Globalisation and the Movement of People: What It Means for Party Politics? An Introduction

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Living in a globalised world, with its inherent easier movement of people between nations, imposes new challenges for representative democracy and for party politics specifically. Political parties have traditionally operated at a domestic level, yet, with the large number of people moving around the globe, this is now changing. This special section, deriving from a workshop on the topic, is one of the first attempts to systematically address this issue. It offers a theoretical framework and five empirical studies on the party abroad. The collection provides evidence of varied levels of existence of the party abroad in different contexts. It illustrates that the party abroad as a new modus operandi for parties that exist in all corners of the world; yet, it is most distinctly developed where the electoral stimuli and the type and size of the diaspora group give strategic incentive to political parties to do so.

Keywords: Party Abroad, Migration, Diaspora Politics, Global Movement of People

Today, we live in a more and more globalised world. This is evidenced not only by the large number of people reported to live and work in a country other than their country of origin—around 272 million as reported by the World Migration Report (McAuliffe et al., 2019)—but also by crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, in response to which countries have closed their physical borders in order to contain the spread of a threat that respects no borders and has overtaken the world.

In light of such unexpected developments, how national politicians act, the level of understanding and agreement on national and international strategy amongst politically opposing camps, is ever more important. Linked to this, what
is also of utmost importance is that citizens, including those who live abroad, feel represented, protected and heard. In modern democracies, representation happens through elections seen as communication processes between voters and elites (Converse, 1975) in which voters entrust and give power to politicians to take care of them and their country.

There have been few elections held in the weeks since the outbreak of the world Corona-Crisis, and it will take time until we can assess how this global challenge will affect the political scenes of countries. France, which carried out the first round of its municipal elections, has subsequently decided to halt the electoral process in order to enforce strict measures for fighting the virus (Elzas, 2020). Earlier in March, however, the Israeli parliamentary elections took place regardless. For the third time in a year, Israel held elections for the Knesset, in the hope to be able to form a working government. As in every other Israeli national election, only Israeli citizens physically present in Israel, were eligible to vote.¹ Kuttler (2015) points out that many Israelis do not find the cost and distance as obstacles to the ballot and that some see it as civil duty, while others as a way to continue living at home even when far away.

The question of whether voting from abroad should be allowed is a normative one. Despite the existing debate for or against voting from abroad and whether it should be limited to citizen–residents (Bauböck, 2005; Laguerre, 2006; Caramani and Grotz, 2015), empirical evidence suggests that more than 120 countries in the world allow overseas voting or give some provision on how to do so (Ellis et al., 2007). This has a number of implications, and one of them—on party politics—has thus far received modest scholarly attention (Østergaard-Nielsen and Ciornei, 2019 a,b; Rashkova and Van Der Staak, 2019, 2020; Kernalegenn and Van Haute, 2020).

¹Israel remains one of the few countries that does not allow its citizens abroad to vote through absentee ballots, they would have to make the trip back to Israel if they want to participate in the electoral process.

1. Diaspora voting and its meaning for party politics

Voting, and the electoral process, is a phenomena largely bound to the nation-state. Except voting for supranational institutions such as the European Parliament, most voting that takes place happens to determine the outcome for national institutions—parliament, president, local government. From this perspective, while people have been moving around the world and creating pockets of diaspora in various places, much of the political party’s literature has been focussed on the national scene (Katz and Crotty, 2006). Questions about the ‘party abroad’ have only recently started to emerge. Rashkova and Van Der Staak (2019, 2020)
provide a number of party cases of national political parties, which operate abroad, and offer policy advice to parties around the world, which may be considering to start operating beyond national borders. Their analysis shows that there is a great, untapped, voting potential in the diaspora communities abroad, and that parties engage with their voters abroad in varying extends—often, based on what their goals are and the availability of resources. The edited volume by Kernalegenn and Van Haute (2020) furthers the work on the party abroad presenting a collection of country case studies and the multi-dimensionality in which they exploit the voter potential from abroad. Echoing Rashkova and Van Der Staak (2019, 2020) the chapters in their volume show that the party abroad is used for lobbying, channelling the vote from abroad and selecting representatives, but also to ‘control’ emigrants in the host country, for example; creating opposing camps in the framework of a conflict at home. Østergaard-Nielsen and Ciorno (2019a,b) study why parties are interested in the emigrant vote and how parties in Spain, France, Italy and Romania differ in its mobilisation.

