Where Did the Party Conflicts Go? How Horizontal Specialization in Political Systems Affects Party Conflicts

LOUISE SKOOG
University of Gothenburg

This article shows that political conflicts are expressed in different arenas and between different actors depending on the degree of horizontal specialization in a political system. In political organizations with a low degree of horizontal specialization, more issues are depoliticized and the discretion of the administration increases. One factor that spurs political conflicts is prioritization between policy fields, rather than within fields. The article is based on an analysis of minutes from Assembly meetings as well as interviews with leading local politicians and Chief Executive Officers in three Swedish municipalities.

Keywords: Political Conflict, Horizontal Specialization, Depoliticization, Comparative Politics, Local Politics, Local Governments, Local Executive.

Related Articles:

Acknowledgements: The author wishes to thank Politics & Policy Editor-in-Chief, Dr. David Mena Aleman, and the five anonymous reviewers for their constructive critique and valuable comments on earlier versions of the article. Gratitude is also owed to participants of the Nordic conference on local government studies (NORKOM), who have contributed with thoughts and ideas in earlier stages of the process.
¿A dónde fueron los conflictos entre partidos? Cómo la especialización horizontal en sistemas políticos afecta los conflictos de partidos

Este artículo muestra que los conflictos políticos se expresan en diferentes escenarios y entre diferentes actores dependiendo del grado de especialización horizontal en un sistema político. En las organizaciones políticas con un bajo grado de especialización horizontal, se despolitizan más temas y aumenta la discrecionalidad de la administración. Un factor que estimula los conflictos políticos es la priorización entre los campos de las políticas, en lugar de dentro de los campos. El estudio se basa en un análisis de las actas de las reuniones de la asamblea, así como en entrevistas con los principales políticos locales y directores ejecutivos de tres municipios suecos.

Palabras Clave: Conflicto político, Especialización horizontal, Despolitización, Política comparativa, Política local, Gobiernos locales, Ejecutivo local.

党派冲突去哪了？政治系统中的水平分工如何影响党派冲突

本文表明，政治冲突会根据政治系统中水平分工的程度而在不同场所及不同行动者之间展开。水平分工程度低的政治组织中，更多议题是去政治化的，并且行政部门的自由裁量权会增加。激起政治冲突的一个因素是政策领域之间的优先化，而不是政策领域内。本研究基于瑞士三个自治市的议会会议记录分析，以及与地方政客及首席行政官员的访谈分析。

关键词: 政治冲突, 水平分工, 去政治化, 比较政治, 地方政治, 地方政府, 地方行政.

The ability of voters to choose between political alternatives and parties that offer conflicting positions is essential if political leaders are to be elected who will represent their voters in future conflicts. Party political conflicts are, therefore, essential for a functioning democracy. As an added bonus, when political conflicts are managed well, they can also serve to increase the influence of political leaders (Skoog and Karlsson 2015). Earlier studies show that a range of factors can cause political conflicts, for example: fiscal stress, size of the demos, and contestation (Skoog and Karlsson 2018). Organizational structure can also cause political conflicts. Political bodies and the administration are interconnected institutions wherein the framework for resolution of political conflicts is set. What decision makers know and believe is partly determined by their organizational context and position, and earlier scholars of democracy have studied how organizational structure influences the behavior and interactions of political actors. For instance, Lijphart’s (1999) work shows that the way in which
Political institutions are organized influences the character of political conflicts (Lijphart 1999).

Political systems at all tiers of government depend on specialization, with division of labor into units and subunits, specialization within units, and coordination between those units (Christensen and Lægreid 2008). Horizontal specialization is an expression of the number of specialized subunits at the same administrative level (Bezes et al. 2013; Egeberg 2012; Gulick 1937). It conveys how different issues and policy areas are to be linked together, or decoupled from each other. In classic economic theory it is assumed that specialization results in some units having a comparative advantage over others, while in public management research, specialization is regarded as crucial to improve performance and political capacity (Hood 1991; Massey 1997; Verhoest and Bouckaert 2005). Where and how political conflicts between political actors are expressed varies between political systems depending on how they organize their political and administrative institutions.

Political bodies and their design set the framework for where and how political conflicts are expressed and handled. Even though it is common for political systems to divide their organizations according to sector or policy area, the degree of horizontal specialization varies greatly. It is often argued that centralization facilitates shorter and more efficient decision-making processes. However, concentration of power also brings with it the risk of making a small number of actors too dominant. In contrast, it is argued that decentralization in the form of horizontal specialization can foster advances, and may also cause fragmentation due to the large number of actors involved (Bezes et al. 2013).

