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whistleblowing

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Accountability in Swedish Political Parties?

Survey evidence of misconduct and whistleblowing

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Introduction

[I]n the modern age of institutions, whistleblowing is now established as one of the most important processes – if not *the* single most important process – by which governments and corporations are kept accountable to the societies they are meant to serve and service (Lewis et al. 2014: 1).

Whistleblowing – the disclosure made by an insider of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices to actors in, or outside the organization that may be able to take action (Near & Miceli 1985) – is an important instrument of accountability. Scholars even claim that whistleblowing “may be the most immediate and effective way of exposing and controlling organizational crime” (Rothschild & Miethe 1999), and can play a crucial role in eradicating misconduct and wrongdoing within organisations (Culiberg & Mihelič 2017). Yet whistleblowing also comes with significant risks; revealing misconduct in one’s own organisation can have negative professional and personal consequences for the individual. Whistleblowing can be understood by colleagues or management (or even society more broadly) as a lack of loyalty, given that revealing misconduct can have adverse consequences for the organisation.

Nowhere may this risk be more pertinent than in the case of political parties, where loyalty to the organisation is valued very highly due to the electoral costs that may be incurred by revealing misconduct. That is not to say misconduct does not occur in political parties, however. For example, in 2017 Swedish investigative tv-programme *Kalla Fakta* revealed several cases of alleged sexual harassment and assault in the Sweden Democrats (Recabarren 2017). One of the women, sitting member of the Riksdag Hanna Wigh revealed that she had been sexually assaulted by a senior party member – and that she believed this was in response to concerns she had raised previously about irregularities in the party’s finances. Although a

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preliminary investigation was subsequently dropped due to lack of evidence, Wigh later resigned from the party and became a political independent. During the Metoo movement in 2017, more allegations emerged regarding sexual harassment by members of several other parties (e.g., Lindström and Jeppsson 2017; Thornéus 2017), leading many parties to reassess internal procedures for dealing with the personal and professional conduct of members and internal accountability procedures. These examples also shed light on how misconduct and whistleblowing may look within parties as well as the severity of reprisals for whistleblowers – particularly when they are not vindicated or supported by the party.

Several aspects of whistleblowing have been researched extensively. Scholars have, for example, delved into questions of why people decide to blow the whistle (Liebes & Blum-Kulka 2004; Berndtsson et al. 2018), how frequently whistleblowing occurs in different organisational and country contexts (Perry 1998; Manning 2001; Liebes & Blum-Kulka 2004; Lewis et al. 2014), and what kinds of actors are inclined to blow the whistle or not (Golden 1992; Rothschild & Miethe 1999; Johnson 2003; Hedin 2008).

However, one of the actors most central to the functioning of the modern representative democracy, namely the political parties, has so far been strikingly absent in the whistleblowing literature. We argue that this is a weakness in the current research, since parties are not just any actor; parties play a pivotal part in democratic systems (Ware 1987) in that they constitute the key link between the political elite and the citizens (Katz 1997). While being close to the formal institutions of power, they are not public actors in a traditional sense; they are rather private and voluntary organizations balancing at the intersection between civil society, governments, and parliaments (Mexhuani & Rrahmani 2017). In their competition for formal executive power, they act as the main channel through which popular control and accountability processes of the democratic system are exercised (Müller 2000; Saalfeld 2000). Thus, if the parties go rotten, it is likely that the rest of the politico-administrative system follows, an insight that has resulted in increased actions for external regulation of intra-party organizations (Cross & Katz 2013).

So far, research on whistleblowing has almost exclusively focused on public agencies or private corporations. Political actors only appear in studies and reports on whistleblowing as receivers of reports of misconduct from other types of whistleblowers, for example when civil servants have turned to politicians in order to draw their attention to misconduct that is going on in public agencies (Johnson 2003; Skivenes & Trygstad 2016). An exception is a recent study by Andersson and Larue (2022) which explores ethical management strategies in parties, including formal whistleblowing systems. This study is, however, primarily focused on which instruments and processes are formally available from a top-down perspective and tells us less about the actual use and potential of internal reporting of perceived misconduct in parties.

Likewise, party research has not specifically paid much attention to the role that whistleblowing may play in preventing such behaviour. There are studies on the accountability of parties, focusing on how and to what extent parties are held accountable by their backbenchers, grassroots, and voters for the policies they pursue (Muller 2000), but also when involved in

corruption scandals (Bågenholm 2021). In the latter instance, the focus is more or less exclusively on how voters react to information about scandals, usually coming from the media, and rarely on the role that whistleblowers play in providing the media with such information in the first place. Party research has also taken an interest in the loyalty of party members, but this has been in relation to voting (Kölln & Polk 2017; Polk & Kölln 2018) and the ways in which party members contribute to parties by supplying economic support, voluntary work, etc. (Scarrow 1994). How loyalty may play into party members' willingness to act as whistleblowers remains understudied.

Taking an explorative approach, the purpose of this paper is to provide a first investigation on the use of whistleblowing, in a broad sense, in the new organizational context of political parties. As party members tend to be very loyal to their parties, they have strong incentives to keep damaging information from outsiders (Polk & Kölln 2018), potentially more so than in other kinds of organizations. Thus, we consider the party context to be an intriguing case for exploring the processes and considerations of whistleblowing. We pose the following research questions:

1. What kinds of misconduct occur in political parties and which trigger whistleblowing in this context?
2. Through what channels are misconducts reported in the context of parties?
3. What are the outcomes and consequences of reporting misconduct in political parties?

This study is thus situated at the intersection of two well-established research fields: whistleblowing and the internal organization of political parties. By engaging and combining them in a novel way and by providing in-depth empirical knowledge into hitherto unknown processes of misconduct and whistleblowing, we make at least three significant contributions. First, we develop whistleblowing theory by specifying how whistleblowing works in a new setting: political party organisations. Second, we extend previous knowledge of political parties by identifying what types of misconduct occur, as well as through what channels they are revealed and the consequences thereof. Third, we develop new ways of understanding internal party accountability by extending the focus to aspects other than those usually studied by party scholars, such as potential value conflicts between being a good citizen, by exposing lack of fairness, and being a good and loyal party member (Karlsson et al. 2018). We thus place the political party at the centre of the grander ongoing debate on how the democratic system as a whole can avoid deterioration and sustain its legitimacy.

