

# **Collaboration between Citizen Movements and Political Parties**

Political Party Innovation Primer 3





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International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, citizen movements have become more important to political parties. In response to reduced membership and public trust, many parties are aiming to re-establish ties with broader groups in society, such as citizen movements (Klaukka, van der Staak and Valladares 2017: 109).

Conversely, many new social and protest movements have themselves transformed into political movements and are contesting elections in order to command decision-making power. Some have successfully entered parliament or government. Many of these newcomers reject the term 'party' and continue to refer to themselves as 'movements'.

This Primer describes how successful collaboration can emerge between parties and movements, and thereby increase citizens' involvement in politics. It is based on interviews and workshop discussions that took place in The Hague, the Netherlands, in November and December 2017, and draws mostly from the latest developments in political parties from Europe.

# What is the issue? The rationale of movement– party collaboration

Citizen movements can be defined as 'networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups, and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity' (Diani 1992: 13). As the relevance of protest has grown in different regions of the world, so have citizen movements. Some of the movements driving or resulting from these protests have disappeared over time. Others have transformed and entered political competition, or have given a new boost to existing political parties. These political movements face the challenge of being responsible parliamentary or even government representatives, while maintaining ties with their original movements.

Establishing, nurturing and expanding links between a political party and movements is likely to enrich the party's policy agenda, structure and support base. As a separate phenomenon, a movement may choose to formalize its structures and become a political party if this is considered a legitimate and effective way of achieving its goals.

However, tensions may appear between the movement arm and the political arm. Contesting for the right to pass legislation from inside parliament rather than influencing the process from outside requires different skill sets, knowledge and resources from adherents and leaders. Parties can manage these tensions through a number of internal design choices: the party's organizational set-up, internal decision-making procedures, choice of policies, and outreach methods and tools. Together, these can institutionalize positive collaboration between the party and the movement. To unpack these design choices, this Primer examines some recently formed political movements. Ultimately, understanding successful collaboration between a new political party and the movement that lent the party its legitimacy can help both new and old parties improve their relationship with the electorate.

# 3. What is successful movement-party collaboration?

What constitutes a healthy relationship between a political party and the protest movement from which it originates? At the very least, successful collaboration consists of three elements.

The first element is electoral support—specifically, a movement whose supporters vote for its political arm in elections. The second is policy coherence—in other words, a party that legislates in line with the policy reforms called for by the movement. The third element is social mobilization—that is, a movement that mobilizes when called on by the political arm.

In other words, parties and their related movements need to be like-minded and coordinated enough to move in the same direction when it matters for their relationship to be successful.

However, citizen movements and political movements or parties often struggle to maintain strong collaboration over a longer period of time. Despite a mutual interest to maintain collaboration between society and politics, instances of organizational fallout abound. Such lack of collaboration can take different forms: for instance, the party and movement may go their separate ways, and the leadership of one arm publicly withdraws support from the other. This was the case for the Aam Aadmi Party in India, when it went in a different direction from the anti-corruption movement from which it had grown (*Economic Times* 2013). Disagreeing with the movement's transition to a political party in 2012, one of the movement's founders, Anna Hazare, decided to distance himself from the party. Another poignant example is the case of the National League for Democracy which, in the lead-up to the 2015 Myanmar general elections, excluded members of the 88-Generation Peace and Open Society Movement, mostly made up of former students who took part in the 1988 protests against the military regime in the country. Later, in March 2017, the group announced that it would transform itself into a party (Chan 2017).

The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) underwent a similar fate. Once the broader movement to have the UK leave the European Union was viewed as having accomplished its aim after the 2016 Brexit referendum, UKIP lost much of its electoral support (BBC News 2017).

Lastly, some movements risk becoming the victims of their own success, when some of their best human resources move to parliament and government, leaving a void in the political structure outside parliament.

## 4. Approaches to movement-party collaboration

This section describes three approaches to ensure successful cooperation between political parties and citizen movements.