The degree of specialization is a prominent feature of political systems at the local level, with potential side effects. A shift in responsibility from council committees to political leaders is also an understudied part of the European trend of strengthening the local executive (Heinelt et al. 2018). An example of this development is the tendency among Swedish local governments to remove most of their council committees. In implementing these reforms, the aim is for decision-making processes to be centralized on a small number of strong leaders within each municipality. The protagonists of this reform, the Swedish local political system, argue that it both enhances democratic ideals and facilitates shorter and more efficient decision-making processes (Siverbo 2009). There are, however, no studies regarding how it affects political conflicts and the consequences it might have for relations between the political bodies that make up local government.

The aim of this article is to article how horizontal specialization affects party political conflicts and why such conflicts are expressed in some institutional arenas and not in others. Specialization can be distinguished in different ways, but the focus of this article is on specialization by task or function (Gulick 1937). The research questions in focus are:
Where are party political conflicts expressed in political systems with different degrees of horizontal specialization?
What mechanisms cause party political conflicts to be expressed in an institutional arena?

Research aims such as these require a structure with cases that vary considerably with regard to horizontal specialization, while at the same time being as similar as possible in most other aspects. A research design focusing on local governments within the same country enables such a article, and also offers other methodological advantages, such as identification of where political conflicts are expressed, while simultaneously checking for structural and cultural aspects that could interfere with the analysis. This article is based on interviews and documents from three Swedish municipalities that vary in degree of horizontal specialization. I use earlier studies of horizontal specialization and organizational structure to form theoretical expectations regarding how specialization by task or function might be expected to affect party political conflicts.

The article is structured as follows: the next section focuses on what party conflict is and how the degree of horizontal specialization might be expected to affect conflicts. I then present the organization of political institutions in Swedish local governments. Next, the focus is on the research design and methodological aspects, before I present the findings. I then provide an analysis of how expressions of party conflicts vary between municipalities depending on their organizational structure. The concluding section focuses on a discussion of how the degree of horizontal specialization affects party political conflicts in political systems and what this means for democracy.

How Horizontal Specialization Affects Party Conflict

Organizational structures are composed of rules and roles specifying, with more or less clarity, who is expected to do what and how (Scott 1981). Such structures divide people into groups and are capable of endowing actors with different interests and distributing resources and influence between them. Depending on structure, some groups may be favored over others, giving rise to power struggles and conflicts. This means that conflicts are an integral part of all formal organizations. In the following section, I first discuss what party political conflict is and then how the degree of horizontal specialization can be expected to affect it.

There are numerous definitions of what political conflict is (Bush and Folger 1994, 56; Fink 1968; Schmidt and Kochan 1972). However, there is reason to argue that there are at least two different forms of conflict in a political arena:

1 This article focuses on Swedish local government organizations, and special attention is paid to political arenas such as the Assembly and council committees.
political dissent and antagonistic behavior (Lantto 2005; Skoog and Karlsson 2015, 2018). Political dissent refers to the different positions that political actors take on political issues on a scale between agreement and dissent; a high degree of political dissent between the parties means that they have positions on political issues that are theoretically a long way apart, whereas a low degree of political dissent means that their positions are similar to each other. Antagonistic behavior refers to the way political actors behave toward one another in order to reach their goals on a gradual scale between harmony and antagonism. A high degree of antagonistic behavior means that there are acts of open critique toward other political parties and an emphasis on their differences. There is also a heightened frequency in alternative claims, reservations, and calls for votes during meetings. This can lead to disrespectful strategic actions to stop other actors from exerting political influence. In contrast, a low degree of antagonism means that the parties downplay existing party differences and strive toward harmony across party lines (Lantto 2005; Skoog and Karlsson 2015, 2018).

