

Building parties on the ground: Explaining grassroots party activism in Buenos Aires

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Abstract

What can explain the ongoing persistence of grassroots party activism? Despite multiple studies demonstrating the decline in “party on the ground” organisation, recent literature indicates grassroots activism remains alive in both theory and practice. This paper examines a new Argentine political party, *Nuevo Encuentro*, which, in a short period of time, built a large grassroots organisation of local branches and activists, and argues that the role of territory is a key explanatory factor. Based on a qualitative analysis of *Nuevo Encuentro* in Buenos Aires it demonstrates that a territorial organisation strategy helped the party: accumulate already mobilised activists; sustain and further motivate activists through a local branch structure; and recruit new members via linkages with urban communities. In so doing the paper extends literature on party-building and high-intensity activism and also contributes to the dismantling of methodological state-centrism in party scholarship by highlighting the significance of local organisational strategies.

Keywords

Party organisation; activism; territory; local branches; Argentina

Introduction

What can explain the ongoing persistence of grassroots party activism in the 21st century? For nearly three decades political party scholars have cited evidence for the decline in what Katz and Mair (1993) term the “party on the ground”, consisting of grassroots activists and supporters who have traditionally operated through local organisational structures (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Scarrow et al, 2017; Whiteley, 2010). In parallel, political parties have undergone a period of centralisation and professionalisation that has bolstered their other organisational faces of “central office” and “public office” (Katz and Mair, 1994). The trend of declining grassroots activism has been noted in both advanced and emerging democracies from across the world (Hale, 2006; Van biesen, 2003) where factors such as new media technologies, access to state funds and personalistic leaders have provided disincentives to invest in building parties on the ground. Nevertheless, exceptions persist, and high levels of grassroots activism continue to be observed in parties in Europe (della Porta et al, 2017; Dinas et al, 2016; Tronconi, 2015; Whiteley et al. 2019) and the global south (Bénit-Gbaffou; Van Dyck, 2014). Moreover, research indicates that strong parties on the ground remain of clear benefit to party-building in emerging democracies (LeBas, 2011; Levitsky et al, 2016; Tavits, 2013) and electoral successes in established democracies (Fisher et al, 2014). It is thus striking that relatively few attempts have been made to explain how and why parties on the ground continue to flourish in contemporary democracies.

This paper examines a new Argentine party named *Nuevo Encuentro* (New Encounter, hereafter NE), whose core attribute has been its large grassroots basis of activists and argues that a greater appreciation of *territory* as an organisational strategy provides important insights to explaining successful party on the ground development. Territorial organisational strategies - in the form of local branches and linkages with urban communities - have long been central to party organisation (Ostrogorski, 1902) yet remain under-researched. The paper specifically examines NE in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA) where, in just a few years, the party rapidly built a territorial network of several dozen local branches, spanning most of the city’s neighbourhoods, accumulating several thousand activists. NE is a centre-left political party that,

soon after arriving in CABA around 2009, decided to enter into electoral alliance with the national government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015). Although its influx of activists can be partially explained by its programmatic appeal to a newly politicised youth seeking to support the national government, NE's large grassroots base can only be fully understood in the context of its remarkable territorial organisation. Specifically, I argue that territorial organisation facilitated NE's rapid growth in three ways. First, it provided party leaders a strategic means of absorbing already mobilised activists and to manage, and facilitate, their growth and even distribution across the city. Second, local branches were key to maintaining activists once in the party, providing spaces of political socialisation with opportunities for taking on increasing party responsibilities. Third, territorial penetration in neighbourhoods created new linkages with urban communities from which to recruit and sustain its activist base.

The paper's focus on territorial organisation makes three wider contributions to the literature. First, it adds to recent work on party-building in emerging democracies by providing a novel approach to explaining the conditions through which party on the ground organisation successfully flourishes. Existing literature has pointed to the significance of inheriting pre-existing organisational structures from civil society organisations (LeBas, 2011; Levitsky et al, 2016) as well as the resources provided by patronage or clientelist relations to the state (Grindle, 2012; Levitsky, 2003; Muñoz and Dargent, 2016) to explain strong parties on the ground. The case study presents a new scenario. Second, it adds to literature, predominantly from the UK, that seeks to explain "high-intensity" activism (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). It is argued that a range of incentives, which include material and solidary, can explain why some people engage intensively in party activism (Webb et al, 2019). The case study demonstrates that incentives by themselves are not enough and that, in this case study, a territorial infrastructure provides a crucial means of accumulating and maintaining activists. Finally, the paper contributes to an ongoing dismantling of methodological state-centrism that has long pervaded political party scholarship by highlighting the significance of neighbourhood and urban scales for organisational strategies (e.g. Collignon, 2018; Dinas et al, 2016; Johnston and Pattie, 2006; Vergani, 2014). It begins by surveying literature on the decline of party on the ground organisation and recent counter-theories to explain the ongoing persistence of grassroots activism. It then introduces the case study and methodology before detailing three factors of territorial organisation that explain NE's successful party on the ground development.

