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Party leaks and whistleblowing in Swedish
print media 2010-2024

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Abstract

Resisting autocratization requires mechanisms that can expose political elite misconduct and hold responsible actors to account. However, as fundamental actors of representative democracy—constituting the main channel between citizens and democratic institutions—political parties are comparatively closed entities for non-members. The only way for the public to gain insight into internal party activities is through social and news media, which thus constitute vital channels of information. Still, media reports largely depend on people on the inside being prepared to leak information about their party and party colleagues to journalists, information that may cause a public scandal to the detriment of the party, as well as to the source of the leak. We therefore ask the following questions: When and why are media disclosures concerning party misconduct made by insiders? Drawing on previous research and interviews with political and investigative journalists, we hypothesize that such media disclosures are more likely when: H1) party list nominations take place and H2) parties are losing popular support. The analysis is based on 709 newspaper articles of misconduct in political parties leaked to and published in Swedish print media between 2010 and 2024. The results are in line with H1 and H2. This paper thus contributes novel theoretical, as well as empirical insights to research on investigative journalism, political parties, political scandals, and whistleblowing by illustrating how a previously overlooked factor – media disclosures made by insiders of party-related misconduct – plays an important role in internal party struggles and is at least partially driven by political gain. This is something that journalists and the public should keep in mind when holding the political elite to account based on such reports.

Keywords: political parties, whistleblowing, leaks, misconduct, scandals

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Introduction

Every fourth year when there is a fight about the [party candidate] lists, politicians use the measures available to discredit one another. That is something of which people are well aware. (Romina Pourmokhtari, the then leader of the Liberal Youth Organization, quoted in Strömberg, 2021)

Acting as the link between the public and the formal political institutions, political parties are fundamental actors of representative democracy (e.g. Stokes, 1999). Not only do they constitute the main channel for public opinion to inform political action and policy, they also formulate and drive political visions and – as the opening quote refers to – fill political positions. Well-functioning and trustworthy political parties are therefore vital for the sustainability of the representative system in liberal democracies.

Yet we know from the literature on parties and corruption (Della Porta, 2004) and political scandals (Thompson, 2000) that parties and their representatives are not always well-functioning, nor trustworthy. Individual misbehaviour, deficient internal processes for decision-making, underhand exchanges with dubious actors and even financial irregularities are a few examples of party related misconducts that have been publicly revealed, also in well-developed democracies (Huberts et al., 2022).

The media often plays a crucial part in these exposures. By bringing misconduct into public attention, political watchdog journalism may deter others from bad behaviour and incentivize politicians to perform better (Norris, 2014). However, to report on internal party matters, watchdog journalism often depends on the access to reliable and willing sources inside the organisation (Liebes and Blum-Kulka, 2004; Balan, 2011; Allern and Pollack, 2012). Such insider disclosure is considered one of the most important tools for holding decision makers accountable for internal activities and for coming to terms with misconducts of different kinds (Culiberg and Mihelič, 2017).

However, to date, we know little about when and why party members provide sensitive internal information to outside actors such as the media. First, party research indicates that party members are willing to report corruption in their parties to outsiders (Balan, 2011; Invernizzi and Ceron, 2023; Feierherd et al., 2024). However, Niklasson et al. (2024) show that party representatives often hesitate to report misconduct, and if they do, they use primarily internal channels. Second, studies on watchdog and investigative journalism tend to focus on the role and importance of journalism as a mechanism of accountability, depending on the power balance between journalists and politicians (Davis, 2009) and across different political systems (Tumber and Waisbord, 2004b; Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020). Less attention is paid to the identity of journalists' sources, why they leak, or what they leak about (Malling, 2019). Third, the large research field on leaks and whistleblowing has engaged with questions regarding the insider as a source, but only in the contexts of government agencies (e.g. Brown, 2008; Park and Blenkinsopp, 2009; Skivenes and Trygstad, 2016; Hedin and Månsson, 2012; Caillier, 2017), private enterprises (e.g. Barnett et al., 1993; Berndtsson et al., 2018), and to some extent NGOs (Francis and Armstrong, 2011; Levy, 2018). They have overlooked insiders of political

parties. Furthermore, whistleblowing scholars have expressed a hesitation towards studying whistleblowers' motivations (Lewis et al., 2014). The public benefit of the misconduct being revealed is the same regardless of what reasons moved the whistleblower into action. Instead, these scholars have spent all the more effort mapping and describing the severe retaliations that these individuals often face (Burke and Cooper, 2009; Hedin and Månsson, 2012; Rothschild and Miethe, 1999).

We argue, however, that studying when and why whistleblowing occurs is likely to improve our understanding of the internal power struggles and accountability processes of organisations, which is particularly pertinent in the context of politics. In a time when media communication constitutes a pivotal part of political accountability (Djerf-Pierre et al., 2014), we find it quite surprising that the role of party members as whistleblowers has not been thoroughly scrutinized. We intend to address this gap by exploring the dynamics of insiders' media disclosures concerning party misconduct.

By disclosure we refer to the overarching concept of making information that is confidential, or at least non-official, available to journalists who previously lacked access to that information. Whistleblowing and leaks are considered sub-categories of disclosure (e.g. Bovens, 1995). Our focus is on non-sanctioned disclosures to the media about potentially compromising information—as perceived by individuals or groups on the inside—not on deliberate and party-sanctioned leaks about, for instance, forthcoming policy-proposals with the aim of influencing public debate (Davis, 2009).