The focus of this article is on party political conflicts: that is, conflicts between elected political leaders from different parties and between the political majority and the opposition. Conflict may also occur where one party is dependent upon another (Tjosvold 1997). In decision-making situations, one party often has the power to make decisions with which one or more parties do not agree, thereby revealing their inherent interdependency and power relationship (Bachrach and Baratz 1970; McMillan 1997). Such situations give rise to conflict if all parties are not in agreement. The greater the resources or values at stake, the more intense a conflict can be when a decision is to be made (Bachrach and Baratz 1963; Bartunek, Kolb, and Lewicki 1992; Pfeffer 1981). Depending on the degree of horizontal specialization, authority and power over decision making are located in different institutional arenas. Regardless of whether it concerns disagreements about objectives, concern for potential outcomes, or uncertainty regarding alternatives, it is well established in earlier studies that decision making provokes conflict in organizations (March and Simon 1958). Furthermore, Vabo (2005) and Serritzlew (2003) argue that partisanship and party membership is one of the strongest predictors of preferences for subunits of local government systems. However, even though disagreements exist, this does not mean that they are expressed. Earlier studies show that even though elected politicians are in disagreement in subunits of local government systems, these disagreements are not voiced—resulting in situations where actors are seemingly in consensus (Karlsson 2003).

This enables one to derive the first theoretical expectation: In organizations with strong horizontal specialization, one can expect a lack of political conflicts in subunits. In organizations with a low degree of horizontal specialization, one can expect political conflicts to be elevated into the superior institutional arena where the power to make decisions in that field is located.
Position in the organizational hierarchy is important for what resources and information you control (Mintzberg 1983; Pfeffer 1981). If an organization has a high degree of horizontal specialization, it encourages disagreements between both individuals and groups, as different assignments are not equally valued by an organization. Earlier studies have shown that there is a tendency for members of a subunit to become more occupied with their specialized goals than with the overall goal of the organization as a whole (March and Simon 1958). In line with this reasoning, scholars have suggested that if a political organization has a high degree of specialization in relation to its task or function it could, within each organizational subunit of a local government, stimulate certain perspectives, and encourage political decision makers to pay special attention to the concerns of that particular field (Ellegård 2013; Serritzlew 2003) at the expense of the bigger picture (Albæk 1995, 245-6). This accords with a premise from organization theory—that institutions focus attention (Gulick 1937; Hammond 1990). This means it is likely that a strong specialization would focus the attention of politicians toward the sector where they are in charge. However, politicians may also self-select into subunits that are specialized in relation to their own policy areas (see e.g., Shepsle and Weingast 1987; Weingast and Marshall 1988). These factors can cause goal displacement, with groups in an organization disagreeing on what is important and conflict arising between them. Such tendencies have also been observed in the European Commission, where interdepartmental conflict is commonly related to conflicts between sectorial interests (Christiansen 1997). Increased specialization also brings with it risks of fragmentation and duplication of work (Koop and Lodge 2014; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000).

If a political organization has a low degree of specialization, such centralization of decision-making power would stimulate a broad scope or holistic perspective for decision makers where they are well versed in several different fields. However, it would also entail centralization of power in a small number of select actors. Accordingly, previous research on national governments has also found that conflicts are sensitive to the number of ministries (Perotti and Kontopoulos 2002; Schaltegger and Feld 2009; Wehner 2010). The same line of reasoning can be applied to political subunits at the local level. In an article focused on fiscal discipline, Ellegård (2013) found that conflicts of interest are less common in municipalities with a small number of council committees. Consequently, this would also mean that with a low degree of horizontal specialization, the potential for conflict between units is limited compared to organizations with a high degree of specialization.

*This gives one the second theoretical expectation:* In organizations with a high degree of horizontal specialization, one can expect to find conflict between organizational subunits.
The Swedish Case

In an international comparison, Sweden has large municipalities with extensive political organizations with major political responsibility for welfare services (Hesse and Sharpe 1991; Sellers and Lidström 2007). The local level in Sweden is also genuinely politicized on party lines, and the political system is based on parliamentary principles (Gilljam and Karlsson 2012). Swedish municipalities also have varying degrees and forms of political conflict among themselves (Karlsson and Skoog 2014).

The organization of local governments in Sweden is based on different institutions with different organizational functions. The Assembly (Kommunfullmäktige) is the parliamentary arena of Swedish local governments and is formally the highest-ranking decision-making body. The number of members in the Assemblies varies between 21 and 101 depending on size of the municipality. At the heart of municipal operations is the Executive Board (Kommunstyrelsen). It is responsible for directing and coordinating local government activities; supervising the activities of the council committees and municipally owned corporations. The Chair of the Executive Board (Kommunstyrelsens ordförande) is a full-time salaried politician and one that is often described as a de facto executive mayor (compare “the committee-leader form” in Mouritzen and Svara 2002) (Skoog and Karlsson 2015). Alongside the Executive Board are council committees (nämnder), which are simultaneously drafting and executive bodies where members elected by the Assembly are responsible for activities undertaken by the administration within a specific policy area (e.g., education, social care, or environment).

