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Title of Thesis: Parties without Traits. An Explorative Study of Characteristics and Possible Effects of Organizational Identity Diffusion in the Appearance of the Parties CDU and SPD from the Perspective of their Members

Title of Book: Social Democratic Union of Germany?
The Identity Crisis in German People's Parties
from the Perspective of its Members

Publisher: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften (Wiesbaden)

Date of Issue : 12.2011 / 01.2012 (tbc)

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Summary

Many observers of the German party system find that the two major parties CDU and SPD have entered a state of "identity crisis". Often this diagnosis relates to the problems of these parties in communicating a reasonably consistent and recognizable image, wherein core and unique traits are clearly recognisable. An analysis of the media coverage reveals that communicating differences seems to be a particular problem. Often commentators draw far-reaching conclusions from the "identity crisis" verdict. For example, identity problems of parties are held at least partly responsible for the tendency of people feeling no longer associated with parties and fewer people aiming at a permanent active involvement in parties.

The research project attempts to pursue these hypotheses at the level of party members. Is there empirical evidence of organizational identity diffusion amongst the members of the CDU and SPD? If so, how can we describe this phenomenon? Is there any empirical evidence of negative effects of organizational identity diffusion on the emotional party affiliation and/or partisan activity?

Drawing from organizational research terminology, the working concept "diffusion of organizational identity" circumscribes the difficulties of an organization member in the production of an inner sense of order in relation to the organizational image in accordance with the principles of differentiation, centrality, continuity over time and coherence. One can speak of organizational identity diffusion in connection with parties, if partisans have difficulties in naming values that actually belong to the core of his or her own party, considering what traits actually differentiate the own party from others and what features have remained the same over time. Recent evidence of organizational research suggests that such a diffuse internal image of an organization has negative effects, at least to members' identification with their organization.

The empirical findings suggest that both parties have significant difficulties in presenting a clear image towards their members. Diffusion of organizational identity is a phenomenon that occurred amongst most polled members of both political parties SPD and CDU during the investigation period. The survey shows that above all the dimensions of convergence and contradiction do play a very important role. In the perception of both member-groups, party convergence takes place on a general level, but also in connection with party manifestos and policy fields. On these levels, members of both parties find it increasingly difficult to draw distinctive lines between the major parties. Contradictions manifest themselves mainly at the level of those values commonly associated with the CDU and the

SPD. For many members of the SPD and the CDU, social justice respectively the Christian idea of man make up the central brand values of both parties. At the same time, these values come into conflict with the political action of the party. But also the face of the party on the ground is a constant source of contradiction. So it happens that one party appears both socially just and socially unjust at the same time as well as the other party is supposed to be Christian, but at the same time the letter "C" in the CDU seems not to matter at all.

Despite the severeness of the identity crisis amongst partisans, findings of the case studies do not support the hypothesis of a negative effect of organizational identity diffusion on partisan commitment. Although both cases do comprise text passages that suggest such a connection, on closer examination relevant paragraphs proved to be plurivalent. Moreover, in the light of the entire case diffusion of organizational identity could not account for a proposed or completed withdrawal from active party work. With the identification variable, things were a little more different. At least one dimension of organizational identity diffusion – convergence – appears to have a negative effect on party identification. But even here, identity diffusion as determining factor has to prove itself against other factors such as the behavior of party elites.

All things considered, we have to admit a “return of the classic factors” know from “traditional” party research when it comes to explaining the foundations of identification and commitment. These include perceived opportunities for participation as well as the disposition of time resources. Even though the analysis of individual cases does not reveal diffusion of organizational identity as a decisive factor for disidentification and passivity in partisan activities, yet there are indications that an inner scheme such as organizational identity serves as a precondition for the coordination and implementation of partisan activities.