Drawing on previous research and interviews with 13 investigative journalists, we formulate two hypotheses of how the election cycle and the current state of the public opinion influence when and why different kinds of misconduct are reported by party insiders. These hypotheses are tested on quantitative data consisting of 709 newspaper articles based on 424 cases of misconduct reported through party disclosures and published in Swedish print media between 2010 and 2024. Our results indicate that media disclosures of both individual and structural misconduct are affected by the election cycle. Specifically, we find an almost threefold increase in media disclosures during the nomination period, when party members compete for a place on the ballot. Further, we show that members of parties in decline tend to disclose information about individual and structural misconduct to the media more often than parties that are performing well in opinion polls.

This paper makes several important contributions by providing evidence that media disclosures made by insiders of party-related misconduct are driven by political gain. This insight speaks to the development of existing theoretical models on political scandals, party infighting, and whistleblowing, since scholars engaging with these topics have overlooked the phenomenon of whistleblowing in political parties, and thus the reasons and implications of party insiders acting as media sources.

In the next section, we discuss our theoretical model of how media disclosures and political scandals are related. We then formulate hypotheses regarding when and why certain kinds of

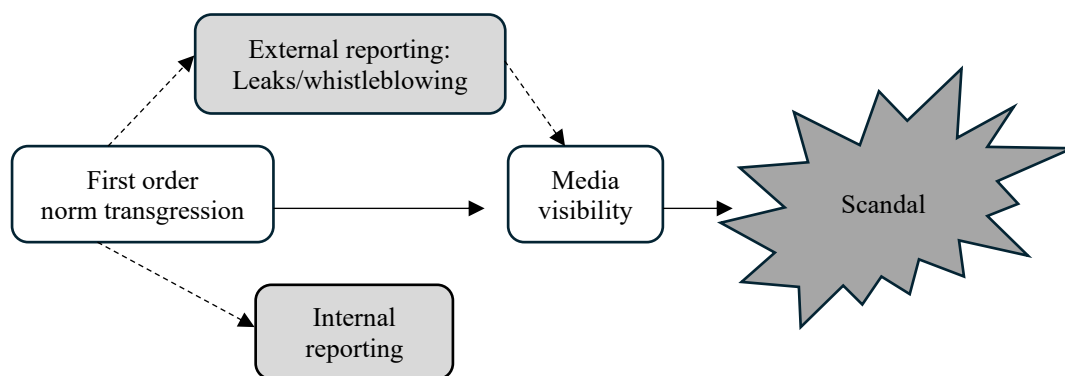
media disclosures are made and describe the data used, before moving on to the empirical analyses and conclusions.

A theoretical model of disclosures and political scandals

Scandals springing from serious misconduct by parties or party members constitute a common feature in news media in most liberal democracies since the 1960s (Thompson, 2000; Pollack et al., 2018). In their volume on political scandals and media across democracies, Tumber and Waisbord (2004: 1031) observe that “[s]candals seem to be the norm rather than exceptional moments.” The transgressions concern all kinds of misconduct and have been categorised in various ways (see e.g. Thompson, 2000; Pollack et al., 2018; Johansson and Vigsø, 2020), but overall, they can be divided into those concerning the structural level (involving political institutions and organisations, decisions, and processes) and the individual level (involving individual politicians and political leaders).

All forms of misconduct do not, however, become scandals. In fact, the majority of misconducts within political parties remain unaddressed and, if reported at all, they are primarily done so through internal channels (Niklasson et al., 2024). This is also the case in other kinds of organisations (Culiberg and Mihelič, 2017; Berndtsson et al., 2018). For a scandal to arise, exposure of a norm transgression is required (Thompson, 2000; Tumber and Waisbord, 2004a).

Figure 1. External reporting as a part of the political scandal process



Note: Inspired by Thompson (2000: 63-66). The light grey boxes and the dotted arrows illustrate our modifications. NB! Thompson’s model does not end after the scandal but continues with second order transgressions. That latter part of the model is excluded since it is not relevant to our study.

Figure 1 illustrates the sequence of a political scandal based on Thompson’s (2000: 63–66) understanding of a political scandal as a result of mediated visibility. The model begins with what is termed a first-order norm transgression, which is a violation of norms that have the potential to become a scandal (e.g., sexual harassment, bribery, or abuse of power). These transgressions often take place in what Goffman (1959) refers to as the “back regions” of politics (i.e., internal settings shielded from public view). As long as these violations remain

hidden from the public, they do not escalate into scandals, but if stories are picked up by the media, a scandal may emerge.¹

Missing from the initial model is *how* norm transgressions become known by the media in the first place. The model describes how information about back-region behaviour can leak into front regions, but it does so without recognising the actors and actions that make this happen. This gap has also been noted by Manuel Balan (2011), who states that: “despite growing attention, it remains unclear how corruption scandals come to light”, something that Sherman (1989: 892) identifies as “one of the most important problems in understanding the process of scandal”.

In some cases, investigative journalists uncover misconduct independently through systemic, albeit random, reviews of financial statements, audits, etc. (see e.g. Sherman, 1989). In other cases, they may stumble upon incriminating evidence by chance, or while following a suspicion. There are, however, instances where journalists only manage to pull incidents of misconduct out of the back regions of politics thanks to information provided by party insiders. We therefore develop the model of the political scandal process by adding external reporting: a stage in between the norm transgression and media visibility.

