of fallible memories, people's tendency to portray themselves as they wish to be seen, and the difficulty of pinpointing one's own assumptions and motivations (especially when they are contradictory, as they often are). Politicians and their parties are under even greater pressure than others to paint themselves as heroes, win supporters and protect their reputations, so researching parties requires even subtler detective skills than usual.

Anthropologists often claims rigour on the basis of three methodological processes (Crewe, 2018): (a) reflexivity: anthropologists are committed to finding out about people's 'silent traditions' (Bourdieu, 1977: 167), that is, the cultural norms and practices that people take for granted. To do this you need reflexivity. This involves a sense of detachment and a process of taking account of your own culture and history and how they impact on your research; (b) recognising plurality: you have to aspire towards learning from the diverse and contradictory perspectives in any site, inquiring into who is included and excluded in your research; (c) multi-disciplinarity: good anthropology needs to learn from experts in the same field, in the case of political parties above all political theorists and scientists. Theoretically, all anthropologists have a holistic sensibility – seeing politics as entangled with history, geography, culture and ritual – but in practice it is impossible to write comprehensively about the whole. All anthropologists are disposed towards an interest in relationships, so when prioritising that is where they focus their attention. Since the study of politicians often focuses on aggregating individual behaviour or looking at institutions as a whole (their system, structure or culture), our understanding of relationships, processes of relating and the change in these relations, offers something new to parliamentary research.

Anthropological inquiries into political parties

Most ethnographies of parliaments reveal the workings of political parties to a lesser or greater extent (e.g., Weatherford (1985) on the US, Abélès (2000; 2006) on France, Crewe (2005; 2015) on the UK) as do anthropological monographs on politics more generally (e.g., Aronoff (1989) on Israel) or on particular nations (e.g., Lewis (2011) on Bangladesh). Lewis (2011) explains that to fathom contemporary Bangladeshi politics, including the historical struggles between Muslims and Hindus, you have to go back to the British colonial era and the policies of the East India Company but also look at how Bengali vs non-Bengali conflict was created by Partition and the establishment of East and West Pakistan. The two main political parties that emerged express these tensions. They operate in what has become a weak state but a strong society, made up of patron-client relations organised around the Awami League vs the Bangladesh National Party who took turns to form governments until 2014 (when the latter boycotted the election), using their power to build up state structures with their supporters (Lewis, 2011; Ahmed, 2020).

Politicians are embedded in wider society so their parties must be as well. Abélès's (2000; 2006) seminal work on the French National Assembly reveals how words, acts and objects are manipulated through rituals to allow the confrontation of different elements of society as represented by political parties. This is about more than the expression of belief; it expresses a belonging to one side or another. Traditionally, certain parties tended to dominate in particular localities – the Communist Party always won in certain Parisien suburbs, the right in the Western Province of the Vendée (Abélès, 2006) – but of course Macron turned French party politics upside down by establishing a new populist party and sweeping to power in 2017. The broadly left vs right camps have fractured. It remains the case that, as Abélès (2006) explains, like most countries in France you have both formal hierarchies within parties (e.g., created by who has positions of authority) and informal hierarchies jostling for influence (e.g., by creating celebrity through the media). So, any anthropologist writing about parliaments will have political parties in a central place because our approach is profoundly empirical and aims to reveal what is important to our informants in their everyday

experience. You have to keep updating as the winners, losers and coalitions keep changing.

Despite this, strangely anthropological research specifically on political parties remains rare. What we have already indicates the value of theorising about them with reflexivity, multi-disciplinarity – a sense of how politics is entangled with history, geography, social relations and culture – and a recognition of plurality and difference with and between places. In popular discourse the prevailing assumption is that political parties are all about ideology but this is not the full story. Former Shadow Leader of the House of Commons, Labour MP Angela Eagle, claims that most members of her party probably only agree with about 40% of their manifesto commitments (Crewe, 2015) and that was before Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader by the broader membership despite being extremely unpopular among Labour MPs. Nonetheless shared values constitute some kind of glue within parties so arguments between members are often about their aspirations for change but also increasingly how they convey these and who should be their spokespeople.