Our analyses are based on a survey of 1,165 Swedish politicians on the local, regional, and national levels. The responses show that just under half had experienced at least one instance of misconduct in their party in the previous two years. The results show that the two primary types of misconduct experienced in parties are serious structural organizational problems and inappropriate personal conduct and that these primarily occur in the national arena. Misconduct in political parties is reported around half of the time, and this is predominantly done through internal channels within the party. Serious structural organizational problems are the most likely misconduct to be reported, whereas financial misconduct to the benefit of the party is a

less commonly reported problem. Moreover, we identify a form of misconduct specific to parties—political or ideological misconduct—which stems from a perceived lack of adherence to the party program or the ideological norms of the party.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: first, we present a literature review of two relevant research fields: that on political parties in relation to corruption and accountability and that on whistleblowing. This section is concluded by a summary in which the contribution of this study is clarified. Then, we discuss the Swedish case and describe our data before we finally present the results and conclude with a discussion of these.

Literature review

Whistleblowing as an instrument of accountability in parties

Whistleblowing is classically defined as when members of an organisation – either former or current – disclose information about illegal, unethical, or illegitimate practices under the control of that organisation to actors in, or outside the organization who may be able to act (Near & Miceli 1985; Near et al. 2004). By its potential to reveal activities that are otherwise hidden, whistleblowing is considered a key instrument of accountability (Lewis et al. 2014) whereby organizations or individuals can be held responsible for their actions.

A lack of accountability is generally associated with corruption, “the abuse (or misuse) of public office for private gain” (Treisman 2000: 399), and research has consistently shown the devastating effects of corruption on society at large (Mauro 1995; Gupta et al. 2002; Holmberg & Rothstein 2011). Understanding how accountability can be executed is thus of utmost importance for increasing our knowledge of how good governance is built and maintained. Moreover, since the elites’ behaviour strongly influences how ordinary people behave (Rothstein 2013)—captured in the saying “the fish rots from the head down”—it is particularly crucial to ensure efficient mechanisms for accountability in organizations aspiring for executive power, such as political parties.

Parties are not free of rot (Thompson 2000). In fact, scandals in political parties appear rather common, not only in endemically corrupt countries, but occasionally also where corruption is less of a societal problem, e.g. the expense and party gate scandals in the UK, the benefit scandal in the Netherlands, and the Panama papers scandal in Iceland. Swedish parties are also occasionally accused of various forms of misconduct, such as cheating with government grants (Johansson-Murie 2012; Hjertqvist 2014), evading party financing regulations, and featuring discriminating nomination processes (Öhberg 2015).

These corruption scandals are generally exposed to the public via media reports, which in turn oftentimes are based on information provided by whistleblowers. Whereas elections are the main mechanisms for citizens to hold parties accountable for their actions in parliament and government, whistleblowing is an instrument for insiders of a party, i.e. party members

(including the leadership and elected representatives), to hold other members and representatives to account for their behaviour, internally as well as publicly. The Watergate scandal and the Panama paper scandal are two cases in point (Thorsen et al. 2013). The party members' position as observers of the party machinery makes them an important link between the public and political representatives when it comes to reducing potential moral hazard problems (Müller 2000). Although many parties, at least in liberal democracies, have committed to increased transparency, the internal workings of parties often remain hidden from the public eye. By calling attention to misconduct and stopping inappropriate candidates, members can contribute to much more reliable governance. Whistleblowing in parties can thus serve a specific democratic function that few other available tools can.

There are reasons to believe, however, that external whistleblowing in particular is rarer in political parties than in other kinds of organisations. A study by Niklasson et al. (2020) shows, for example, that ministerial advisers (party loyalists) claim that they would be less likely to signal their concerns outside their ministry compared to civil servants, even if the government was about to make a policy decision that would damage to the country severely. The fear of injuring the party in the eyes of the public may thus trump the will to protect the prosperity of the state.

Previous research has found, however, that a party may not suffer from an external whistleblowing report; it may in fact not matter at all in terms of electoral outcomes, since voters for various reasons punish corrupt officeholders to a surprisingly limited extent. Oftentimes, with the consequence that the culprits are re-elected (Bågenholm 2021). Still, blowing the whistle could lead to an internal discussion about the work environment and potentially result in an improved situation.

How party members think in these kinds of situations – what considerations they make – is not something that previous research on political parties can answer. The extensive research on corruption and political parties has not directly engaged in questions connecting misconduct in these organisations to whistleblowing, as the focus has been less on the original sources of corruption information, than on the channel through which the public learn about it. From the research on this topic, however, we know that parties willingly take a public stance against corruption, but almost exclusively directed against one's political opponents and never addressing one's own party organisation (Bågenholm & Charron 2014).

As corruption research has not engaged in questions about whistleblowing in parties, we are still in the dark when it comes to what types of misconduct that exist within parties, how widespread the misconduct is, and above all, what parties and individual party members do when detecting such behaviour. Given the likewise vast research on whistleblowing (Culiberg & Mihelič 2017), it is surprising that the two research fields have still not met; there is a striking lack of systematic knowledge concerning how, to what extent, and under what conditions misconduct in political parties is exposed by people inside the organisation.