# Approach 1: Collaboration based on organizational set-up and procedures

The organizational set-up of a new or established political party influences its relationship with the citizen movement through: (a) an inclusive governance structure; (b) a representative leadership (that citizens identify with); and (c) the role of members and adherents in the party.

#### Inclusive governance structure

Political parties and movements can facilitate collaboration with citizen movements by actively involving movement supporters in decision-making. Political movements, such as France's La Republique En Marche (Republic on the Move, LREM), have chosen to decentralize some functions, such as its campaigning, to where it is in direct touch with citizens, while keeping its candidate selection more centralized. The Aam Aadmi Party in India goes far in this respect and has only three official office bearers (to meet Indian regulations on what constitutes a political party) with very few actual powers. The party's proposed municipality budgets are allocated via participatory budgeting, whereby citizens get to directly decide over budget allocation. Podemos in Spain has an online portal that allows any supporter of the movement to debate and make

policy proposals. Proposals which gather sufficient support pass to an online voting stage, the results of which are made public and are used to inform the electoral programme or organization of the party itself. And of course, some older left-wing political parties have statutory members on their national executive committee who formally represent the workers' movement from which they hail.

For more localized political movements, holding inclusive committee or assembly events is one way to involve citizens more directly. The Beirut Madinati movement's General Assembly meets every quarter to discuss and inform the movement's strategy and policy platform, providing an opportunity for the smaller, local neighbourhood committees to inform various working groups of local grievances and issues.

A party can also focus on more ad-hoc movement participation by stimulating outsider involvement in party working groups and task forces. In keeping with the organic nature of many movements, their supporters are more likely to participate when this is done more informally. The Dutch People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, VVD) has tried to accommodate broad citizen engagement by allowing both member and non-member experts to sit on its internal policy committees. When it comes to policy development, the LREM also solicits input from among citizens that do not vote for it—including by more actively involving well-known technical experts. The Danish Alternativet Party has organized 'political laboratories' around the country to gather ideas as to how its electoral programme could be perceived as being more approachable and informal by members and nonmembers. The party also emphasizes a culture whereby members actively control the leaders above them, instead of depending on leaders to fix problems.

Lastly, to maintain citizens' involvement over time, it is important to clearly communicate the role of the social movement within the party. The role of the British campaign group Momentum has so far been to support the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn rather than to get involved in Labour Party affairs more broadly. Such focus has made it easier for the movement to manage its adherents' expectations and maintain their willingness to mobilize.

#### Representative leadership

Many citizen movements are non-hierarchical and leaderless. Political competition nevertheless requires a level of accountability achieved through accountable leaders. Successful movement–party collaboration rests on representative leadership.

Leaders who in speech, image and behaviour reflect the movement's original cause can play a central role in uniting movement and party. Leaders may represent such diverse causes as the anti-establishment (Jeremy Corbyn, UK), anti-corruption (Maia Sandu, Moldova), or the 'new' and young (Emmanuel Macron, France; Sebastian Kurz, Austria). Youth, frank language or

unconventional styles suggest a break with the past. Importantly, however, representative leaders do not have to be copies of their supporters. As long as they are credible symbols for the ideals that the movement espouses, leaders can hold educational, professional, class or identity backgrounds different to those of their supporters.

Social movements often resist not only the powers that be, but also the political elites in general. Electoral lists that mix long-time insiders with candidates from outside the political arena therefore lend credibility to claims of rejuvenating politics. For its electoral list, LREM in France chose some candidates with no political background, from school teachers to a bullfighter. LREM also nominated politicians from rival parties, to reflect a form of politics that transcends traditional political divides.