The Local Government Act (Kommunallagen) regulates the basic structure of Swedish municipalities. However, since 1991 this act allows municipalities to make their own decisions regarding how to structure their organizations. This has led to great variation, but it is still possible to discern some basic categories. The traditional model, and still the most common one, is for municipalities to organize their administration into local departments according to different policy areas with matching council committees (Figure 1).

At the other end of the organizational spectrum is a nonspecialized structure (Figure 2), with a growing number of municipalities having chosen to redesign their political organizations and remove most of their council committees, which engage a large number of local politicians (Karlsson, Rommel, and Svensson 2009). Such committees are also important for fostering specialization and political expertise, which earlier scholars have shown is shared with other councilors and party members (Hagen and Vabo 2005; Vabo 2005). Removing council committees means that the arena that also provided an opportunity for contact between many politicians and administrators disappears. Instead,

---

2 Council committees are often replaced by Assembly drafting committees (see Figure 2), preparatory bodies with no authority to make executive decisions.
Figure 1.
A Specialized Structure of Political and Administrative Bodies in Swedish Local Governments (Traditional Model)
contact between politicians and administrators have to pass through the Executive Board and Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

When the horizontal specialization of the municipal organization is diminished in this way, the political work is centralized to a higher degree on the Assembly and its members. Proponents of such reforms argued that the centralization of executive power facilitated shorter and more efficient decision-making processes, with politicians refraining from day-to-day involvement in administrative operations, which reformists argued would revitalize local democracy and give politicians a more interesting role (Karlsson, Rommel, and Svensson 2009; Siverbo 2009).

**Research Design and Method**

The aim of this article is to show how horizontal specialization affects party political conflicts and why such conflicts are expressed in some institutional arenas and not in others. A comparison of municipalities with different degrees of horizontal specialization enables such conclusions. Three Swedish municipalities have been chosen as cases based on their degree of horizontal specialization (i.e., number of council committees). They have roughly median populations for Swedish municipalities (approximately 15,000 inhabitants), which means that they represent small/medium-sized municipalities with two (Municipality A and Municipality B) having retained their council committees and the third (Municipality C) having removed most of its council committees in 2010. The sensitive nature of articling the quality of relations between actors, for example, how friendly and respectful they are toward each other, meant that it was not
possible to gain access to more cases. The selection of cases is based on the logic of a most similar cases design, which means that the municipalities selected are chosen as they are very similar with regard to possible influencing factors (similar size and tradition of political rule), except when it comes to the phenomenon of interest—horizontal specialization—where they vary. One important factor that remained constant across the municipalities was the composition of the political majority (center-right), as well as what parties were in opposition (the left-wing parties and the nationalist-populist party, the Sweden Democrats). Using this design logic, many of the independent variables that could influence the phenomenon studied can be controlled for (Gerring 2017; Peters 1998).

The analysis in this article is based on both documents and interviews. First, minutes from all Assembly meetings during 2009 and 2016 for all three municipalities have been used to article antagonistic behavior in the Assembly. The years 2009 and 2016 were chosen as they represent “before” and “after” Municipality C implemented their reform. The year 2009 thus serves as an important point of comparison in order to draw conclusions regarding whether there has been a change in the behavior in the Assembly and, if so, what direction such a change has taken.

In total, 668 cases have been analyzed. Different forms of antagonistic behavior, so called conflict markers, have been noted for every case during the years selected, enabling a comparison across municipalities as well as over time. For every decision made and noted in the minutes, the focus during the analysis has been placed on whether it gave rise to so-called conflict markers. These markers are different actions taken by councilors in the meeting and noted in the official minutes; examples of such actions are “alternative claims,” “reservations,” or a “call for a vote.” For each case, I noted the various conflict markers in a spreadsheet and then created a summary for each municipality (see Tables 1-3). For each table summarizing the conflict markers, the proportion of conflict markers constitutes the more meaningful result as it is more suitable for comparison between municipalities.

Furthermore, a total of eleven interviews with leading local politicians and CEOs were conducted in 2016. The interviews were semistructured in nature, meaning that some of the questions and themes were predetermined, but there was an opportunity to ask supplementary and follow-up questions. An interview guide was used and the questions were based on themes and topics generated from the theoretical framework. The interviews lasted one to two hours, with an interview guide being used, and the questions concerning themes generated from the theoretical framework. A range of questions was consequently asked regarding their background, how they would characterize the political culture of their municipality, the relationship between the political parties—as well as between the majority and opposition—whether this relationship varies in the different institutional arenas of the municipalities, etc. The use of minutes has

---

3 Minutes from 2013 for Municipality C were used as a control and the conflict markers are consistent with the levels of 2016.
been essential to support the respondents’ perception of conflicts given during the interviews.