Whistleblowing research

While there is a considerable body of research investigating the correlates of whistleblowing in, e.g., business ethics and organisational theory, there is little in the way of direct comparisons between organisation types with different hierarchical structures and cultures of loyalty, such as those one might find in political parties. The focus has rather been on case studies, or comparisons of various private enterprises, public agencies, or civil society organisations. Five fundamental questions about whistleblowing and organisational misconduct have guided this research: (a) who blows the whistle? (b) what types of misconduct trigger whistleblowing? (c) in what contexts is the whistle blown? (d) through what channels does whistleblowing take place? and (e) what are the consequences of whistleblowing? Here, we focus on the latter four, since those areas are the most relevant given our research questions.³

There have been several attempts to create typologies of misconduct that may lead to whistleblowing. Culiberg and Mihelic (2017) identify the “what?” as one of the key features of their conceptual “wheel of whistleblowing”. Questions asking about experiences of wrongdoing in the workplace and the subsequent reporting of these actions are traditionally derived (and developed) from the US Merit Principles Survey data, collected by the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB). This tradition began with Miceli and Near’s work (1984) and has been frequently visible since.

The types of misconduct identified range significantly in their scope and severity from misdemeanours to public scandals (Culiberg & Mihelič 2017; Thompson 2000). Brown (2008), for example, compiles an extensive categorisation and typology of wrongdoing that may prompt whistleblowing based on studies of public agencies in Australia. Brown’s categorisation illustrates how organisational wrongdoing may be based on individual action, as well as more structural issues – such as perverting accountability and other attempts to cover up individual misconduct.

The type of wrongdoing is fundamental to understanding the path taken by potential whistleblowers in reporting it (Near et al. 2004; Somers & Casal 2011). Whistleblowing intentions have been found to be far greater in instances of wrongdoing perceived to be more severe or more salient (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran 2005; Latan et al. 2019). The decision to blow the whistle has also been found to be significantly determined by greater management or co-worker support to report (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran 2005; Bergeron & Thompson 2020).

³ There is a considerable body of evidence, however, primarily based on survey data, to suggest the demographic characteristics of whistleblowers and likely whistleblowers. Besides a few exceptions, there is a broad consistency in these findings. Generally speaking, whistleblowers are likely to be male (Miceli & Near 1984; Rehg et al. 2008; Krambia-Kapardis 2020), performing well in their job, and in relatively senior positions in the organisation (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran 2005). Whistleblowers are also likely to be more highly educated and score higher in measures of moral reasoning (Dworkin & Baucus 1998; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran 2005). Those who bear witness to misconduct (bystanders) are less inclined to blow the whistle, however, than those who are immediately affected by it (Gao et al. 2015).

One consideration that potential whistleblowers need to make is how the misconduct should be reported, if at all. Should they report internally to somebody within the organisation (e.g., to a colleague or a superior), or externally to an outsider (a third party, e.g. a watchdog agency, the media, or the public)? All these channels are considered ways of blowing the whistle (Near & Miceli 1985). Calling out an illegal act within an organisation can be costly to the reputation of that organisation (Barnett et al. 1993), a cost that the organisation may well make the whistleblower pay for in the end. A number of studies and memoirs of whistleblowers testify to the severe work-related, as well as social consequences that whistleblowers face (Rothschild & Miethe 1999; Burke & Cooper 2009; Hedin & Månsson 2012; Snowden 2019).

An additional strand of research is related to the contextual factors that can facilitate whistleblowing, e.g. the type of organisation in which the misconduct occurs. The context also feeds into, not only what kinds of misconduct are more prevalent, but also how severe they are considered to be. While the type of organisation is not a prominent angle in the literature, it is often included as a background question in studies that use survey methods. Some studies do focus on specific organisations or types of organisations, however, which may suggest that the authors have some reservations about the extent to which their findings may travel to other types of organisations. Those more focused studies include the military (Near et al. 2004), police (Park & Blenkinsopp 2009), or other government agencies (Brown 2008).

Other studies have included employees from a variation of organisations and sectors in their samples. When comparing across sectors, for example, the majority of studies have identified those in the private sector to be more likely than their public sector counterparts to blow the whistle (e.g. Rothschild & Miethe 1999; Krambia-Kapardis 2020), but this conclusion is not unanimous (Cassemetis & Wortley 2013; Berndtsson et al. 2018).

However, none of these studies consider whistleblowing in political parties, either outright or in comparative relation to another organisation type. Indeed, most studies do not consider the political realm outside of public agencies. The investigation of instances of whistleblowing in Norwegian municipalities carried out by Skivenes and Trygstad (2016) constitutes one exception, but this study considers politicians as the receivers of information about wrongdoing from and by administrative employees, rather than politicians being the ones who blow the whistle. Their study does not concern the organisational structure of political parties and party leadership.

Contribution: whistleblowing in the party context

To sum up, there are reasons to believe that misconduct occurs in parties and that this misconduct is sometimes reported by insiders to actors primarily inside, but also to actors outside the party organization, with the intent that they should call attention to the problem. Which actions and situations are most commonly considered as misconduct in political parties remains an open question.

Regardless, we expect that a high degree of loyalty of party members makes them little inclined to blow the whistle, particularly externally, since this way of reporting may damage the popularity of the party. The popularity of the organisation is typically not something that would be much of a concern for a whistleblower in other kinds of organisations, but in politics, party members harbour a strong wish to see the goals of the party realized. Contributing to decreasing one's own party's popularity and perhaps increasing that of competing parties, for which the whistleblower lacks sympathy, may tip the scales in favour of loyalty rather than fairness.

The cost of publicly exposing organisational misconduct in a political party is also likely to be greater than in other organisations. Where is the whistleblower supposed to go if the negative consequences become so great that she must leave the party? There is the possibility of securing a position in a rivalling political party (Recabarren 2019), but the exit strategy is often the equivalent of ending one's political career, whereas in other organisations alternative employment is likely more attainable.

Thus, by providing what is, to the best of our knowledge, the first study of the occurrence of whistleblowing in the party context, we fill a gap in the literature concerning accountability in a type of organizations with vast power and influence over the public sphere which has, so far, been largely neglected in the debate on mechanisms to curb corruption.