#### The roles of members and adherents

Political parties traditionally distinguish between members and non-members, and grant members decision-making privileges, regarding candidate selection or policy formulation, for example. Most citizen movements are characterized by their open access and low engagement threshold. Not only do they usually accept participants from all walks of life, but more importantly they also choose not to pose conditions to taking part in their activities, whether rallies, petitions or online debates. Therefore, political parties that lower the threshold to participation and blur the roles of insiders and outsiders make it easier to engage the movement from which they hail. Inclusive primary elections, which allow members and non-members to select party leaders, are used by some movement-turned-parties. The Party Innovation Primer *Inclusive Primary Elections* (International IDEA forthcoming) presents more information on this instrument.

During its first months of existence, the LREM organized a total of 1,500 broad citizen conventions as part of its Zero Entry Barriers approach. Regular citizens with no formal party status could convene and formulate policy statements, which ultimately laid the basis of the LREM election manifesto. The party also offered the possibility of free membership and double membership along with that of other parties. Another example of blurring the line between members and adherents is the Labour party in the UK, where, for the 2015 party leadership elections, the party introduced a relatively low one-off fee of GBP 3 for 'registered supporter' status. This entitled registered supporters to vote for the party leader and deputy leader without being a full member. This has been credited as one of the ways in which the party was able to triple its support base within the space of two years (Audickas, Dempsey and Keen 2018). Lastly, barriers to party involvement can also be lowered at supra-national level. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe (ALDE), an umbrella party of European liberal parties, introduced individual membership for citizens who otherwise do not belong to its constituent parties.

### Approach 2: Collaboration based on policy and ideology

There does not appear to be a single winning ideology for movements that turn into parties, or parties that wish to establish greater social movement links. Successful collaboration exists across the ideological spectrum. The way in which ideology is unpacked and communicated can, however, help cement the link between parties and movements.

Many established political parties pride themselves on their well-defined and encompassing ideologies that translate into detailed policy views, which in turn are brought together in election manifestoes. Clear policies guide their role in opposition or coalition talks and eventually help them to govern. Ideology and policy allow greater party continuity that transcends changes in leadership.

Movements, on the other hand, often arise from single issues that are defined only loosely, or sometimes merely from a feeling of injustice or a shared value. The Spanish 15M protest in 2011 opposed austerity policies without promoting a united or concrete counter-agenda (Beas 2011). As such, its general cause allowed protesters of many walks of life to participate. Founded in 2016, the Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați România, USR) is now Romania's third biggest party, and the nationwide expression of the Save Bucharest Union, a movement whose founders focused on local issues such as protecting parks and historical buildings from property developers.

If a movement turns into a party, decides to run for parliament and has members elected to parliament, it faces policy choices every time a legislative proposal is voted upon. The more a party defines its policy positions, the more accountable it becomes, and the more it risks estranging its original following to whom it may be very difficult to explain compromises in supporting or opposing proposals. For the USR, elected into parliament in 2016 on the issue of anticorruption, the decision to take a stand on the issue of marriage equality caused internal conflict. This culminated in the resignation of the party's leader, who did not want to alienate more conservative supporters of the anti-corruption movement.

Parties that manage to maintain links with their original movements tend to be those which hold firm to their original cause, even after entering parliament. This should not, however, result in a multitude of single-issue parties that eschew ideology altogether. Rather, these parties need to find a way of striking a balance between a less defined common cause and the multitude of necessary operational policies. The Philippine movement-turned-party Akbayan Citizens' Action Party learned to adopt 'delight issues': trademark policies that broad groups of citizens identify with and that mobilize groups, such as fighting against the spread of dengue fever (Gacad 2014). In 2017, Hungary's Momentum party launched a successful referendum call on the country's 2024 Olympics bid, as a symbol for



corruption and economic decline (Harris 2017). LREM in France decided not to focus too heavily on messages in its election campaign that were policy-oriented (such as new law proposals) but focused on bigger changes and ideas. After coming to power, the party prioritized symbolic policies, such as its first legislative proposal, an Act on morals in politics.