Results

This section presents the empirical material, with the first section presenting findings from municipalities with a specialized structure and the second section presenting material from the municipality with a nonspecialized structure. Each section starts with a presentation of the analysis of minutes from Assembly meetings, and then continues with findings from the interviews.

Municipalities with a Specialized Structure

As a part of answering the research questions, I have conducted an analysis of minutes from Assembly meetings. The proportions of conflict markers (alternative claims, reservations, and calls for votes) out of the total number of cases for decision making are presented here for 2009 and 2016. Findings from the analysis are summarized in Tables 1-3 (in “Municipality with a Nonspecialized Structure” section).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Municipality A (Specialized Structure)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative claims (1 pers.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative claims (Multiple pers.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reservation (1 pers.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reservation (Multiple pers.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reservation (Entire party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Votes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of cases (N)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Municipality B (Specialized Structure)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative claims (1 pers.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative claims (Multiple pers.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reservation (1 pers.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reservation (Multiple pers.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reservation (Entire party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Votes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of cases (N)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in Tables 1 and 2, Municipalities A and B have relatively stable levels of conflict markers, that is, antagonistic behavior. Where I find changes to the conflict markers, they are mainly decreasing, such as “Alternative claims (1 pers.)” and “Reservation (Entire party)” in Municipality A. For Municipality B, there are decreases in levels of “Alternative claims (1 pers.),” “Alternative claims (Multiple pers.),” “Reservation (Entire party),” and finally, there is also a decrease in the call for votes in both municipalities. This means that, if anything, the level of antagonistic behavior in the municipalities with a specialized structure did decrease somewhat. These decreases occur simultaneously with an increase in the total number of cases for decision making in both municipalities. To ascertain what this means and to answer the research questions, I will now turn attention toward the interviews with politicians and administrators.

Respondents from municipalities with specialized structures describe Council Committees as being characterized by consensus and that these are arenas where party identities are largely put aside. As illustrated in the quote below, it is common that politicians in committees do not regard themselves as party representatives.

R: We [in the committee] don’t live in the political world, so to speak. Being in opposition and all of that… This is about managing the activities of the administration, within a field that has a low priority in Swedish politics. Issues such as care for the elderly and the disabled and so on. It really is more about us fighting together against the “the powers that be.”

I: So, you don’t identify with your parties in the committee?

R: No, it’s much more about us as individuals. (...) And we’ve never had any voting or anything like that in the committee.
Politicians with seats on Council Committees do not separate themselves into roles of majority or opposition in the same way as they do in the Assembly or the Executive Board. Instead, as shown in the quote above, there is an emphasis on their cooperation across party lines and on them fighting together. Representatives stress the fact that they strive to make decisions that all members of a committee can agree upon—to reach a consensus and to be united in their efforts to promote their policy sector, which means that political dissent in the form of disagreements is rarely expressed. Members of committees say that they put their party identities aside, never have calls for votes, and they describe their work as “fighting together” for their specific policy field against the “powers that be.” Committee members often regard themselves as representatives for the part of the population that is in need of the services provided by their department. This means that they do not see themselves as just party representatives, but also as representatives of a specific social group. By “powers that be,” they are referring to politicians with seats on the Executive Board, and also other members of the Assembly. Respondents refer to this as them forming “committee parties,” where members often identify more strongly with their policy sector than with their own political party. This means that neither political dissent nor antagonistic behavior within the council committees is common. Instead, members of the committees often identify with their policy sector, causing them to be in conflict with those representing other sectors; openly critiquing other committees and being advocates for their policy field even within their party groups.

The political climate in the Executive Boards is very different compared to the committees. As shown in the quote below, while the latter are often referred to as “consensual” the former is characterized by “high-stakes politics.”

It is much more consensual in the council committees than it is in the executive board… The executive board is after all, as we say, the “government” of the municipality. And somehow, THAT’S where it is important. More so than in the committees.

Deputy Chair of the Executive Board

Chair of the Council Committee on Social Services

Political debates in the Executive Boards are more heated. There is often an emphasis on political differences between the majority and the opposition, and it is more common to have calls for votes. This means that there is a heightened level of both forms of political conflict in the Board.