Research design

To investigate wrongdoing and whistleblowing in political parties, we conducted an original survey of 1,165 Swedish politicians following the national election of 2022. Data was collected using the Politikerpanel, a panel of individuals with some kind of party-based political assignment in Sweden from the local, regional, and national levels. This means that we targeted individuals who were active rather than passive members as they have all been trusted to represent their parties in different forums, ranging from local committees to the parliament. At the same time, they are likely to be somewhat institutionalized and can have personal stakes to consider when deciding if and how to report perceived misconduct.

The panel is organized by the SOM (Society, Opinion and Media) institute at the University of Gothenburg. The panel has been found representative for the population of Swedish politicians, the only exception being a slight overrepresentation of men and an underrepresentation of people from the Centre Party (Andersson & Persson 2018).

As we are primarily interested in actual instances of misconduct rather than hypothetical scenarios, an initial question asking whether the respondent had experienced or become aware of an instance of misconduct within the party within the previous two years reduced the sample to 471 respondents who answered affirmatively. We focus our research on these 471 individuals and explore the occurrence and reporting of misconduct in Swedish political parties.

The Swedish case

This study focuses on the Swedish context, which is characterised by high levels of general trust (Rothstein 2001) and a generally low tolerance of corruption (Special Eurobarometer 502, 2020). The protection of whistleblowers in Sweden is among the most comprehensive in the world (Bauhr & Grimes 2017) and although the law (SFS nr: 2021:890) primarily applies to employees in the private and public sector ("SOU 2020: 38" SOU 2020: 38), it signals a general recognition of whistleblowing as an important accountability mechanism.

Swedish parties have been largely self-regulating so far (Larue 2012), but in a recent study, Andersson and Larue (2022) map ethics management instruments for the eight parties that are currently represented in the Swedish parliament. They show that there has been an increased adoption of formal ethical codes and guidelines, but tools to reinforce ethical behaviour are rarely used. Two parties, the Centre Party and the Social Democrats, have anonymous whistleblowing functions, whereas others have processes for reporting with varying degrees of anonymity.

Swedish parties are generally considered strong (Esaiasson & Holmberg 1996) and compete in a proportional election system. Parties in proportional election systems may have stronger incentives to protect their collective reputation and therefore to discipline their own members into silence on internal party matters (Kitschelt 2000). This places Swedish party members in a particularly difficult situation should they discover any misconduct within their party; according to the societal norms, they should report misconduct, but according to party norms, they should be loyal to their party. The Swedish case thus presents us with the opportunity to understand how people reason and react when facing this dilemma.

Measuring misconduct and whistleblowing

An important distinction in previous studies is how whistleblowing is measured. There are two main alternatives: (1) the stated intention to blow the whistle and (2) actual whistleblowing behaviour. The former is obviously far easier to estimate and has certainly been the prevailing method in empirical whistleblowing literature. However, there is a considerable conceptual difference between the two measures that is not entirely and consistently addressed by this literature. Of those who identify or are aware of illegal or unethical behaviour in their organisation, there is a considerable gap between those who do and do not blow the whistle. In some studies, the reported attitude-behaviour gap is responsible for around a 50% decrease in actual whistleblowing (i.e., only around half of those who witness wrongdoing and intended to report it would end up doing so) (Krambia-Kapardis 2020).⁴ Reported intentions to blow the whistle may thus ultimately be superseded by organisational norms of obedience and loyalty (Dungan et al. 2015) or lack of knowledge of how to report (See Special Eurobarometer 2022:

⁴ This is very much in line with results from the corruption voting literature, which show that respondents in experimental studies and surveys say that they will punish corrupt officeholders, whereas in reality they often continue to support them (see Incerti, 2020).

523). In this study, we therefore aim to capture actual whistleblowing, although we still rely on self-reported behaviour.

Inspired by Brown (2008), the respondents were asked to indicate whether they had – during the two previous years – experienced or become aware of the following in their party: improper financial favouring of either (i) the party or (ii) an individual, (iii) inappropriate personal conduct, or (iv) serious structural organisational problems. To increase the chances of receiving comparable responses, examples were provided for inappropriate behaviour (e.g. harassment, bullying) and organisational problems (e.g. discrimination, informal excluding networks, unreasonable demands on work effort). Respondents were also given the opportunity to elaborate on an alternative form of misconduct using a free-text option. For each of these categories, respondents also indicated the level (local, national, or both) that the misconduct occurred.

Following this, the respondents were asked if they had reported the misconduct, and, if the response was affirmative, through which channels. As mentioned previously, there is a considerable conceptual difference between the intention to blow the whistle and actually doing it. By asking the respondents' reactions to real situations of misconduct, and not how they would potentially react if faced with a certain imagined situation, we hope to decrease the gap between actual whistleblowing and intentions to report detected in other studies. Still, we may have problems with people overreporting whistleblowing behaviour and underreporting misconduct, because they want to portray themselves and their parties in a better light, but the survey is anonymous, and it is not evident what the social norm actually is in the party context.

We deliberately did not use the term “whistleblowing”, since we wanted to capture not only reporting through formal whistleblowing functions, but also the more subtle forms of making complaints. The survey thus captures several ways in which the misconduct may have been reported: informally to another party member, informally to somebody on a leading party position, formally to the party, anonymously through a whistleblowing function (administered by the party or another organization), formally to an external actor, to the media, and on social media. The respondents were also offered the possibility to describe other means through which they may have reported the misconduct.

Finally, the respondents were asked to state whether the instances of misconduct they had reported had been followed up and remedied, followed up but not remedied, or not followed up at all. They were also allowed to elaborate further in a free text format on what particular instances of misconduct they had had in mind when responding to the survey.

Results

We will now present the results of our explorative analyses of the survey data. We start with the first research question on what kinds of misconduct occurs in political parties, and which of these trigger whistleblowing. We then move on to the next research question concerning

through what channels misconduct is reported, if at all, and conclude with the results in relation to the third research question on outcomes and consequences of whistleblowing.