The purpose of this study is to explore the dynamics of the external reporting branch of this modified political scandal process model. The primary focus is on the link between norm transgressions and media visibility, through the disclosure of information by an insider to an external actor. We do not consider what happens after the norm transgression has become visible in the media. Not all these incidents develop into scandals (Busby, 2022: 19), but that is not the concern of this paper. Instead, the focus is on the preceding steps that are typically out of sight but vital for a scandal to arise. The questions we ask are therefore: when and why, does external reporting occur? In the following section, we present our hypotheses and expectations.

Hypotheses about external disclosures and media visibility

Since there are very few studies on the dynamics of media disclosures by insiders about misconduct in political parties, we draw on related topics in all research fields mentioned above. Our theoretical assumptions are also informed by 13 explorative interviews with Swedish political reporters and investigative journalists.²

Based on whistleblowing research, a whistleblower may be driven by at least four different motivations: defending the public good, standing up for ethical ideals, personal satisfaction, and political reasons (Liebes and Blum-Kulka, 2004). The latter motivation, political reasons,

¹ This may in itself cause second-order norm transgressions, but that is outside the scope of our study.

² See appendix A1 for more details concerning the interviews.

has not received much attention by whistleblowing scholars, as their focus has been on non-political organisations. In the context of political parties, however, we expect political reasons to be a highly relevant factor for the dynamics of media disclosures. Leaks may be used as an accountability mechanism (Culiberg and Mihelič, 2017), but also as a tool to make political points and rid oneself of political opponents (Tumber, 2004; Davis, 2009; Balan, 2011; Allern and Pollack, 2012; Jenssen and Fladmoe, 2012; Amick et al., 2022; Feierherd et al., 2024). An instrumentalised media logic would, for example, imply that politicians use the media to “intervene in the world of politics” (Hallin, 2004: 37; see also Mancini, 2018). The idea that politicians’ denunciation of corruption in political parties can be politically motivated is supported by Invernizzi and Ceron’s (2023) study on the sources of judicial investigations in Italy, as well as that of Balan (2011), who concludes that corruption scandals are triggered by competition among government actors who leak information about each other, including party colleagues. Neither of these studies have investigated when and why politicians turn to the media, but their results are in line with the experiences of several of our interviewees. An investigative journalist (6) says, for example, that:

Some of those who get in touch with us may do so mainly because they want to put a spanner in the works for a competitor, or someone they don't like, or someone who belongs to a faction that they seek to undermine.

The hypotheses and expectations below therefore emanate from the assumption that political reasons are key motivations to media disclosures of misconduct in political parties. We argue that insiders disclose information about individual or structural misconduct in their party due to political motivations, and that these motivations are particularly pertinent (a) during certain points in the electoral cycle and (b) when the party is doing particularly poorly in opinion polls.

The election cycle and disclosures of misconduct

Parties are political organizations whose primary goal is to win elections (Strom, 1990; Müller and Strøm, 1999). This makes the party context unique compared to that of other organisations usually studied in relation to leaks and whistleblowing. Unlike other whistleblowers, politicians must consider a temporal aspect when deciding to blow the whistle, as the timing of political scandals may affect both public perception and voter support (Pereira and Waterbury, 2019; von Sikorski et al., 2020; Feierherd et al., 2024).

There is a growing body of research suggesting that political parties and politicians strive to maximize their electoral success through the strategic timing of actions and priorities (Alesina et al., 1993; Aidt et al., 2011; Seeberg, 2022; Schwalbach, 2022). Feierherd et al. (2024) observe, for example, that politicians in Argentina tend to file corruption lawsuits against internal and external opponents right before an election to maximize the effect, as voters’ attention span is short. Of particular interest to this study is the fact that political competition occurs not only between parties but also within them.

Furthermore, there is evidence of the electoral cycle being correlated to media reports on political scandals (van Aelst and De Swert, 2009; Le Moglie and Turati, 2019; Garz and Sörensen, 2021; Feierherd et al., 2024). Feierherd et al.'s (2024) study shows that newspapers are more likely to publish stories on corruption scandals close to elections, which may indicate that the media has a greater focus on covering such news then, but also that politicians are more inclined to leak incriminating information to the press in times of election for strategic reasons (see e.g. Adekeye, 2017; Put and Coffé, 2024). None of these studies can say whether it is the politicians or the media who drive this pattern, however.

Exactly when the internal power struggles peak arguably depends on the political system and context. In some systems, like Argentina, these struggles are the most intense right before the general elections (Feierherd et al., 2024). In others, like Sweden, it is likely when the candidates compete for party nominations and favourable positions on the ballot. Several of the Swedish journalists interviewed (3; 6; 15) note, for example, that it is during the nomination periods that party members start contacting them about misconduct. Once the candidates are selected, politicians shift away from intra-party competition toward inter-party competition (Skjæveland, 1999).

In light of this discussion, we hypothesise that:

H1: Media disclosures by insiders of party-related misconduct are more likely during the nomination stage when party members compete for positions on the ballots.

Public party support and disclosures of misconduct

In addition to the electoral cycle, there are also good reasons to believe that public party support matters. Party infighting and political scandals are usually bad in terms of voter support, at least in the short run (Pereira and Waterbury, 2019; Rienks, 2023; Klingelhöfer and Müller, 2024). Party members thus have good reasons to keep quiet as long as the party is doing well in the opinion polls, so as not to jeopardize the party's chances of electoral success. Why change a winning formula?