### Approach 3: Collaboration based on methods and tools

A host of innovative methods and tools have been developed over recent years that facilitate close engagement between large groups of leaderless movements and their political offspring. This includes a range of digital tools that bring political leaders and citizens into closer and easier contact but also non-digital innovations.

#### Use of digital innovations

Political parties have developed tools with a variety of functions. Some of them relate to campaigning; others to policymaking and online voting. France's LREM has a range of tools, including the Grande Marche 'Cartography', a mapping software and user-friendly app used to find out where participants can carry out door-knocking. It also has the LREM Platform, which has four functions: to create committees; to organize events; to connect with other people; and tools for online campaigning. Finally, LREM has a massive online open course (MOOC) to create a party cadre. Momentum in the UK has adopted virtual phone banks (similar to those used by the Obama presidential campaign in the USA) and the 'Calling for Corbyn' web app. International IDEA's Digital Parties Portal (see Box 1) contains numerous examples of digital innovations and tools that can be used by political parties.

#### Box 1. International IDEA's Digital Parties Portal

The Digital Parties Portal helps politicians find the right information and communications technology tools for their party. The Portal presents applications that parties around the world have used to innovate their internal and external workings. Users can search applications by keyword, political function or technical function. Every application is described in terms of what it does, how it is used, and which political party has used it before. The Portal introduces niche tools designed for political parties, but also presents apps which are already well known to a broader audience from a different perspective—inspiring an innovative policy-oriented use.

#### <http://www.digitalparties.org>

Some political parties have developed their own platforms, especially ones where access to the source code allows them to create the modalities and functions required, and to better moderate online debate, discussion or voting. For example, Podemos in Spain initially used the forum site Reddit to house discussions and debate but moved to its own platform as debate at times became circular, non-conclusive or even aggressive. Podemos' new site allows the party to maximize its users' experience, adjust functionalities, and ensure that the debate can be better managed and monitored to guarantee a healthy, constructive debate among registered movement supporters. However, many parties also use freely available online tools such as Meetup, or paid-for platforms such as Ecanvasser and NationBuilder, which help citizens organize local get-togethers more easily. The Political Party Innovation Primer, *Digital Microtargeting* (International IDEA 2018), describes how political parties increasingly use big data to understand citizens' interests.

Social media platforms are also frequently used. The Beirut Madinati movement, for example, used Facebook and Twitter not only in its election campaign, but also to conduct polls online and gather feedback on organizational and policy issues.

Many citizen movements emphasize the interaction between the online and the offline. As the mobilizing power of social media for street protests has shown, political agency is increasingly dependent on the ability of the digital and non-digital to operate in tandem.

#### Use of non-digital innovations

Political parties have used all forms of physical get-togethers to engage with their founding movement in a structural way, of which deliberative democracy events, mass meetings, town hall meetings are some of the better-known examples. In the run-up to the 2017 general elections, the Dutch CDA organized a so-called CDA1000 meeting, in which 1,000 of its members convened for a day to participate in a series of short round-table discussions. The policy initiatives that these discussions generated were voted upon, and successful initiatives automatically made it to the party election programme.

Demosistō in Hong Kong aims to create a platform for self-initiated political discussion. The platform will be in the form of a petition system, where individual citizens can file petitions that can in turn be debated by other citizens and improved. If they then reach a sufficient level of support, they will be taken up and advanced by the party's representatives to the Legislative Council. The party offers its own representatives' offices as 'shared working areas' for citizens to improve their proposals. In a similar fashion, LREM in France has initiatives allowing people to form their own local committee spontaneously without being part of any party network, as well as the 'co-construction' of the party programme: organizing thematic events to discuss and enrich the programme and



manifesto. Romania's USR disseminates questionnaires among random citizens to inform its election manifesto.