Misconduct and whistleblowing in political parties

452 out of 1,165 politicians that took the survey reported having witnessed or experienced some form of misconduct during the two years prior to the conduction of the survey.⁵ The distribution of these responses across types of misconduct are reported in Figure 1, while Table 1 details summary statistics for the full sample and this restricted sample. Seniority is measured as a dummy variable which takes the value of ‘1’ if the respondent is a permanent (in Swedish ‘*ordinarie*’) member of the local or regional council or a sitting member of national parliament, and ‘0’ otherwise. Education and age are measured in categories, with higher values indicating those older and more educated.

For each category of misconduct, the number of responses is broken down into where the misconduct is said to have taken place – on the local level (e.g., in the local government council or in local party infrastructure) or at the national level (e.g., in national parliament or in central party contexts). While the number of respondents represented in Figure 1 is 452, the number of total misconducts reported is 628, as respondents were able to select multiple options when responding to the initial question of misconduct experiences. For gender, ‘1’ equals male, ‘2’ equals female and ‘3’ equals other/did not want to disclose.⁶

Table 1 – Summary statistics for the full and filtered sample.

	Full sample					Misconduct witnesses				
	N	Mean	St. Dev	Min	Max	N	Mean	St. Dev	Min	Max
Gender	1164	1.35	0.52	1	3	452	1.42	0.55	1	3
Education	1163	6.55	2.01	2	9	452	6.66	1.85	2	9
Age	1164	4.85	1.21	1	6	452	4.71	1.25	1	6
Seniority	1165	0.64	0.48	0	1	452	0.63	0.48	0	1
Party	1164	3.82	2.22	1	10	452	3.82	2.24	1	10

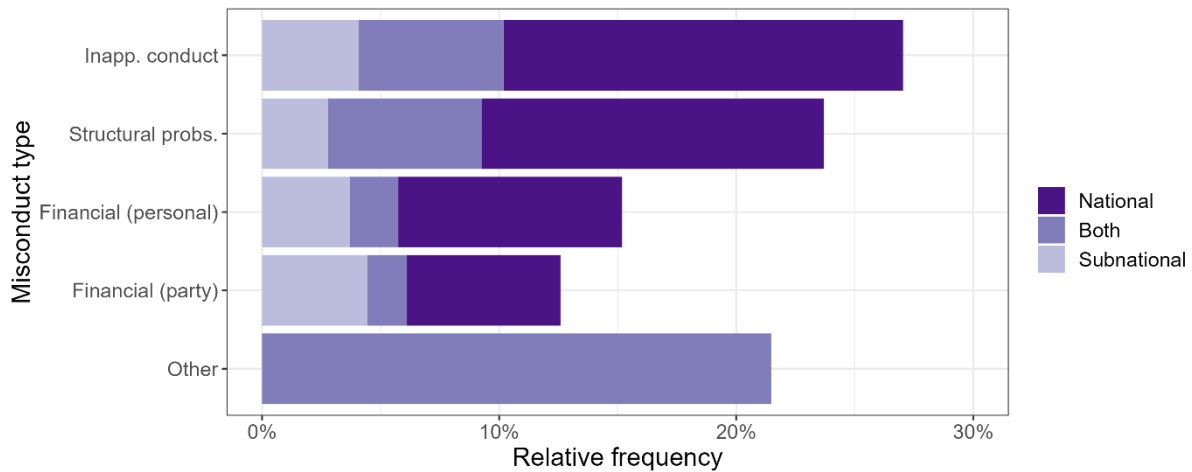
As illustrated in Figure 1, the most frequent types of misconduct experienced in Swedish political parties are inappropriate conduct and structural organisational problems. Specifically, across the 452 individuals who experienced misconduct, 32% reported having experienced or been aware of at least one instance of serious inappropriate behaviour by a member of their party within the prior two years, and 28% reported having witnessed or experienced serious structural organisational problems. This equates to 13% and 11% of the total sample of politicians, respectively. These represent both individual-level and party-level wrongdoing, suggesting that both are prevalent in Swedish parties. Far less frequently experienced are issues

⁵ An additional 19 respondents reported having witnessed or experienced misconduct, though they were omitted from the sample as they only reported having become aware of these events through the media rather than from personal experience or internal party sources.

⁶ Due to ethical considerations regarding respondent anonymity, we are unable to disaggregate the sample further by party.

relating to improper financial favouring of the party or the individual, which reflects the relatively low levels of corruption in general in Sweden.

Figure 1 – The relative frequency of types of misconduct in political parties, by level at which they occurred. Percentages refer to the percentage of misconducts rather than respondents (respondents could provide several answers to this question).



The category “other” was chosen by 26% of misconduct witnesses. The free text specifications showed that instances of perceived undue favouring in appointments were behind many of these responses. In addition, the open questions revealed a perceived form of misconduct specific to parties, namely what can be labelled as ideological misconduct. This implies that party representatives (or the party itself) do not behave according to the party program, or do not honour the election pledges made. A similar result is reported by Andersson and Larue (2022): party representatives frequently refer to party ideology as a source of good and ethical behaviour. This finding is crucial to further studies of whistleblowing (and other forms of ethical instruments) as it reflects a view on what constitutes misbehaviour that departs from the common definition in the literature. It is not necessarily about breaking rules, but rather not acting sincerely and, interesting enough, it seems to be perceived as something that one might (or should) *report*, internally or externally.

Ideological concerns might also shed some light on the finding that, although the sample is comprised of mainly local politicians, most of the misconduct is said to have taken place on the national level. This result is somewhat puzzling given that previous research indicates that corruption is probably more frequent at the local level than at the national level in Sweden (e.g. Erlingsson et al. 2008; Bergh et al. 2016). However, if the politicians have ideological misconduct in mind, their responses might reflect many of the ideological compromises that parties make in Parliament.