When the party is losing popular support, however, critical voices tend to be raised. Party members start calling for changes in the hope of turning public opinion around. The criticism usually concerns either the political agenda and direction, the party organisation, or the party leadership (Ennsner-Jedenastik and Müller, 2015; Invernizzi, 2023). Thus, the criticism is not limited to identifying a few bad apples (individual misconduct) but may also comprise of reports concerning party misconduct on a structural level.

This criticism is not only expressed internally, but also externally. Invernizzi and Ceron (2023) show, for instance, that when a party loses electoral support, politicians are more likely to leak information about corrupt MPs to outsiders. This information may originate from competing parties who perceive a chance of winning new voters, but the attacks may also come from party

insiders (Golden and Chang, 2001). Such external reports from insiders can signal to the electorate that the party is taking action to address problems and misconduct that discourage people to cast their votes for them. That frustrated and disgruntled party members start leaking information about things they perceive to be amiss when the party is doing poorly in the opinion polls is also confirmed by journalists (Politikbyrå on December 11, 2024).

Disclosing information to the press in these situations can be either a strategic move from individuals who perceive the situation as an opportunity to secure a better position within the party, or a way for those who simply hope to save the party from demise. Regardless, the timing implies that such reports are motivated by political gain. We therefore hypothesise that:

H2: Media disclosures by insiders of party related misconduct are more likely when parties are losing popular support.

Data and research approach

The Swedish case

Sweden and the other Nordic countries were for a long time considered relatively free of political scandals. Today, however, Pollack et al. (2018: 3087) conclude that “mediated scandals have become a standard feature of political life” in such contexts. This development is not surprising given that Norris (2014) has shown that watchdog journalism, of which reporting on misconduct in political parties is a central aspect, is perceived more important by journalists in liberal democracies.

As a low corrupt liberal democracy with a proportional election system, Sweden is an interesting case when studying how and when party members disclose sensitive information to the media. What happens in political parties matters in this context, as strong cohesive parties play a pivotal role in the political process. Party misconduct, if disclosed, may certainly harm a party’s electoral success, but there is also a general culture of loyalty to the party. Party members are therefore likely to think twice before leaking externally to the media.

At the same time, the prominent role of parties and the proportional election system imply strong intra-party competition (Boucek 2002). Such competition can lead to leaking incriminating information to the press about internal competitors, in order to discredit them and gain an advantage in the nomination race (Balán, 2011). Furthermore, Sweden, like most other EU countries, has a comprehensive protection of whistleblowers, although it does not yet extend to political parties.³ The law (SFS 2021:890) primarily applies to employees in the

³ See Transparency International, 2023, <https://whistleblowingnetwork.org/WIN/media/pdfs/2023-How-well-do-EU-countries-protect-whistleblowers-revised-revised.pdf>. TI reviewed 20 countries of which almost all (19) had not fully implemented the EU directive. Only four, however failed to allow whistleblowers to report wrongdoing directly to the authorities without any restrictions.

private and public sector, but still signals a general recognition of leaks and whistleblowing as important accountability mechanisms. Moreover, and also in line with most other European countries, Swedish media is strongly protected against attempts to make them reveal their sources (Freedom, 1998), which facilitates for party insiders to disclose information anonymously without running the risk of being exposed.

Sweden is furthermore considered part of the “Democratic corporative” media system, together with most other Northwest European countries (Hallin and Mancini, 2011). This model implies, among other things, a high level of journalistic and critical professionalism, which means that politicians are scrutinized and exposed if they misbehave. There is also a strong adherence to ethical self-regulations and in contrast to other media systems, there is also a clear distinction between opinion and news. Finally, what lies in the public interest is a guiding principle. This all suggests that Swedish media will not shy away from publishing incriminating news about politicians, but also that such decisions will be well-motivated, both from an ethical and public interest standpoint.

There are thus structural and cultural factors that are likely to restrain party members from disclosing sensitive information about party-related misconduct to the media, but there are also factors that make such disclosures more likely. And there is also a strong likelihood that the media will publish such stories. As shown, Sweden is not at all unique in presenting this kind of complex context, and the results from this study would most likely apply to most West European countries, not least the Nordic ones. Given the lack of previous research on this topic, Sweden is a good a starting point as any other low corrupt liberal democracy, with whistleblower protection and a proportional election system.

Data collection: Media stories

To assemble data on media stories relating to leaks in political parties in Sweden, we conducted a systematic search process based on all local and national print media between 2010-2024. The search was conducted using Mediearkivet⁴, a digital news archive that stores PDF and web-format versions of news stories and broadcasts from across the globe.

As we are primarily interested in leaks due to misconduct from or inside political parties, we constructed a search string using boolean operators consisting of three criteria that needed to be met for the article to be considered relevant. Articles were only eligible if they contained words relating to: (a) misconduct or wrongdoing, (b) whistleblowing or related concepts, and

⁴ <https://www.retrievgroup.com/sv/product-medicarkivet>. Mediearkivet is the largest Nordic digital news archive containing the complete versions of newspaper articles published in daily papers and journals since 1981. However, there is a gap in their data 2000-2009, when articles from the some of the major daily papers are missing, since Mediearkivet refrained from paying the newspapers' fees for that period. Even though Mediearkivet started paying from 2010, they never gained access to the data from 2000-2009, which is why we have decided to start our data collection in 2010.

