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# POLICY BRIEF

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## Adaptable, Diverse, Innovative:

Five Future Impulses for Political Parties

**In our increasingly complex and fragmented society, political parties remain indispensable in maintaining productive cooperation between young and old, rich and poor, right and left, urban and rural areas, as well as people with and without a migratory background or German citizenship.**

## Introduction

Political parties must change in order to be able to fulfil their tasks in the long term. They need appropriate organisational structures and processes, meaning statutes, regulatory frameworks and organisational routines that enable agile political work instead of restraining it. In addition, a more innovative approach to everyday party work is imperative. A friendly, co-creative and energetic environment is crucial if parties want to win and permanently keep new members and non-member volunteers. The inter-personal quality of cooperation, the openness towards new people and new issues, the capacity to debate fairly, and the willingness for reflective leadership are key for future success.

### **CHANGE AS A STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE**

Even a cursory look at the foreseeable developments of the next decade makes evident that Germany's structural change will further accelerate. Political parties

are directly exposed to demographic change, new work habits and environments, and digitalisation of work and communication. Hence, their change is not an end in itself. New organisational structures are the foundation for a political party's sustained legitimacy as one of the key drivers of change in society. Adapting to the changes around us may seem like a giant challenge, but is the only chance to upkeep long-term success and political effectiveness as an organisation.

Change needs dedicated, driven leadership. At the same time, innovation includes the whole organisation: 'common' members, officials, and sympathisers all have a role in re-defining the inner workings of their party on the local, regional and federal level. Outside perspectives are necessary in order to break up the routines of an increasingly homogenous membership.

To avoid costly failure, low-threshold prototyping is a key aspect to successful party innovation. New organisational methods and processes should be designed, tested, evaluated and enhanced on a small scale before being rolled out into broader party structures. Furthermore, smart incentives and nudges can help to promote change. This applies to mid-level officials in particular. They can become architects of a successful future for a party if they succeed in adapting their self-conception.

## 1. Adapting to everyday lives as they are

*Thesis 1: Political parties need organisational structures that adapt to a broader spectrum of today's everyday lives. Various types of membership may be one way to reflect the growing cultural and habitual diversity of our society. In order to design offers that match today's needs, parties need to gather more knowledge and data about their members and potential volunteers.*

Political parties need an activist-focused approach to internal change. In other words, they need to fundamentally rethink their position towards their volunteers – the offers and the infrastructure they need, the incentives and training necessary, and so on. To stay in touch with contemporary living environments, one type of membership is no longer enough. Different party members have different motivations for their membership, as well as varying qualifications and competences, time budgets, and activity preferences.

Traditional party formats remain legitimate but should be complemented by new participatory pathways. Present means of participation in political parties are characterised by regularity, physical presence, and time intensity. Those who can or want to invest only a small amount of time for political campaigning want the opposite: time sovereignty, locally bound opportunities for campaigning and efficient work – and debate – processes.

Political parties need to ask themselves: how can we design our processes and habitual actions in order to foster more motivation and self-efficacy? They should

act on the assumption that their members and possible volunteers want to make a difference with their actions. Hence, political parties should accelerate their volunteers' desire for impact instead of taming it, and adjust their structures accordingly.

It seems advisable to look for best practices outside the political professional field, for instance labour unions, churches and social interest groups. After all, these institutions are facing similar structural challenges and have been experimenting with new organisational structures for quite a while now. Political parties can benefit from learning more intensely with and from these organisations. Strategic dialogue formats on all levels are necessary to that end.

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### Knowing more about current and future volunteers is a prerequisite for designing successful innovation.

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Learning from others is one thing; expanding knowledge about your own organisation is another entirely. Political parties know far too little about their active, inactive and former members, not to mention their sympathisers. At the same time, the strategic development of the volunteer base and, therefore, of the entire organisation is hardly possible if there is a lack of insight into the members' political interests, time budgets, competences, and available qualifications. Parties thus should systematically expand knowledge of current and potential volunteers. One way to do this is the inclusion of various types of activists when re-designing and testing structures and processes.

#### PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Introduce parallel membership models:** Activists should be able to pick their preferred way of working when entering party membership. One way to open up parallel pathways could be the design of various membership options, e.g. 'The Expert' (focusing on specific fields of policy), 'The Activist' (local projects and campaigns), or 'The Ambassador' (building networks with other institutions). Providing members with specific guidelines, task descriptions, and training can help to gain traction from day 1.

- **Tailored volunteering:** Parties should establish centralised coordination of onboarding processes, including tailored offers for initial volunteering. An ideal scenario would be offers that fit into individual activist's time budgets, qualifications, and main fields of interest.
- **Policy working groups on state and federal level:** Volunteers who want to focus on state or federal policy issues can join working groups that specialize on specific issues and collaborate mostly online. These working groups are on eye level with traditional party branches and send delegates to party conventions.
- **Free choice of regional party division:** Party members should be able to choose the regional party division they want to be part of, especially in urban areas where party members today need to change division when moving to another neighbourhood in a city. Tactically motivated, short-term changes of divisions preceding inner-party direct elections can be avoided by setting moratoria.
- **Promote time-efficiency:** Political parties should use their volunteers' time as the most valuable resource they have. Time-efficiency on all levels thus is key. Parties should evaluate their structures with regards to time-efficiency, with the aim of keeping self-administration as low as possible.
- **Systematically learn about volunteers:** Political parties should collect more information (and thus data) about their members and sympathisers, in order to adjust offers to their actual needs and wishes.

## 2. Qualifying for the future

*Thesis 2: Political parties can upgrade party membership by offering broad and high-quality education programs. These programs offer tangible advantages for every volunteer, while at the same time lifting the organisational culture in its entirety to a new level of cooperation.*

In the coming decades, lifelong training will play a more important role in the labour market. That being said, the focus of professional qualification will shift from the skill level to personal development, such as leadership skills, mediation competence, or awareness practices and stress management. Permanent self-development and training on the personal and professional level will be a key factor to professional success.

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### Organisations who qualify individual members develop as a whole.

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Political parties can benefit from this development. Organisations who up-skill their members develop themselves. Political parties can position themselves as powerhouses of qualification – knowing that individual learning will not only empower each and every party member, but also the organisation as a whole. At the same time, learning in fields like self-leadership, team-leadership or conflict-moderation offer an incentive for volunteers to accept party membership.

While not producing tangible benefits in the short term, broad qualification programs will significantly strengthen party structures in the mid- and long-term. Professional training thus should become the 'new normal' for active members, party officials, and elected representatives. Therefore, parties should introduce their qualification strategies today. They can learn from the business sector, where professional education programs have been implemented for all professional levels over the last decades.

**PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- **Standardising curricula:** Parties need to systematically qualify their elected officials and employees in order to gain increased leadership expertise. One nudge towards that goal would be automatic enrolment for training curricula for all party officials.
- **Define obligatory competencies for full-time officials:** Only those who gained certain professional competencies should be hired.
- **Set targets for qualifying volunteers:** Parties should set organisational targets for the qualification of volunteers. This sets an incentive for the implementation of organisational qualification infrastructures (budgeting, designing curricula, pooling trainers and consultants, etc.), and helps to promote the organisation's willingness to provide training, coaching and other development measures for their volunteers. Parties should establish a quid pro quo: those who volunteer actively should enjoy qualification benefits, such as training free of cost. And those who enjoy free qualification measures need to be actively engaged in and for the party.
- **Spend more on personal development:** Qualifying party members is the best investment for a successful future. Future-orientated parties use 5 per cent of their revenues on training measures of all kinds, targeting the development needs of their volunteers, employees, and elected officials.
- **Internal party-training certificates:** Those who have successfully participated in certain set of training/seminars have the opportunity to receive a professional certificate. This not only distinguishes party members who constantly learn from those who don't, but also offers advantages for them within the professional job market.