Of the 452 respondents who were aware of an instance of misconduct, 49% answered that they reported the occurrence in some manner. Table 2 breaks this figure down to investigate whether

there is some degree of heterogeneity in reporting tendencies based on the misconduct that has taken place. This table suggests a slight under-reporting of inappropriate behaviour relative to other forms of misconduct, perhaps because half of the respondents claim that these cases have already been resolved. The two forms of financial misconduct are the most likely to be reported and the least likely to be ignored. In 86% of the cases, they are stated as either reported, or already resolved. Overall, however, there is relative consistency across types of misconduct with regard to which are reported and the extent to which respondents believed them to have already been resolved (and as such they did not feel the need to report).

Table 2 – Reporting tendencies by misconduct type. Percentages refer to the percentage of cases regarding a specific misconduct category

Misconduct type	Structural probs.	Inapp. conduct	Financial (personal)	Financial (party)	Other	Total
Reported	59 (46%)	60 (41%)	39 (48%)	33 (49%)	72 (62%)	263 (49%)
Not reported	14 (11%)	13 (9%)	4 (5%)	3 (4%)	12 (10%)	46 (9%)
Already resolved	55 (43%)	73 (50%)	39 (48%)	32 (47%)	32 (28%)	231 (43%)

Those in the ‘not reported’ category in Table 2 were subsequently asked why they did not report the misconduct. They were able to select several reasons for this, and the results can be found in Appendix A1. Although this subsample is limited to only 46 respondents, 48% of these answered that they were worried about negative consequences for themselves if they were to report. At the same time, 26% of this group stated that they did not report due to a fear of appearing to be disloyal to the party. A similar sized group were concerned about negative consequences for the party or were dissuaded by their lack of proof. Less frequent reasons given were that the respondents didn’t consider the issue serious enough, did not know who to turn to, they were concerned about negative consequences for others, and that they did not consider it their responsibility.

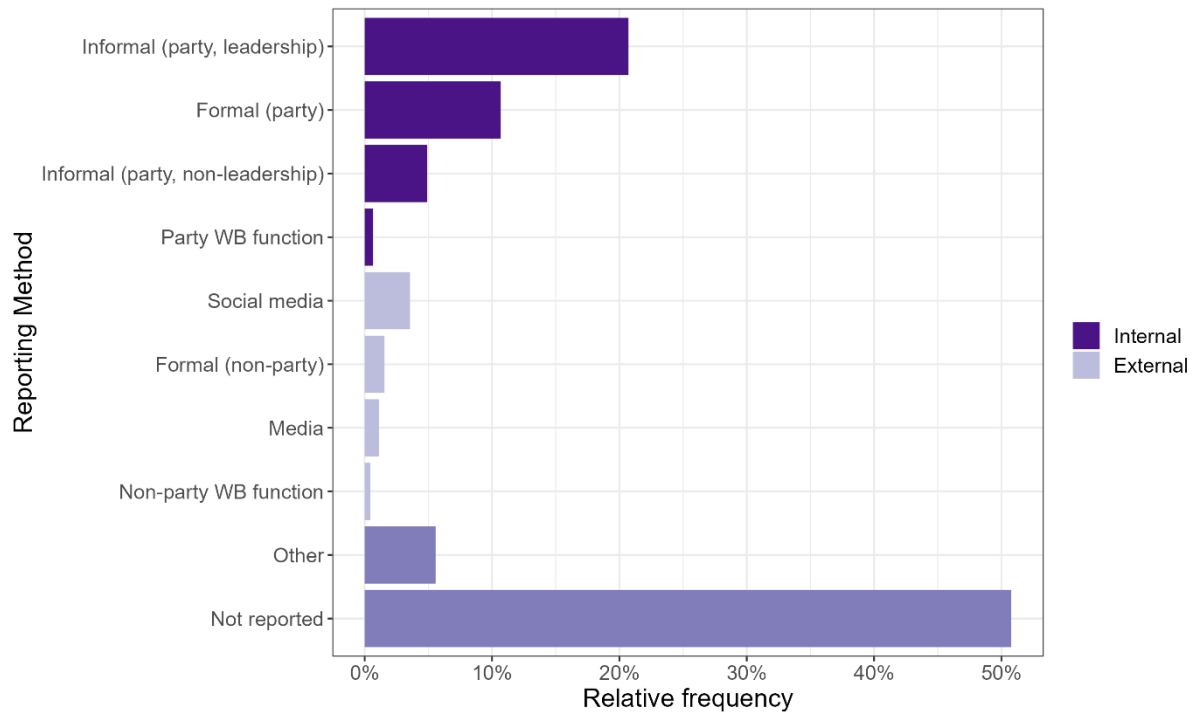
The channels through which whistleblowing is made

Reporting is done in several different ways, internally as well as externally. As illustrated in Figure 2, the three most common ways in which misconduct is reported in political parties are all internal.⁷ Informally reporting the issue to party leadership (vertical), to a fellow party member (horizontal), making a formal report to the party leadership, and using internal whistleblowing functions collectively account for 75% of reported cases, or 37% when including those who didn’t report. One should view these results with some degree of caution, however. As with the previous question on the type of misconduct, respondents were also able

⁷ Note that the discrepancy in figures between Table 2 and Figure 2 is due to the multiple misconducts reported in the initial question regarding witnessed cases of misconduct. The percentages in Table 2 therefore refer to misconduct cases, rather than witnesses (Figure 2).

to give several answers to this question, which mean that they may have taken several (possibly internal and external) steps to reporting the issue. Figure 2 is nevertheless a good indication that internal reporting channels are by far the most frequent in political parties, and particularly informal avenues, which is in line with findings in other kinds of organisations. Given that formal whistleblowing functions are so rare in political parties, it is not surprising to see so few took this route.