(c) political parties.⁵ We also sought to exclude some high-profile cases (e.g., stories relating to Frances Haugen or Julian Assange) that we knew to be irrelevant to our study, but generate a high number of hits, to make our search results more valid.⁶ In total, the media search resulted in 11 337 hits.

Following the initial search process, an assessment of source credibility and relevance of all sampled articles was conducted. Op-eds, letters to the editors, etc. were excluded, since we only wanted cases where a professional journalist had assessed the credibility of the information leaked. We also excluded cases that had been picked up by the search string, but did not in fact fulfil all three criteria required (e.g. neither a politician nor a party were responsible or accused of misconduct, or the source was not from the party associated with the misconduct), as well as duplicates, corrupted files, and articles that did not contain enough information (e.g. “Year in review” articles that only referred to an incident in one sentence).⁷ The sample was then supplemented with a few well-known and highly relevant cases that did not turn out in the media search, mostly because they did not fulfil all three search criteria; the articles may have mentioned misconduct and political parties, but not whistleblowing or any other related concepts, for example. This validation process reduced the number of articles to 1304.

As several articles can refer to the same incident, we collapsed related articles into single case observations that contain the information of all stories relating to a given case. This approach enabled us to build a more comprehensive and reliable dataset, since different newspapers include different pieces of information in their accounts of the same incident. At this stage, the sample of articles was also subject to a further assessment of relevance to the present study. For example, several articles referred to misconduct or whistleblowing in an abstract sense, whereas in this study we are interested in specific occurrences of these two features. Our final sample consists of 709 news stories that relate to 424 cases of political disclosures from political parties. This sample of articles were then subject to a coding procedure that recorded article-level (e.g., the publication date and author) and story-level characteristics (e.g., the type of misconduct referred to, the context, the affiliation of the source and accused, the political party etc.).

⁵ While thematically relevant, we do not include the specific word "leak" (läckor), since it generated many irrelevant articles about physical leaks of various kinds. We therefore attempt to capture this phenomenon indirectly by including the search term "anonymous source" (anonym* käll*), which typically indicates a leak as we conceptualise it.

⁶ The full search string: ("anonym* käll*" OR "slå* larm" OR visselblås*) AND (anklag* OR anmäl* OR diskriminer* OR fusk* OR hemlig* OR jäv* OR korrupt* OR kränk* OR mobb* OR munkavle OR muta* OR mutor* OR nepotism* OR olämplig* OR skandal* OR svågerpolitik* OR trakasser* OR tyst* OR *utred* OR ofred* OR härv* OR misstänkt*) AND ("inom partiet" OR parti* OR partimedlem* OR politiker*) ANDNOT (trump OR assange OR haugen)

⁷ If these incidents seemed relevant and were not mentioned in any of the other articles identified by the search string, we looked them up and added them (if found relevant) manually.

Measures

Particularly pertinent to this study are the variables collected on the type of reported misconduct. We aggregate these types into two categories: misconduct that can be attributed to an individual (e.g., inappropriate conduct by a party member, or financial irregularities in favour of an individual) and that which is structural in character (e.g., financial irregularities in favour of the party, organisational problems, work environment issues, or failure by the party to act in line with its responsibility).

We follow Aberbach (1981) and Put and Coffé (2024) in identifying the nomination stage as a distinct period in the electoral cycle. Elections to all three levels (local, regional, and national) take place simultaneously in Sweden on the second Sunday in September every four years. The last election was in 2022. Electoral lists are typically finalized at the end of April in the same year of the election. We therefore consider the six months prior to this to be an appropriate period for when candidates are most likely to be competing with one another for position on the party lists. Specifically, we operationalise the nomination period as a dummy variable, equalling ‘1’ for the period from September 1 in the year prior to the election until April 30 in the year of the election. In robustness tests, we also vary the beginning of this period in alternative measures by two months in either direction (see Appendix A3). Results are largely robust to this alternative specification.

We measure poll performance by combining our monthly dataset with aggregated polling data, where we create monthly average poll results for each party for each month (with the exception of election months which are omitted). From this, we create a variable which, for each month, records the difference between current (average) poll percentage and the vote percentage received by the party at the previous election. Parties are therefore adjudged to be performing well (+) or poorly (-) relative to the last election. This measure is in line with Stiers et al. (2018), who show that supporters of small parties consider their parties to be successful if they perform better than in the previous election. As this measure does not take party size into consideration, however, we also consider a party’s raw monthly poll percentage in models using this variable. Descriptive statistics of each of these variables are available in Appendix A2.

Estimation approach

To test the determinants of individual and structural misconduct disclosures in the electoral cycle, we transform our media stories dataset into a time series consisting of party-months. That is, we record for each month in the period from January 2010 to December 2024, the count of cases that occurred relating to each party as well as the characteristics of those cases. Given that several parties can be involved in the same case (for example, in local or national coalition contexts), this approach allows us to identify relationships that may be due to case or party factors, whilst also controlling for time-varying factors. In our main specifications we therefore utilize a series of zero-inflated poisson regression analyses that are well suited for event-count data where the dependent variable contains many zeros, as is the case for individual (and

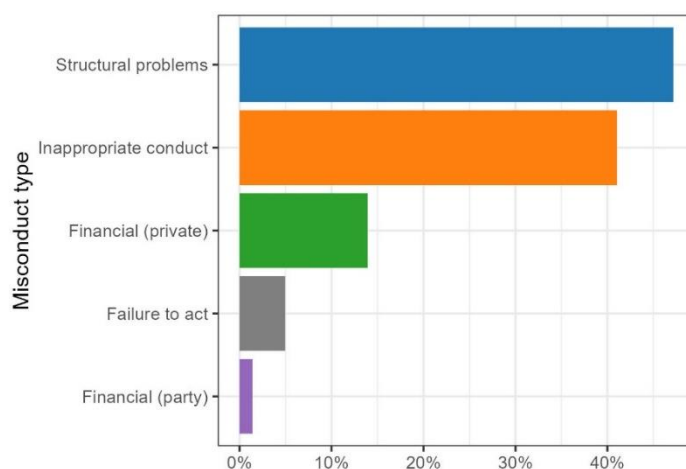
particularly smaller) parties. We also include party fixed effects to account for party-level variation regarding the frequency and timing of certain kinds of misconduct.