Even though the Assembly is formally the highest-ranking decision-making body in a municipality, its meetings are often seen as a way to legitimize decisions that have already been made in committees and Boards. When describing the work in the Assembly, many respondents refer to it as “just a stop en route.” The
second deputy chair of a council committee provides this statement regarding his role in the Assembly:

By the time we get to the Assembly, it’s time to shut up.

Both dissent and antagonistic behavior between parties is expressed to some extent as having political debates, as well as various conflict markers. However, participation in the debates is mainly left to local party leaders. Respondents refer to them as well-organized performances where the outcome is predetermined. The assembly is regarded as an arena that is used to legitimize decisions that the parties have already agreed upon in other arenas. Instead, its main purpose is to allow transparency into decision-making processes.

**Municipality with a Nonspecialized Structure**

Municipality C removed most of its council committees in 2010. The politicians interviewed have all held leading positions in the municipality for decades and were involved in initiating the reform.

In Municipality C, one can see that the overall level of antagonistic behavior in 2009 is lower than that of Municipalities A and B for the same year. One can also see that in contrast to the other municipalities, there are *increases* in practically all forms of conflict markers in Municipality C after 2009. This means that the level of antagonistic behavior in the Assembly increased after they removed their council committees. And, contrary to developments for Municipalities A and B, the number of cases *decreased*. This indicates that after the removal of most of their council committees, more cases are being delegated from the political level to the administration. I now turn attention toward the interviews with politicians and administrators.

Differences in opinions between parties on political issues are often voiced in the *Executive Board*, and calls for votes are reoccurring; this means that both political dissent and antagonistic behavior is common. The main argument for this municipality to reform its political organization and remove council committees was to obtain “a more active Assembly.” However, this reform also had a secondary purpose: there was a desire to eliminate what is often referred to as “committee parties” which cut across party lines, meaning that politicians from the same party might be at odds with each other as they are advocates for different sectors. This was perceived as having negative effects on the work within the Executive Board.

“Committee-parties” were easily formed, and I felt as if I was some sort of judge when sitting on the Executive Board, even between representatives from my own party. Because they all came to me and said “this is the most important issue to push right now.” And then I had to show them that there just wasn’t enough money for everyone.
Leader of the Opposition
Second Deputy Chair of the Executive Board

Cases which were handled by committees before the reform are now the responsibility of the Executive Board, which has instigated changes to the work within the Executive Board. First, the Executive Board handles more issues than before the organizational reform. This has not only increased the workload for the Executive Board, but also made it an even more important arena than before. There is now greater pressure for each member of the Board to be well versed in all different departments of the administration.

Second, more cases are being delegated to the administration than before the reform. Respondents say that the reform has made it apparent that there is a limit to how many cases and information a single arena for decision making can handle and that cases that are deemed to be not sufficiently important are not brought to the attention of the Executive Board. This confirms what was indicated by the analyses of the minutes; the reorganization has resulted in fewer issues being brought to the attention of politicians, and it has brought with it fresh challenges:

There is a risk of the administration becoming more influential and of the administration’s control increasing as it is not possible for the politicians to be as well informed concerning the details as before. In the new organization, their perspective is more general.

CEO

Consequently, the discretion of the administration has increased as a result of the reorganization and it is mainly the responsibility of the CEO to decide what cases are to be brought before the Executive Board and what cases are to be handled by the administration.

After the organizational reform, it is more common for issues not to have been resolved in the Assembly than in other arenas, which, according to the respondents, has revitalized Assembly debates. Prior to the organizational reform it was up to the party leaders to participate in Assembly debates on behalf of his or her party grouping. But after the reform, the climate in the Assembly has changed; it is described as “livelier.” As an example of how this is expressed, they say that assembly meetings are longer and that more of the elected members are engaged in the debates.

**R:** I feel that [Assembly debates are] more stimulating now. The Assembly used to be just a stop en route. All issues had to pass through it in order to be formally decided. It was also a way for the parties to “show off” for the media. The local press, that is. But the issues were actually set in stone by the time they reached the Assembly.
But that’s changed?

It’s changed a bit, yes. Except when it comes to issues concerning the economy, the municipal budget and suchlike. We tend to be quite principled on those issues.

Leader of the Opposition
Second Deputy Chair of the Executive Board

The outcome of Assembly meetings is now less predetermined. However, as seen in the quote above, this is not true for all matters. Issues that are of principal importance to the parties, such as municipal budgets, are still resolved in other forums. Consequently, not all issues are actually open to change when they reach the Assembly.