So, the *communication* of ideology has become just as important to understanding how political parties work. Bignell's (2018) doctoral thesis about political communication in the Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand weaves a theory based on anthropology and history, but also on communication studies. She takes account of that tiny party's unique position (and even the different individuals within it), and tells us how connected political worlds are changing more broadly. Conveying economic competence was a key message for the Greens; for them, reputation is vitally important to their struggle for influence. But like all political parties, Bignell relates that they are under the influence of the political communications scholar and activist George Lakoff, who argues that political spin works in metaphors, appeals to emotions and needs to follow the 1+3 rule – give your headline and follow it with 3 supporting statements. Her granular account reveals how compromises are made in messaging in both ways that are specific to this group but also can be generalised to others. Faucher-King's research on political party conferences in the UK also unveils shifts (in this case as a result of the digital revolution) that are global but affect different countries in a

variety of ways. Voters can watch conference speeches on TV or online so the performances have far greater significance for winning public support. As she puts it:

> the conference season actualises the political map, frames ideological debates and clarifies the positions of the competing teams. It legitimizes political organisations and the ways in which social and political conflicts are mediated, displaced or relocated in Westminster. (Faucher-King, 2005: 11-12)

Floret also points to how social media is affecting politicians' relationship with the public:

> Mass media forbid the segmentation of the public a priori (even if new media tend increasingly to do so in practice). In creates obligation to have a catch-all message with neutral content that makes sense to the majority of the audience without alienating any minority groups. In short, technology is not only the means of communication but also a communicative constraint. (Floret, 2010: 59)

Members of political parties can never escape from public exposure and scrutiny, sometimes hostile and abusive, and the continual need to win support for themselves and their own party or faction.

Why is anthropological work on political parties so rare? One reason is that it is extremely difficult to access across them because embedding yourself in one as a member makes it impossible to join another (at least simultaneously). Schumann (2009) has written a rare ethnography as an intern for a particular party – the Liberal Democrats in the Welsh Assembly in the UK – and provides a rich seam of insight as an insider. He often observed interaction unseen by outsiders. He writes about how he watched a Special Adviser text an MP in Westminster to ask a question and then observed the MP doing so moments later on the Parliamentary TV online. Socialising with other parties was encouraged, Schumann reports, because it helps with cross-party deal-making and getting useful information. Although you might be told about such processes by insiders, when witnessing them yourself it makes it easier to discern what are claims, what are realised in practice and when these coincide. Being an insider might present problems of bias, but it also allows a researcher to produce solid evidence for their conclusions.

In my ethnographies of the UK House of Lords and Commons I relied on doing detective-like work as an outsider (Crewe, 2005; 2015). In the Lords I did get permission to attend the weekly Crossbench peer meetings (the group of independent members who belong to no party) and was given a desk in one of their shared offices, providing plenty of opportunities for informal conversation and gossip. Understanding the loyalty engendered even among non-party peers helped me fathom the emotional impact of belonging to political parties. One of the puzzles I grappled with was why political party members in the Upper House nearly always follow the instructions of their party, most importantly by voting for or against motions, even though managers have so few threats or inducements at their disposal. This defies the kind of rational choice explanations that are popular among political scientists (e.g., Kam, 2014). Peers are appointed to Parliament for life, and often towards the end of their careers, so they are mostly not ambitious for promotion to government or opposition 'frontbench' posts. What does this party 'loyalty' consist of, then? I explain elsewhere that there are three likely possibilities: (a) being a peer is socially all-encompassing and inspires a contradictory sense of social importance but political humility; (b) the collective process of disciplining between peers is surprising effective; and (c) the anticipation of shame that is felt when you betray your colleagues curbs disobedience even when peers disagree with their party (Crewe, 2005).