Results

Previous research suggests that political insiders are very reluctant to pass on sensitive information about their parties to the media, and that issues concerning misconduct are primarily reported internally to other party members and/or the party leadership (Niklasson et al., 2024). Only a small share reaches the media and even fewer stories are actually published, since journalists must consider the credibility of their sources, the quality of evidence, and the public interest (Journalist 1; 4; 6; 10). Thus, the misconducts presented here represent those at the tip of the iceberg of actual cases of misconduct that occur in political parties.

Figure 2 illustrates the types of misconduct in parties that are reported on in the media. The vast majority of cases relate to structural problems (such as issues relating to the working environment) and inappropriate conduct of individuals. Far less frequent is misconduct relating to the financial gain of the person or party. This distribution of different kinds of misconduct reported in the media is in line with the pattern identified in Niklasson et al. (2024), regarding the kinds of misconduct actually occur in political parties, as reported by politicians.

Figure 2. Types cases of misconduct in political parties



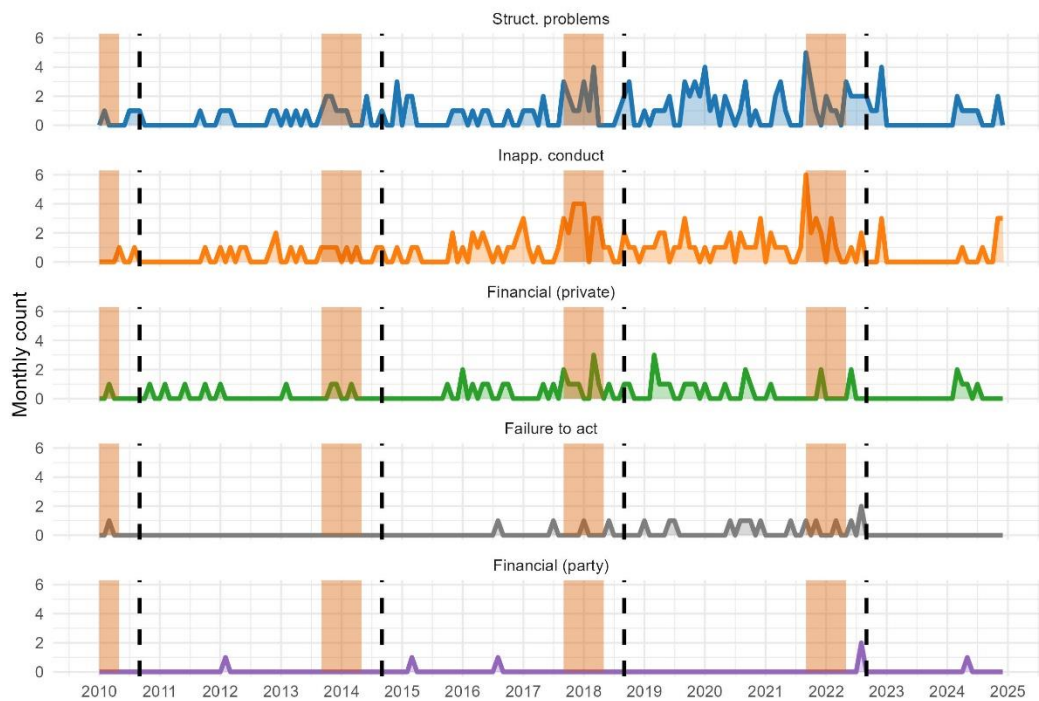
Note: N = 424 cases

Figure 3 plots the temporal nature of disclosures in political parties by considering the month of publication from 424 cases of misconduct disclosures, contextualized by general elections (vertical dashed lines) and nomination periods (shaded areas). While this is only a descriptive plot of the data, there is initial indication of an increase in cases in approximately one year prior to the election. The timing of these spikes coincides with the periods leading to nominations to electoral lists. This appears particularly the case for reports relating to inappropriate conduct of individuals. In a system where people primarily vote for parties and not individual candidates, this makes intuitive sense, as disclosing information about certain

individuals may pass as an attempt to rid the party of a few bad apples. The party may thus run less of a risk of losing popular support due to the negative publicity and the bad apples can be replaced by another candidate, one that the whistleblower may prefer.

There is also some indication that the number of cases decreases in the election campaign period, which immediately follows the nomination period and precedes the election. This pattern indicates that it is not primarily the media that is more eager to publish news on political scandals during the nomination period, but that it is the politicians who are more willing to leak that kind of information then. Otherwise, it is hard to understand the drop in media coverage, since the media has no reason to be less interested in publishing news on political scandals during the election campaign, whereas the politicians clearly have.