Where Did the Party Conflicts Go?

This section presents the analysis that is based on the two theoretical expectations and answers the research questions. The first research question to which the theoretical expectations are linked is: Where are party political conflicts expressed in political systems with different degrees of horizontal specialization? The results show that, depending on degree of horizontal specialization, political conflicts are directed toward different institutional arenas.

According to this article’s first theoretical expectation, in political systems with a high degree of horizontal specialization one can expect to find a lack of political conflicts in subunits responsible for different policy areas. This article has also shown that even though subunits—that is, council committees—have the authority to make formal decisions, they are the site for few expressions of political conflict. Instead, members of the committee try to achieve consensus and to make decisions on which they can all agree, resulting in a low degree of dissent being expressed. It is also the case that antagonistic behavior is rarely expressed, as respondents state that they put their party identities aside and work together to promote their policy sector in relation to other actors in the locality. This means that there is a lack of party political conflicts in subunits.

Moreover, in correspondence with the second theoretical expectation, conflicts in the form of antagonistic behavior can be found between organizational subunits as members of council committees form so-called “committee-parties.” This means that they identify more strongly with their respective policy field than with their own political parties and that open critiques of other committees are common. These conflicts cut across party lines, meaning that representatives from the same party can be at odds with each other over distribution of resources between their respective policy fields. Such formations also affect the work within
the Executive Board as it becomes the responsibility of the representatives with seats on the Executive Board—that is, party leaders, to mediate between their own party colleagues.

The separation of issues at lower levels of the organization that is associated with strong horizontal specialization means that responsibility for coordination, maintaining an overview, and for making priorities between policy fields, is pushed upward in the organization toward the Executive Board. Work within the Board is characterized by high-stakes politics and expressions of political conflict are common as each party representative seeks to make decisions that are in line with their party programs. From their position at the top of the organization, they can then form political positions as to what priorities they, from a party political point of view, should argue. When the degree of horizontal specialization decreases, the centralization of decision-making power means that the discretion of the Executive Board is even greater than it was prior to the reform. On the contrary, as there are no subunits to which to delegate cases, the Board’s workload increases and it is not possible to stay as well informed on the details of each department of the administration as before the reform.

Furthermore, one can see that the role of the Assembly varies between organizations depending on degree of horizontal specialization. In organizations with a high degree of horizontal specialization, decisions regarding policies are agreed upon in Boards and committees—not in the Assembly. This has meant that the primary purpose of the Assembly is not the decision making per se; instead it is to allow transparency into decision-making processes and to provide an arena where party leaders can display their respective stances on policy toward actors external to the local government organization. This is also in line with findings from earlier studies (see e.g., Siverbo 2009). However, in organizations with a low degree of horizontal specialization one can see that the work in the Assembly is different: When unresolved issues from different policy fields are directed toward other institutional arenas, in this context the Assembly, political conflicts are triggered in those arenas.

This means that party political conflicts are infrequent in organizational subunits. However, to understand this development, one must turn attention to the second research question: What mechanism causes party political conflicts to be expressed in an institutional arena? Based on the results of this article, the cause or mechanism behind this revitalization is twofold: one, the Assembly now has the discretion to debate and decide on policies that are not previously agreed upon in other arenas; and two, along with their increased discretion, they have the ability to make priorities between policy fields—which fuels political conflicts between political actors. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the work within the Executive Board is characterized by the sort of prioritizations and expressions of political conflicts that are common in that institutional arena. There is no similar ability to make such priorities in council committees, and it is likely that this is the reason for their low levels of party political conflicts. For
it is in the arenas with authority to make priorities between policy sectors and fields that political conflicts are expressed.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

As this article is based on three small/medium-sized municipalities, it is important to be aware of the limitations on generalizing the results. Where it is more likely to resonate with municipalities of a similar size, there seems to be little variation among how the respondents perceive the situation in their municipality, which is perhaps a sign of how familiar local councilors are with it. But it is important to keep in mind that the article is based on a limited number of interviews. The use of minutes from Assembly meetings has thus been essential to support the respondents’ perceptions of party political conflicts.

There has been a trend in Europe in recent decades to strengthen the local executive and many reforms of local political systems have been implemented with this aim in mind. The development among Swedish local governments to remove most of their council committees can be seen as part of this general trend. Even though a case article such as this has its limitations, there are implications that should be of general relevance. The findings indicate that how political institutions are organized affects where party political conflicts are expressed.