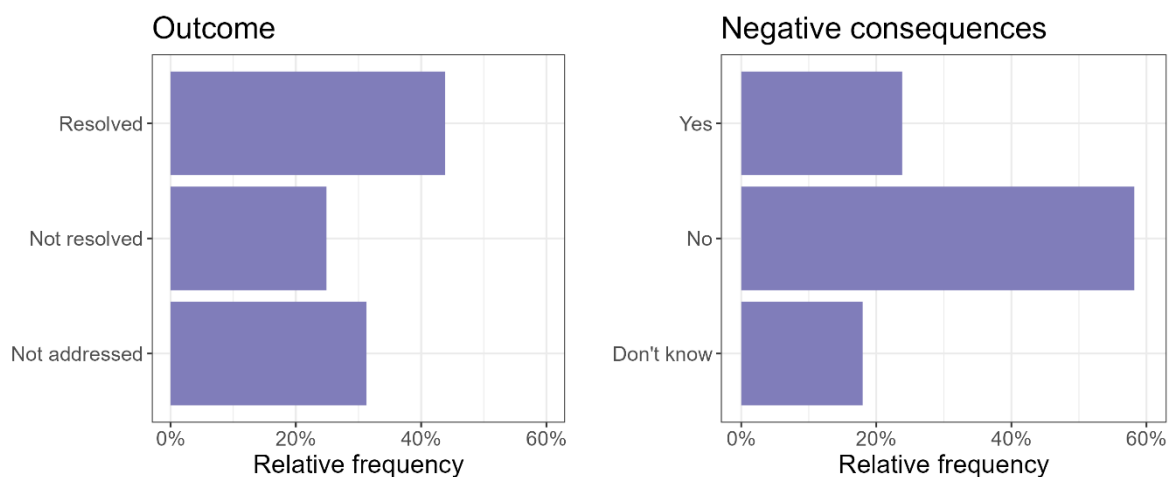
Figure 2 – The frequency of misconduct reporting methods in political parties



Outcomes and consequences of whistleblowing

To consider the consequences of whistleblowing in parties, we focus on two survey questions. The first asks respondents what happened in the case of the misconduct, while the second asks whether there were any negative consequences for the whistleblower (be it themselves or someone else). The results of these questions are illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3 – Outcomes and consequences of whistleblowing in political parties



Cases of misconduct in political parties are resolved 44% of the time, meaning that in the majority of instances, cases are either not resolved (25%) or not addressed at all (31%). However, a considerable majority (58%) of respondents reported no negative consequences for those who did report. This is perhaps surprising given the considerable body of literature testifying to the devastating consequences for whistleblowers in other organisational contexts (Rothschild & Miethe 1999; Burke & Cooper 2009; Hedin & Månsson 2012; Snowden 2019). However, this answer must be considered in combination with the frequency of reporting detailed in Figure 2, which shows that in the vast majority of cases, misconduct is not reported. It could therefore be the case that misconduct is more likely to be reported when the whistleblower does not fear serious (or any) repercussions. If they do, the would-be whistleblower may be more likely to keep quiet.

Those who did report negative consequences for the whistleblower were also given the opportunity in a free-text answer to elaborate the nature of the negative consequences. The most common of these seem to be internal disciplinary action regarding political career opportunities – specifically being removed from a political position, or being relegated down ballot list orders, which will have consequences for electoral prospects. Among the more common of other reported negative consequences is being excluded from party information and events.

Concluding discussion

This first investigation of misconduct and whistleblowing in the context of political parties shows that misconduct, as perceived by insiders, is primarily related to structural problems and inappropriate individual behaviour. Instances of misconduct are fairly often said to be reported, but primarily through internal and informal channels. Talking to the media is rare and the formal whistleblowing functions that are available in some parties seem to be of little consequence, at least for active insiders. Most cases of misconduct are thus not resolved or even addressed, even though negative consequences for those who blow the whistle are not clearly prevailing to the extent one might expect. More qualitative research is required, however, to delve deeper into the experiences and considerations of party members regarding

misconduct and whistleblowing. While our choice to rely on survey data gives us the opportunity to estimate the frequencies of misconduct and reporting, we do not gain the contextual depth that a more qualitative approach could provide.

This study has also other limitations, which opens opportunities for future research. First, we focus on the single-country context of Sweden. As previously argued, Sweden constitutes a suitable case for exploring the potential tension between party and societal norms, but how party members balance these norms is likely to vary depending on what those norms are, as well as on the organisation of parties, government institutions, and civil society.

This explorative survey study still makes three significant contributions. In relation to the whistleblowing literature, we extend the scope of whistleblowing to a type of organisation that this field has surprisingly neglected so far despite its importance for the functioning of democratic countries: the political party. Situated in between the formal institutions of representation and civil society, parties are one of the main, if not *the* main channel through which ideological currents in society are channelled to the authorities in power. If the parties are not able to prevent and disclose misbehaviour, or even corrupt behaviour, the legitimacy of governance structures is severely impaired.

Furthermore, we identify a category of perceived misconduct that has not been recognised by previous whistleblowing studies, namely that of ideological or political misconduct. This concerns situations when insiders experience that the party, or party representatives do not behave according to the party program or general ideology. Although this type of perceived misconduct may not be limited to party organisations—the logic should apply also to other social movements with an ideological pathos—these concerns are likely to be particularly pertinent in the party context. The relationship between ideological/political misconduct and whistleblowing in political parties thus deserves further investigation.

To the research on internal party organisation and party accountability, we make a contribution by identifying what types of misconduct occur in political parties, as well as through what channels these are revealed and with what consequences. We note for example that, apart from ideological/political misconduct, the incidences referred to by the respondents are similar to those identified in other organisations. Comparative studies would be necessary, however, to know whether certain kinds of misconduct are more prevalent in political parties than elsewhere.

Our third contribution is a developed understanding of internal party accountability involving whistleblowing. The fact that relatively many cases of misconduct are not reported for fear of repercussions and the results indicating that such repercussions also occur reveal potential problems in the democratic accountability chain that party scholars, as well as parties need to pay greater attention to, theoretically, but also empirically. Parties and similar organisations sincerely interested in preventing and disclosing misconduct should be concerned that many insiders choose not to report misbehaviour, not even informally, because of the fear of retaliations. Although reporting can certainly hurt the party, the effects may be even more

detrimental if improprieties are allowed to continue unchecked. This realisation should spark a policy discussion on the need to extend whistleblowing protection to party organisations. In current EU legislation, (<https://www.whistleblowingmonitor.eu/>), parties are not explicitly covered by protection rights. In effects, potential whistleblowers in parties do not only have to contemplate the potential damage to the party, but also to themselves when deciding whether to report misconduct.