### 3. Diversity and dialogue as strategic assets

*Thesis 3: Political parties need diversity on the inside in order to gain legitimacy on the outside. The ability to talk and listen in a dialogic manner is a prerequisite for mastering diversity, enabling enhanced interaction on the inside, as well as with people and organisations outside of the party.*

Internal diversity is a precondition to creatively dealing with new social and political developments. It is the most important organisational resource for handling complex challenges. Therefore, diversity is no end in itself for political parties but a strategic imperative.

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#### Diversity is no end in itself but a strategic imperative.

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However, along with the readiness for accepting new faces, diversity postulates the readiness to change oneself<sup>1</sup>. The capacity for diversity is synonymous with the capacity for dialogue. Political parties should establish dialogue formats, which deepen the organisational exchange with non-members in order to add to the perspectives on the inside, and to source new ideas and approaches to hitherto unsolved challenges.

**PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- **Strategic dialogues:** Political parties should establish 'strategic dialogues' on local, regional and federal levels. This format intensifies the exchange of the party with its environment, expands the scope of policy topics and perspectives, and systematically deepens the network of the party. The format facilitates a change of perspective by bringing together party members with pre-selected experts, volunteers from other organisations, members of the business community, etc. These dialogues source ideas and impulses on programmatic or organisational questions for the party, and offer

1. See policy brief „Parteikultur. Ideen für Parteireform abseits von Satzungs- und Gesetzesänderungen“ (only available in German yet) by Regina Michalik und Hanno Burmester, available at [www.partiereform.org](http://www.partiereform.org).

networking opportunities and pathways of programmatic influence for non-party participants. Strategic dialogues need a clear thematic focus and a set deadline, as well as explicit expectation management (role definitions, possible impacts, feedback cycles).

- **Inter-sectoral dialogue formats:** Designated party officials on all levels should be responsible for strategically expanding the networks with organisations of other sectors, especially those the party is usually not talking with. These people organise regular dialogue formats to foster and deepen exchange.
- **Local campaigns and projects:** Impact-focused, time-limited local initiatives deepen the ties within the local community and open up new opportunities for limited, low-threshold engagement from non members. Also, parties can deepen their self-understanding as a ‘systemic facilitator’ who helps local initiatives to actually have a political impact and build networks with other players of civil society.

## 4. Innovation needs leadership

*Thesis 4: Modern organisational structures are crucial for sustaining legitimacy as a key actor of civil society. Therefore, party leaders on all levels should deepen their leadership and management competencies and move matters of organisational development up their priority list.*

Political parties should recognise that promoting and enabling internal innovation is a core task. A smart party promotes innovation labs in order to produce, test, implement and evaluate innovative ideas and initiatives. Designated officials on all levels identify successful party work and help to implement these ideas throughout the organisation..

Innovation needs leadership support in order to bear fruit. The party leadership thus should agree on positive messages regarding attempts to innovate: praise

best practices on all levels, promote faces of innovation, and stress the importance of ongoing change for sustaining the party’s legitimacy as an agent of change in society.

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### Innovation labs will help to produce, test, and implement good ideas.

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Party leaders should accept their responsibility to not only foster debate on policy issues, but organisational innovation as well. In times of strategic disorientation and eroding membership, it is crucial to broaden the focus of organisational debates and include non-members, best practices from other sectors, etc. In order to reach these external players, parties need to come up with spaces and methodologies that transcend the usual pro and con party debates.

#### PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Increase change competence in the party leadership:** Elected officials and full-time employees are in charge of developing their organisation (strategy, recruitment, structures and processes, etc.). Hence, they should be trained systematically on topics such as leadership, self-management, and organisational development. It may be necessary to introduce systemic incentives to nudge talented party officials towards hitherto under-represented ‘non-policy’ fields of work.
- **Use best practices and implement them organisation-wide:** Parties do not lack innovative potential and ideas. However, a lack of networks does exist, which are necessary to spread successful practices (especially from a local level) into the organisation. Parties should establish centralised innovation pools where designated officials source, collect and spread innovative projects and practices. Furthermore, they are responsible for connecting drivers of change and build innovative networks throughout the organisation.
- **Promote role models:** Parties should funnel their internal attention towards activists who show a willingness to innovate. Visits and public praise from

party leaders, as well as success stories in party media help to promote role models who foster creativity and innovation. Even ‘fast-tracks’ for innovative party activists should be considered.

- **Learn from others:** Over the last few years, organisations in the civil society sector and elsewhere have experienced organisational change more intensely than parties have. From recruitment to member management and mobilization, parties should systemically establish learning journeys that take them into realms outside of their own organisational boundaries. It is highly advisable to think bigger than just in peer-to-peer formats to foster professional exchange. One example would be ‘exchange programs’ for party officials who switch seat with professionals from the NGO or business sector for a week or two.

## 5. (Re-)Connect via technology

Political parties need vivid digital structures. Only with a digital infrastructure will they be able to re-connect and stay connected with civil society<sup>2</sup>. Volunteers need to see a concrete additional value of digital instruments in their daily work in order to successfully implement new digital approaches and tools within the party. It is important to add that not every technological innovation is useful for political parties – they need to emancipate themselves from the vast number of short-lived trends on the digital market in order to spend the limited financial resources wisely.

### Not every technological innovation is useful for political parties.

Digital tools bear the risk to exclude certain member groups within the party if adapted too quickly. It is wise to use them as an addition to existing party communication, replacing traditional methods in the mid- and

long-term only. If applied correctly, digital tools can give members and sympathizers a stronger sense of participation and information. More importantly, digital tools can be the most important way to access new volunteers and sympathisers, especially in younger generations.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Digital voting:** At party conventions and within individual party bodies, digital votes can help to create a lively feedback culture. For example, prior to party conventions one can use ‘liquid’ techniques to pre-select which proposals or candidates should actually be considered.
- **Establish prototypes:** Political parties should establish digital prototypes on local and regional level. The prototypes, and the people involved, can serve as a credible reference when rolling out successful projects into bigger parts of the organisation.
- **Party App:** A ‘Party App’ provides essential and individualised information (e.g. about events and activities) and enables frequent and low-threshold data collection in order to capture the mood of the base. Rotating groups of participants should be questioned in order to avoid seizing of polls. It is crucial to provide feedback if and in how far online voting has influenced leadership decisions.
- **Digitalisation of member-management and members communication:** Parties can use digital means to more systematically collect members’ and sympathisers’ information, always taking into consideration justified concerns of data privacy. This may help to bridge the gap between the party elites and the membership by accelerating the exchange on everyday policy questions. Concerns of data privacy should be addressed by establishing voluntary participation and anonymous storage.
- **Filter of interests:** Thematic and geographic filters of all kinds of digital communication make sure that members receive only information in which they are truly interested in.

2. See Discussion Paper „Auf dem Weg zur Smart Party. Digitale Ambitionen von Parteien zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit“ (only available in German yet) by Henrik Schober, Jessica Dedic und Philipp Sälhoff, available at [www.partireform.org](http://www.partireform.org).

## Towards an efficacious party

In the future, parties can continue to be a pillar of democratic society if they manage to remain up-to-date not only in terms of their program, but also in their organisational structures and processes. In order to live up to their potential in a highly diverse, rapidly changing environment, they need structures and leaders that are focused on the needs of their 'customers', which includes not only their active volunteers but also their sympathisers.

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### **The party of the future is an efficacious party.**

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Party activists need to see that their contribution makes a difference. The party of the future is an efficacious party.

Parties should not be afraid of change, but realise that change is their most important mean for sustaining their leadership function. Transforming parties can deliver a sense of orientation in times of fundamental societal changes – and, by changing themselves, build up legitimacy for the political change to come.

## The Author\*



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