In contrast, in the House of Commons members' experience of political parties is in part shaped by different imperatives: being elected every few years, ambition to get a government (or opposition spokesperson) position, taking positions as scrutineers (e.g., on select committees) and being answerable to constituencies. MPs' relationships with each other, and those outside Westminster, are a response to these pressures that are all squeezed through the filter of party membership (with extremely rare exceptions when an independent MP slips through the electoral net). In my latest book – *The Anthropology of parliaments: Entanglements of democratic politics* (Crewe, 2021) – I explain how politicians undertake these various workloads in separate but also overlapping and contradictory ways. To give just one example, when MPs are elected to sit on select committees they fill seats allocated by party but once there are expected to be guided by evidence rather

than party ideology. Like all of us, politicians shapeshift between roles, expectations and audiences not only sequentially but even in the same event. The shapeshifting between sides is not only created by party. Ahmed (2019) tells a story about Bangladesh where an MP publicly humiliates a teacher in a bid to please a group of anti-Hindu constituents from his own party. So, parties and their factions, or local associations, intersect with wider conflicts socially organised by religious, ethnic, class and gendered differences.

Getting access to politicians to observe and talk to them in a range of party settings was only possible once I had a track record for discretion. I relied on politicians to introduce me to other politicians, parliamentary staff or party workers. Politicians and parliamentary officials would vouch for my scrupulous adherence to research ethics, most importantly respect for confidentiality, but also for my claim that I had enough knowledge about what might embarrass a politician or a political party at any given moment to be discreet. Politicians trust those researchers who have a reputation for being reliably discreet but also for being politically and ethically savvy enough to know what that means in any given context.

A theory of the work of political parties

The picture of entanglement and shapeshifting that emerges out of anthropological work on political parties creates such a complex web of inter-dependencies and dynamism that it is difficult to know where to prioritise and what to focus on when doing research. I will finally suggest a way of studying these patterns with a sense of proportion. What all politicians share in common is that their various areas of work are organised by three shared and divergent processes (Crewe, 2021):

rhythms[1] *of performance*: to do their political work, including within parties, UK MPs navigate time and space as individuals and groups in patterned ways,

[1] White (2014) has pointed out that when the more predictable rhythms of democratic politics come under strain, with an increase of discretionary and improvised decision-making meaning that stakeholders (e.g., in the opposition) are taken by surprise and have too little time to react, then political contestation becomes more difficult.

i.e., in rhythms. All MPs attend their parliamentary political party meetings during sitting sessions and their annual party conferences. In the UK they tend to split their week between working in parliament and visiting constituencies and in both places they have regular meetings with their political parties. When parliament is sitting, Prime Minister's Question Time is usually well-attended, an opportunity to generate some party political communitas as well as public support through the televised event. But individual MPs also create varying rhythms of work depending on their party, gender, connections, location of constituency and political interests – some visiting hospitals more often, while others engage with trade unions, as examples.

riffs of meaning: politicians produce and communicate knowledge and views through their political parties and networks but also as individuals. They develop riffs, or core messages with improvisable variations, about matters of political and cultural important to them, their constituents and/or their party. Politicians have to use their judgement continually when weighing up when and how to align with the view of their local vs national party, their former profession and/or groups of people in their constituency, and so on. Taken together with the rhythms, these riffs create some sense of continuity in their ideas but also connection to others.

rituals and symbols: interaction between politicians is often ritualised in either an everyday or exceptional sense. In everyday political work this involves the rituals of debate, to hold policy debates or make laws, while the more exceptional occasions entail ceremonial rituals of status to reaffirm hierarchies (including who is important within political parties). The more rigidly events are ritualised, and the more laden with symbolism, the more politically or culturally significant they probably are. The process of agreeing new legislation – usually a moral and cosmological contest between political parties – is far more rigidly ritualised than a political party meeting having a brainstorm about an area of policy.

All humans navigate entanglements and shapeshifting by creating rhythms, riffs and rituals, but politicians in political parties do this with the intensity dial turned up. This means that those who control the rhythms, riffs and

rituals can consolidate and increase their capacity to manipulate decision-making. The work within political parties entails struggles with friends and foes – creating alliances and undermining opponents – just like any organisation, but with an intensity and pace that is hugely magnified. Elected politicians are connected through their political parties and constituents to their whole nations and the digital revolution means that they can express their demands in a multitude of ways with an immediacy that is unprecedented. As politicians will increasingly have to deal with chronic emergencies – COVID-19, climate, displacement, violence, poverty and mental illness, to name just a few – the stakes are getting bigger and the dial is turned up even higher. Political parties are key organisations in politicians' capacity to respond to these challenges. They deserve far more attention from political anthropologists.

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