Figure 3. Timing of reports relating to different types of misconduct through the electoral cycle



Note: Black vertical dashed lines represent general elections. Shaded vertical rectangles represent nomination periods for electoral lists.

The results of a series of zero-inflated poisson regression analyses for our hypothesised relationships are presented in Table 1. Results are presented for two variations of the dependent variable: Models 1 and 3 estimate the occurrence of individual misconduct, while models 2 and 4 consider the occurrence of structural problems. All models estimate temporal effects and as such we include party fixed effects to account for party differences and cluster standard errors by month.

Table 1. Zero-inflated poisson regression results for the monthly count of misconduct disclosures

	Ind.	Struct.	Ind.	Struct.	Ind.	Struct.
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Nomination period	1.026*** (0.256)	0.852* (0.395)			1.037*** (0.260)	0.857* (0.397)
Monthly poll performance % (+/-)			-0.094** (0.029)	-0.073+ (0.038)	-0.090** (0.304)	-0.077* (0.037)
Monthly poll %			0.008 (0.018)	0.035+ (0.019)	0.003 (0.020)	0.038+ (0.021)
Observations	1440	1440	1384	1384	1440	1440
Fixed effects	Party	Party	Party	Party	Party	Party
SE cluster	Month	Month	Month	Month	Month	Month
Log-likelihood	-555.9	-483.9	-540.8	-470.0	-524.4	-461.9
AIC	1131.7	987.9	1103.7	962.0	1072.8	947.9

Notes: The table reports the results of zero-inflated poisson regression analysis of the occurrence of disclosures of two different types of misconduct: individual and structural. The unit of analysis is the party-month. + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Results suggest a positive significant effect of nomination periods on both types of misconduct, which is in line with H1. Interestingly, while structural problems are the most frequently reported in the data, the effect of nomination periods is marginally stronger for disclosures of individual misconduct. Given that poisson regression coefficients represent the log change in the expected count (of news stories) in a given month for a party, we can convert coefficients into substantive effect sizes by comparing their exponentiated value with the baseline expected count of news stories in non-nomination periods. For instance, Model 1 indicates that during nomination periods, the expected occurrence of a story relating to individual misconduct is almost 3 times higher (2.8) than non-nomination periods. In the case of structural issues (Model 2), this increase is 2.3 times higher than non-nomination periods. The baseline expected story count in a given month across parties is 0.12, meaning that in nomination periods this rises to over 0.3 for cases of individual misconduct. In large parties such as the Social Democrats, however, the expected count of a story related to individual misconduct in non-nomination periods is as high as 0.24, meaning that a 2.8 times increase in this expectation during nomination period months equates to 0.68. Thus, this table clearly demonstrates a strong temporal dynamic to the reporting of misconduct in nomination periods relative to other periods in the electoral cycle.

In robustness tests reported in Appendix A3, we vary our coding of the starting point of the nomination period by two months in either direction (July and November in the year before the election, respectively). Results for individual transgressions are consistent across these alternative measures, though the association decreases in magnitude, suggesting the beginning

of the nomination period to be particularly important for this kind of misconduct. Structural problems, on the other hand, are not robust to these alternative operationalisations.

Models 3 and 4 present the results of models that estimate the monthly count of cases for political parties as a function of their performance in the polls, relative to their vote tallies in the preceding election. A one-step increase in the poll performance variable therefore corresponds to a one percentage-point increase in polling figures relative to the preceding election tally. These models demonstrate a significant negative effect of relative poll performance on both types of misconduct disclosures, which is in line with H2. This means that as poll performance increases, the likelihood of a misconduct story being published about a party decreases. Substantively, for each percentage point a party is better off in the polls relative to the previous election, the expected count of stories relating to misconduct for that party in a given month decreases by around 9%. In a similar manner to the tests relating to H1, the results are similar between individual and structural variations of misconduct.

Conclusions

In this paper, we study the dynamics of media disclosures by insiders about misconduct in political parties, a context that has previously been largely overlooked by party research and whistleblowing research, as well as that on watchdog and investigative journalism. Just by turning the spotlight towards these organisations, we contribute new empirical knowledge of how external disclosures unfold in this context.

We argue that while the decision to blow the whistle can be motivated by a range of factors, encompassing both self-interest and altruistic intentions, it is, in the context of political parties, reasonable to expect political reasons to largely influence the dynamics of media disclosures. Building on this assumption, which is informed by related research as well as interviews with journalists, we formulate and test two hypotheses of how the election cycle (H1) and the current state of the public opinion (H2) influence when and why party related misconduct is reported by party insiders.

Our results indicate that such disclosures are indeed used for political gain. In line with H1, we find that there is an almost threefold increase in media disclosures of misconduct during the nomination process, when party members compete for a place on the ballot. The results clearly demonstrate a temporal dynamic to the reporting of misconduct in nomination periods – a dynamic that appears to be driven primarily by the politician's willingness to disclose this kind of news rather than the media's inclination to report on it. We base this conclusion on the fact that media reports on party-related misconduct seem to decline after the nomination period has ended, and do not peak similarly during the period following election campaign, despite there being an arguably even greater interest from the media and the public for these kinds of news in those periods (van Aelst and De Swert, 2009). These findings may not surprise politicians or political journalists, but they constitute a significant theoretical contribution to the research that takes an interest in the media logics and power relations that dictate the interactions between journalists and politicians. Furthermore, our results call on voters to critically ask

themselves why information about party misconduct becomes available and whose purpose it serves.