Lastly, as political parties traditionally rely on fundraising for much of their campaigning, they should consider ways in which fundraising binds broad groups of citizens. The UK Labour Party's example of a one-off fee of GBP 3 for 'registered supporter' status, was already mentioned. A second example is crowdfunding. Crowdfunding is an increasingly popular tool for political parties to not only raise campaign money, but also increase donors' sense of stake in the party's future. India's Aam Aadmi Party accepts donations as small as INR 1 (approximately EUR 0.01), acknowledging that even small donations by broad groups of citizens are symbolically empowering, especially to poor supporters. The Political Party Innovation Primer, *Online Political Crowdfunding* (International IDEA 2018) presents more information on this instrument.

## 5. Issues to consider when implementing a collaboration strategy



Citizen movements have turned into political parties successfully in diverse contexts and across different countries, from Spain to the Philippines, and from Denmark to Hong Kong. Nonetheless, a number of contextual factors do influence the likelihood that the relationship between a movement and its offspring party is sustained:

## The information and communication technology environment

Social movements often rely on digital communication to coordinate the mobilization of their activists. While a movement is event-driven, the newly emerged political party will require a regular engagement to involve not only the most committed original activists but also new members. ICT literacy and internet penetration may impact the relationship between the party and its movement. Digital communication is increasingly important to reach large groups of members and citizens. For instance, the Five Star Operating System of the Italian Five Star Movement is an online platform that facilitates interaction between the party's leadership, representatives, and rank-and-file members to discuss bills, nominate representatives, fundraising and training for members.

## **Electoral systems**

Arguably, new parties with a narrow constituency and a policy focus stand a better chance under proportional representation (PR) systems than in first-past-

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the-post systems, except for PR systems with high thresholds (i.e. a minimum number of votes or seats to enter parliament). In the Philippines, the 'Party-List Act', approved in 1995, changed the rules for elections to the lower chamber, thus allowing the grassroots organizations and other civil society organizations that formed Akbayan to register as a political party for the first time. Registered as 'Akbayan Citizens' Action Party', the movement-turned-party competed in national elections and got its first representative elected in the 1998 elections.

## **Coalition formation**

Movements-turned-parties have often grown out of an anti-establishment motivation which consensus and coalition talks can contradict. PR systems are more likely to put parties in such positions than first-past-the-post systems. This makes it more difficult for political movements to enter government, as the case of Podemos after the 2015 general elections demonstrates. Their reality is that, despite their electoral success, young political movements that entertain close collaboration with their original movement base often enter opposition.

## Legal framework

Where legal incentives exist to prioritize members over loose party adherents, political movements face disincentives for involving broad groups of citizen supporters. This can include such legislation as state funding laws that reward parties on the basis of membership numbers. One such example is the Netherlands. The newly formed Forum for Democracy (Forum voor Democratie, FvD) decided to assertively recruit party members ahead of the annual deadline that defines parties' state subsidies.

## 6. Conclusion

With many political parties having lost the trust of citizens, the relationship between these parties and citizen movements has begun to evolve. Some movements have entered the political space by contesting elections, some have aligned themselves with political parties with compatible ideologies, and others have decided to remain in the extra-parliamentary space.

Parties are able to adopt some of the working methods of movements to forge closer links and higher levels of engagement with citizens. The rise of digital means of engagements brings in the potential for much more dynamic interaction with larger groups of people, which would have been far more complicated to accomplish in the pre-digital era.

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## **About this series**

International IDEA's Political Party Innovation Primers are designed to explain emerging trends and practices being adopted by political parties worldwide to reconnect with citizens. Current and forthcoming Primers include:

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International IDEA's Political Party Innovation Primers are designed to explain emerging trends and practices being adopted by political parties worldwide to reconnect with citizens.

Each Primer provides guidance to citizens in general, and to members and sympathizers of existing or new parties in particular, on how to introduce innovative ideas and practices in their organizations.

The Primers aim to fill gaps in existing literature on selected topics, and draw on interviews and consultations with party activists and experts who have employed the innovative means in question.

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