The blossoming scholarly debate on the party abroad and especially the strong attempt to bridge the long history of attention overseas voting has had in migration studies to the field of party politics signifies two developments. First, it is clear that we have entered an era in which party politics is not limited to the boundaries of nations and nation-states and that the question of voting from abroad will be more and more present in political debate; secondly, that current world developments, like the health crisis posed on the world by the arrival of Covid-19 and the ensuing restrictions it has posed related to the guarding of borders, amongst others, will have a strong impact on how national politics are conducted in the future and how politicians respond to the needs of their nationals—those residing within, as well as those residing outside the physical borders of their nation-states.

These developments and the current state of scholarship on the subject suggest that we are in dire need of more knowledge and evidence on what the party abroad is, how and to what extent does it exist, what are the regulatory arrangements in various countries as to whether and in what form national political parties can operate abroad, what is the effect of the operations of parties abroad on national politics, and exploring the involvement of institutions of international electoral assistance in supporting the activities of parties abroad. In an attempt to provide preliminary answers to these questions and extend extant studies, we offer this Special Section on the Party Abroad.

Adopting a structured comparative approach, in a tight-knit collection of articles, the special section presents a systematic examination of the party abroad, its theoretical framework, its empirical variations of legal construct and its effect on party politics in different countries. It consists of a theoretical framework piece, which introduces and critically examines the concept of ‘the party abroad’,
five detailed empirical accounts on the nature and the level of existence and operation of the party abroad in the, respectively, studied countries, and a conclusion addressing the field of electoral assistance and its role in supporting the party abroad. Spanning a small but wide collection of coverage, the articles presented here cover five case studies from three different continents of the world, various levels of democratic development (including established and new democracies), differing level of political involvement of the diaspora and political parties, and quite distinct legal coverage of the operations of political parties abroad. The countries examined include the UK, Australia, Romania, the USA and Italy. Each paper examines the question from the angle most viable to its own party system dynamics, but they all share an inquiry into the party regulation and how operating beyond national parties is legally handled in each of the studied countries.

2. Contributions

The theoretical piece opens the debate of the place of the party abroad within national politics. Rashkova defines the party abroad as a new ‘modus operandi’ for political parties and introduces with a few empirical examples, which show that current political leaders and some political parties are trying to mobilise the electorate abroad. This signifies that while scholars of party politics have focussed their attention to within the nation party politics and party competition, both now need to start considering their expatriates abroad. The latter is a consequence of keeping up with social, as well as party competition, developments. The author situates the party abroad among the classical models of political parties building and suggests that in an era of global movement and citizen distancing from original methods of political participation—signalled by declining party membership and lower voter turnout—turning to its potential electorate abroad is the next natural step in the evolution of party functions. The article concludes with a typology of the operations of the party abroad, which allow for further comparison when we study the phenomenon in particular empirical contexts.

In the second paper, Collard and Webb study the development of the party abroad in the UK. It focusses on two key issues, which have impacted the party abroad—the political discussion of extending the voting rights of Britons abroad for life (as opposed to the current 15 years) and Brexit. In light of rising numbers of registrations of expatriate voters in recent years, the authors examine the extent to which political parties have taken advantage of this and how this has affected their activity abroad. Secondly, they examine the extent to which both issues have changed the preferences of voters from abroad. The article finds that all three major UK parties have formal structures with influence and obligations (Rashkova and Van Der Staak, 2019), and that Brexit and its expected negative effect on UK citizens living in the EU have largely caused a shift away in voters preferences
from the Conservative Party to the other two main political parties. However, the article concludes that while the ‘vote for life’ has not had a significant effect on expatriate voters’ preferences, the policy is also unlikely to change in the immediate future with the current Conservative government.

Moving across the globe, the contribution by Gauja studies the operations of parties abroad in the context of the main political parties in Australia. The authors examine the extent to which the electoral context of expatriate voting influences why and how parties establish organisational structures abroad, and in what shape and form they function. Two characteristics of the electoral potential of Australian diaspora are expected to pre-condition a relatively low presence of the party abroad—the limited period during which Australians residing abroad are allowed to participate in the domestic electoral process, and the type of Australian expatriate and their concentration/dispersion around the world. Furthermore, the authors point out that the number of ballots cast abroad is often cast in traditionally safe constituencies, which further decreases the incentive for structural party engagement abroad. The findings confirm these suppositions showing that the two main Australian political parties have informal structures abroad, which utilise online sources for political discussion, organising social events and intermittent electoral campaigning.