We also find, as suggested by H2, that members of parties in decline tend to disclose information about misconduct to the media more often than those belonging to parties that are doing well in the opinion polls. This is an interesting result as it relates to parties' – or party members' – strategies to set the party on a new course by remedying shortcomings and potentially changing policy positions. The reasons behind these disclosures may relate to political gain for the party, but also the personal benefit of the source insofar as they may gain the upper hand in a subsequent internal struggle. Hence, studying media disclosures of party misconduct provides important insights of political power struggles and policy shifts in declining parties, insights that we believe will prove useful in the theory development and empirical studies of party research.

To conclude, this study contributes new systematic evidence about when and why party members decide to leak incriminating or detrimental information about their parties to the media. Although disclosures of this kind may also serve the public good and represent attempts to stand up for ethical ideals, political gain clearly constitutes a significant driving force behind these reports. We therefore claim that in order to understand the phenomenon of whistleblowing fully, we have to consider the possibility that actors take potential benefits as well as costs into account when deciding whether to disclose information about misconduct in their organizations to external actors.

What is presented here is, to the best of our knowledge, the first study that focuses on media reporting based on internal leaks from political parties. There is thus a great need for further studies in other countries of various political systems and cultures. Due to the lack of previous research, it is hard to assess the scope conditions of the Swedish case, but we find it plausible that our results are valid at least in most West European parliamentary democracies and potentially also in Central and Eastern Europe. For presidential systems, there is some evidence in support of our findings that there is a strategic timing of leaks (Adekeye, 2017; Feierherd et al., 2024), but there are many remaining questions. For example, what other factors play a part in the calculations of whistleblowers' political gain and how strong a driving force is this compared to other reasons for reporting misconduct? What considerations do politicians actually make before deciding to leak incriminating information about party misconduct to the media? These are all questions waiting to be explored.

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Appendix A1: Interviews

This interview study has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Application number 2022-03766-01).

We have carried out 13 semi-structured interviews with well-established political reporters and investigative journalists. These reporters were identified through several different methods, e.g. we approached authors of the newspaper articles collected in the quantitative media search, journalists who frequently comment on political events on the news, and we used snowball sampling. Our aim was to talk to as wide a range of political journalists as possible.

Five of the interviews were carried out face to face, but most of them were done over Zoom, or the phone. In general, the interviews lasted for about one hour and were recorded. All respondents have been assured anonymity.

The interviews covered several themes, e.g., how frequently the journalists are approached by party insiders about misconduct and when, what type of misconduct party members leak about, what the journalists perceive to be their motivations for doing so, and which parties that tend to leak and why. We do recognize that we might have received different answers to these questions had we asked the politicians themselves instead, but given the vast experiences of the journalists interviewed, we argue that it is reasonable to assume that they possess considerable knowledge of how leaks are used in politics and the actors involved. Furthermore, the primary role of these interviews was to provide a background to the media data and generate hypotheses.

All interviews were carried out in Swedish, so quotes have been translated by us into English.

List of journalists

- Journalist 1: Woman, EU reporter at a daily newspaper, October 5, 2023
- Journalist 2: Man, political reporter at a daily newspaper, October 5, 2023
- Journalist 3: Woman, political reporter at the National Swedish Radio, October 9, 2023
- Journalist 4: Man, reporter at TV4, October 10, 2023
- Journalist 5: Man, investigative journalist at a tabloid, October 10, 2023
- Journalist 6: Woman, political reporter at a daily newspaper, October 10, 2023
- Journalist 7: Woman, investigative journalist at a local newspaper, October 12, 2023
- Journalist 8: Woman, investigative journalist at a local newspaper, October 18, 2023
- Journalist 9: Man, domestic political commentator at a daily newspaper, October 19, 2023
- Journalist 10: Woman, domestic political commentator at a tabloid, October 26, 2023
- Journalist 11: Man, political editor at a tabloid, October 26, 2023
- Journalist 12: Man, editor of opinion pieces at an online news site, October 25
- Journalist 14: Woman, EU reporter at a daily newspaper, November 11, 2023
- Journalist 15: Man, investigative journalist at a tabloid, November 22, 2024

Appendix A2. Descriptive statistics

Table A2. *Descriptive statistics of analysis variables*

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Monthly case count (Ind.)	1440	0.15	0.45	0	5
Monthly case count (Struct.)	1440	0.11	0.41	0	4
Nomination period	1440	0.13	0.34	0	1
Monthly poll performance % (+/-)	1384	0.02	2.68	-8.69	10.1
Monthly poll %	1384	12.2	9.55	2.4	38.1

Appendix A3. Nomination period variations

Table A3. *Replication of models 1 and 2 in Table 1 with nomination periods operationalised as beginning two months earlier (July) and later (November), respectively.*

Notes: Table reports the results of zero-inflated poisson regression analysis of the occurrence of disclosures of

	Ind.	Struct.	Ind.	Struct.	two different types of misconduct: individual and collective. The unit of analysis is the party-month. + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	
Nomination period (July-April)	0.838** (0.256)	0.628 (0.412)			
Nomination period (November-April)			0.579+ (0.205)	-0.020 (0.291)	
Observations	1440	1440	1440	1440	
Fixed effects	Party	Party	Party	Party	
SE cluster	Month	Month	Month	Month	
Log-likelihood	-560.5	-487.4	-568.4	-492.0	
AIC	1141.1	994.9	1156.7	1004.0	