But what does this mean? There are normative aspects to political conflicts, where they play different roles and offer different qualities to a democratic system. Political dissent refers to disagreements over political principles and the substance of political programs and policies. As political parties in western democracies were created to represent different political alternatives and programs, political dissent is an essential element for parties in producing clarity in relation to voters on their respective positions. On the contrary, antagonistic behavior refers to the political climate and how parties behave toward each other. A high degree of antagonistic behavior refers to situations where the parties actively try to stop other parties from exerting political influence. A limited amount of antagonistic behavior might prevent unrestrained cross-party compromises and help avoid a confounding of democratic accountability. However, when emphasized excessively, it could give rise to a disrespectful and unpleasant work environment among political representatives. This means that it is desirable to seek a structure of political systems where there is a greater opportunity for political dissent between parties to be expressed and communicated clearly, but nevertheless to be cautious of exaggerated antagonistic behavior. Based on results from this article, it could, therefore, be argued that political systems where there is a low degree of horizontal specialization are favorable. In such systems, political representatives more
often have the ability to make priorities between values, which spur political conflicts between political actors. And when conflicts are accentuated, chances for democratic accountability are improved.

However, as the results also show, in organizations with a low degree of horizontal specialization, more cases are depoliticized and delegated to the administration. Depoliticization of cases gives rise to a democratic dilemma; political representatives are responsible for all matters undertaken by their administration, but when the discretion of the administration increases due to depoliticization, the ability for citizens to hold their representatives accountable is confounded. This could result in a zero-sum game where the chance for democratic accountability is heightened at one end of the political system, but concurrently foreshortened at the other end.

The tendency among Swedish local governments to remove council committees is part of an international trend of strengthening the local executive. This reform is commonly claimed to “vitalize the Assembly” — a popular term for this reform — and what follows is a diagnosis that Assemblies are not dynamic enough. However, the lack of vitality for the Assembly is most likely a consequence of having a strong local executive. When removing the committees, responsibility over political issues is transferred to other arenas — the Assembly, the Executive Board, and in some cases delegated to the administration. The results do show that there is an increase in political conflicts in the Assembly after the reform. However, as issues that are of principal importance to the political parties are still resolved in other arenas and not open to change by the Assembly, there is a risk that this newfound vitalization is deceptive.

The trend for local governments in Sweden to remove their council committees could be regarded as a setback for local democracy. In doing so, the arenas where many local politicians have been engaged are now to be removed, simultaneously decreasing both the total number of politicians and the assignments available to them. Council committees can pose as a challenge for political leaders and for their ability to govern a municipality; calling for elongated decision-making processes as there are additional arenas for cases to pass through, and also tempt politicians to form “committee-parties” which are in conflict with each other — rather than with other political parties. Nonetheless, the phenomenon of politicians serving as advocates for their respective policy sectors is not without its benefits. All policy sectors of local governments are political, but political parties do not politicize them equally. This entails a risk that some sectors are given little attention in political debates, and when these sectors lose their advocates among politicians there is a danger that they are left out from political considerations altogether. It is hard to tell how far-reaching this development will be, but it is vital for scholars to monitor this development and to article its effects on local political systems.
Appendix Municipalities Included in “Where Did the Party Conflicts Go?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Political Rule</th>
<th>Political Organization</th>
<th>Local Characteristics</th>
<th>Unemployment Rate</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Center-right</td>
<td>Specialized structure</td>
<td>Mixture of public and private service sector. Local businesses are mainly based on agriculture, tourism, and sports</td>
<td>Slightly below the average of Sweden</td>
<td>Just above the median of Swedish municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Center-right</td>
<td>Specialized structure</td>
<td>Mixture of public and private service. Local businesses are mainly based on fishing and tourism</td>
<td>Slightly below the average of Sweden</td>
<td>Just below the median of Swedish municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Center-right</td>
<td>De-specialized structure</td>
<td>Mixture of public and private service. It also has a relatively large nongovernmental sector. Local businesses are mainly based on agriculture</td>
<td>Slightly below the average of Sweden</td>
<td>Just below the median of Swedish municipalities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Information regarding the municipalities is based on Statistics Sweden (SCB) and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR).

About the Author

Louise Skoog is a Researcher in Local Politics and Administration at the School of Public Administration, University of Gothenburg. She holds a PhD in Public Administration, with a specialization in political conflicts, administrative reforms, and relations between political actors at local level. She is currently working within the project “Competitive democracy in Swedish local government—how parliamentary settings and marketization form local political conflicts,” funded by the Swedish research council.

References