In stark contrast to the Australian diaspora comes the analysis of Romania, which has a large and very politically active diaspora. Examining party statutes, governmental documents and online party communication, Borz analyses the extent to which new and established political parties differ in recognising and engaging with diaspora and the extent to which their policies address those living abroad. A key characteristic of the Romanian diaspora is that a large majority have fled for political and economic reasons, often leaving relatives behind, which link them to their motherland and its development in a unique manner. The article notes that Romanian diaspora sends the highest amount of remittances and they are highly politically active, including in organising anti-government protests at home. In addition, diaspora votes are counted in a special district, and therefore representation of the diaspora is guaranteed in the Romanian parliament, which suggests that parties can be expected to try to connect to their voters abroad. The analysis shows that while old and more institutionalised parties devote more attention to the diaspora on paper, new political parties engage more with the diaspora, especially online. Furthermore, linking the finding to theories of migration, the author concludes that the policies towards diaspora support prevail over policies towards diaspora return. This is explained, on the one hand, by the state of Romania’s economy and the influence of the amount of remittances that inflow from abroad, and on the other, with the gradual increase in granting voting rights and engaging with Romanian diaspora with policies for diaspora return only starting to shape up.
Kalu and Scarrow study the evolution and development of parties abroad of the two main American political parties. Despite an earlier prognosis that overseas association would play an increasing role in US politics, this article argues that under the single-member district electoral system, which is candidate centred, and with no special provision for the collection of overseas votes, parties have little strategic incentive to operate and seek the support of voters abroad. The historical analysis shows that since the Year 2000, the population of Americans living abroad has increased significantly and, at the same time, it has become easier to get ballot access and vote. The later legal developments have offset some of the challenges that US parties would face trying to mobilise voters from abroad, which would suggest that, if anything, parties would have an increased presence abroad. Instead, what the authors’ analysis shows, is two very divergent responses—Democrats Abroad assuming more party-like structures with designated participants from abroad taking part in the national party convention, while the Republicans Overseas nearly disappearing as an overseas association.

In the final paper, Piccio presents the case of Italy. With one of the largest diaspora populations abroad, >8%, Italy is a country in which political parties both have the ability and the electoral incentive to try to mobilise voters abroad. Similar to Romania, Italy is one of a handful of countries who allocate special reserve seats for diaspora representation. Against the backdrop of these theoretical expectations, the author examines the historical development of the main political parties’ engagement with Italian voters abroad. The data used to study the party abroad phenomenon include party statutes and secondary resources detailing parties’ engagement with diaspora in the past. The author shows that parties’ organisation legacy and individual history towards diaspora representation are determining factors in the level of engagement with the Italian diaspora. Contrary to the parties in Romania, where established parties had more links ‘on the books’ but not in real engagement, the most organisationally established parties, such as the Partido Democratico, show to have the widest network of structures abroad. New parties, on the other hand, hardly mention relation with diaspora in their statutes, yet, similarly to the findings in Romania, are involved with the mobilisation of voters around election times. An important finding from this case study is that strategy on the party abroad, in the Italian case, is independent of the ideology of the party.

In the concluding piece, van der Staak and Rashkova turn to the role of the international institutions for electoral assistance pointing to the need of stronger joint efforts between academics and professionals in the area of ‘the party abroad’. They note that while a number of international organisations are involved in the electoral processes of many countries, and there is some interest around the topic of out-of-country voting, there is, to this moment, little attention paid to concrete assistance for the operations of parties abroad.
3. Conclusion

In era of ever-growing mobilisation of people, this special section discusses a key aspect of party politics, which has been seldomly addressed thus far—the relationship between national political parties and their voters abroad (Østergaard-Nielsen and Ciornei, 2019a, b; Rashkova and Van Der Staak, 2019, 2020; Kernalegenn and Van Haute, 2020). Traditionally focussed on the realm of political action within the nation-state, ‘the party abroad’ is a new area of research for the field of party politics. The aim of the symposium, and this special section, has thus been to give an analytical framework for this new area of study and to build on the few existing works on the topic, expanding our knowledge of the party abroad, both theoretically and empirically.

The papers offer mixed evidence as to the extent to which the party abroad exists in the context of different countries, but also, we observe variation among parties. However, several deductions can be made as a result of the research presented here. First, it is evident that the operational field of political parties is changing and has entered into an era in which it transcends the traditional solely national orientation of parties. Secondly, the degree to which the party abroad exists and is developed in various countries depends on the electoral incentives that are created by the system in which political parties compete, the traditions and organisational structure of the political parties in terms of their historical involvement with their expatriates, and finally the size and the political activity of the diaspora. Clearly, the interesting and diverse picture, which the included case studies portray shows that while there is a lot of promise in the knowledge gathered thus far, we need far more cases, and preferably comparative studies, in order to be able to reach broader and more certain conclusions about this new modus operandi for political parties, the party abroad.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the editors, the external reviewer, and all participants in the Party Abroad Workshop in Amsterdam, December 2019, for their helpful comments and remarks. The financial support of IDEA and the hosting provided by NIAS are greatly appreciated.

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