That being said, our results are based on perceptions of people stating that they have experienced misconduct; we have no possibility to evaluate whether the situations they refer to have indeed transpired, or how the situations are perceived by others involved. A person experiencing that s/he has been removed from a list because s/he exposed corrupt behaviour by leading party members may, for example, have been given lower priority on entirely legitimate grounds, such as cooperation difficulties or inability to communicate the party's visions. Therefore, while we should clearly not dismiss results indicating that whistleblowers are punished, we should not take for granted that all reported instances are examples of mismanagement by the parties. To what extent this is actually the case is a question for future research.

Another practical implication of this study is that parties should pay more attention to their internal communication. A fair share of the respondents who have experienced misconduct stated that they did not know to whom they should report. This is not a specific problem to parties, as similar results have been found also in other contexts. Still, it should be a low-hanging fruit for parties to inform members and activists about their reporting routines in cases of perceived misconduct. It is yet another thing, though, to make people feel confident in following these routines.

Our hope is to inspire more research on misconduct and whistleblowing in political parties, not least from a comparative perspective. In the long run, the aggregated knowledge supplied by this new field of research may change how scholars, as well as party members and citizens think about the need for transparency in party organisations, given their pivotal part in democratic accountability processes. Moreover, qualitative studies are needed to expose the mechanisms of reporting and not reporting, as well as the considerations of individuals torn between different loyalties and/or moral values.

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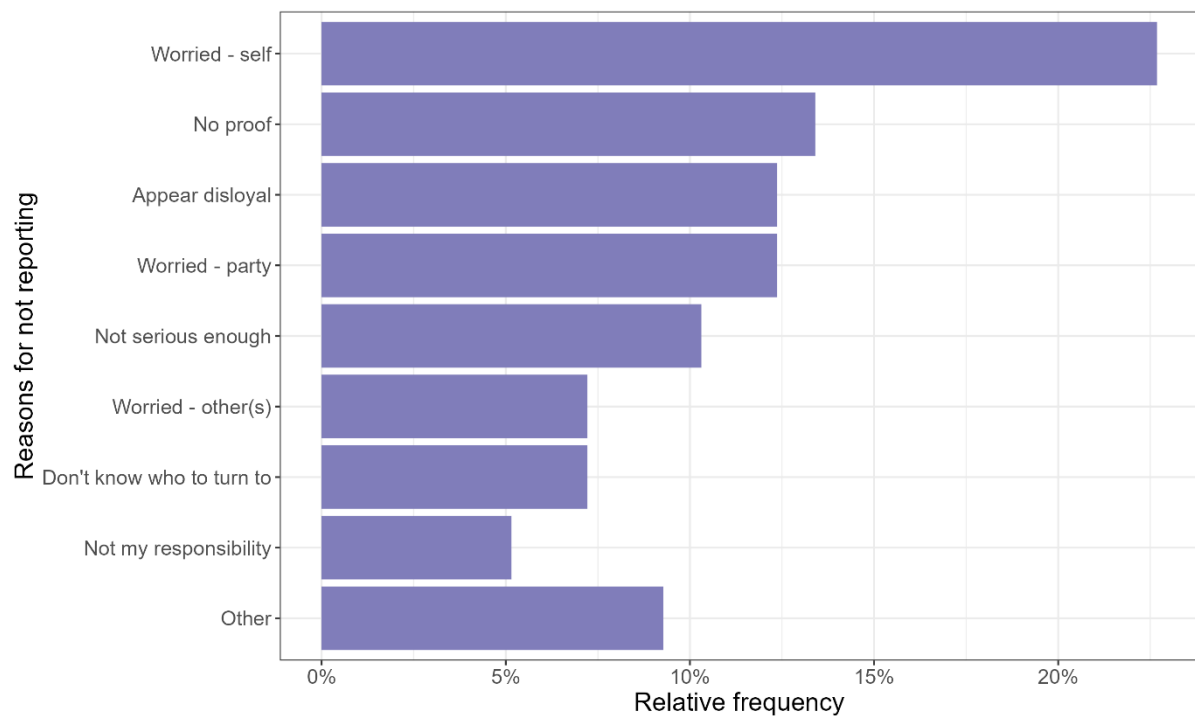
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A1. Reasons given for not reporting



A2. Characteristics of misconduct reporters

	DV: Misconduct reported
Misconduct type:	
Financial (party)	-0.04 (0.08)
Financial (personal)	-0.04 (0.07)
Inappropriate conduct	0.01 (0.05)
Structural problems	0.11** (0.05)
Age	-0.00 (0.02)
Gender	-0.05 (0.05)
Education	-0.00 (0.01)
Party	0.02 (0.01)
Seniority	0.01 (0.05)
Constant	0.48*** (0.17)
Observations	399
R ²	0.02

Standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.1,
p<0.05, *p<0.01.

In Table A1 we consider the characteristics of those who chose to report the wrongdoing, a vein of literature which makes up a considerable part of the research on whistleblowing. However, given that the vast majority of cases are dealt with internally in the case of political parties, we instead broaden the focus to consider who reports the misconduct. Table A1 is the output of an ordinary least squares regression analysis which seeks to explain the act of having reported misconduct having witnessed it, with a range of variables commonly associated with whistleblowing in the literature. Specifically, we estimate the effect of the type of misconduct, a battery of demographic factors (namely age, gender and education level) and the political party of the respondent. The dependent variable is having reported any kind of misconduct.

Overall, these results do not present many clear answers as to who is more likely to report misconduct in political parties. One exception is that the misconduct is more likely to be reported when it refers to serious structural organisational problems, which tend not to be solely attributable to an individual. Perhaps surprisingly, we do not see any significant differences in the likelihood of reporting misconduct according to gender, age, or seniority.