The "death" of the party on the ground in advanced and emerging democracies

Party organisations are not internally homogeneous but consist of different dimensions, or "faces", that include: the party in public office; the party central office; and the party on the ground (Katz and Mair, 1993). The party on the ground consists of the 'the core of regular activists, financial supporters, and even loyal voters' (Katz and Mair, 1993: 597) and historically has been attributed to the "mass party", which proliferated in European socialist parties in the early-mid 20th Century and built a large grassroots basis with strong linkages in civil society (Duverger, 1954; 1972). In the second half of the twentieth century the mass party model was gradually considered obsolete as scholars noted the rise of new forms such as the 'catch-all party' (Kirchheimer, 1966), the 'electoral-professional party' (Panebianco, 1988) and the 'cartel party' (Katz and Mair, 1995). In all cases a combination of the increasing role of the state in providing resources (Katz and Mair, 1995) and the rise in new media technologies (especially the TV) (Farrell et al, 2001), together with weakening working-class linkages in a de-industrialised society (Kitschelt, 1994), have been held responsible for the decline in relevance of the mass party and, more broadly, party on the ground organisation. Katz and Mair's (1994) typology thus served to demonstrate the decline in party on the ground and parallel growth of the party in public office and party central office, a thesis that has been widely reproduced in studies across advanced

democracies (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Scarrow, 1996; Scarrow et al, 2017; Seyd and Whiteley, 2002; van Biezen et al, 2012; Van Haute and Gauja, 2015).

A similar tendency has been observed in emerging democracies where party-building has tended to rely on centralised and professional strategies with little party on the ground organisation. As van Biezen, (2003) argues, drawing on research in Southern and Eastern Europe, parties building themselves in new democracies have tended to miss the mass party “stage” of organisation and have responded to similar factors as advanced democracies including state funds, new technologies and weak working class linkages in order to promote modern, professional/centralised organisational structures. In Latin America, the historical tendencies also replicated that of advanced democracies with a weakening of workin-class linkages in the context of social and technological transformations during the second half of the twentieth century (Levtiksy et al, 2016; Roberts, 2002), and the mass linkages that had been attributed to populist governments in many cases morphed into individual/personalistic linkages (Roberts, 2006), to the extent that some presidents have been elected without any party organisation underneath them (Levtiksy and Cameron, 2003). Finally, both Asia and Africa have indicated trends of party-building without a mass party on the ground (Hellmann, 2011; Osei, 2012)

Despite these macro trends, a strong party on the ground, with high numbers of committed activists, is still considered advantageous to parties worldwide. In advanced democracies studies continue to note a relationship between levels of grassroots organisation and electoral outcomes at the scale of constituencies (Denver et al, 2003; Fisher et al, 2014; Mair and Van Biezen, 2001; Pattie et al, 1995; Roscoe and Jenkins, 2016; Whiteley, 2010). In emerging democracies case studies indicate that on the ground organisation is a pre-requisite for successful new party building (Levitsky et al, 2016; Tavits, 2013). Most recently, there are indications of a sudden growth of party on the ground organisation in new insurgent or “populist” parties in Southern Europe (della Porta et al, 2017; Dinas et al, 2016; Ellinas and Lamprianou, 2017; Tronconi, 2015) as well as in old parties, notably in the case of UK’s Labour (Bale et al, 2019; Whiteley et al, 2019) with some signs in the US Democratic Party (Gautney, 2018). In both theory and practice, it is thus premature to sound the death knell for party on the ground organisation. In this context, it is surprising that there are have been relatively few attempts to explain the ongoing salience of contemporary grassroots party organisation.

The most elaborated theory for explaining “high-intensity” party activism was put forward by Whiteley and Seyd (2002), writing from the UK. Building on and synthesising previous models of participation (e.g. Downs, 1957; Verba et al, 1995), they elaborated the “general incentives model” (GIM) that highlights three central factors of participation: process incentives, i.e. activists are stimulated by the very act of participating; outcome incentives, i.e. the material benefits such as entering public office that may result from activism; and ideological incentives, i.e. the opportunity to pursue their political goals. Also writing from a UK perspective, Webb et al (2019) recently updated this and, drawing on Clark and Wilson (1961), argue that while all supporters will necessarily share a party’s political/ideological goal, they will only become committed activists if they have an ‘aspiration to pursue a political career or to immerse themselves in a social network’ (Webb et al, 2019: n.p.). Given that relatively few activists will become elected representatives, the role of social networks is thus crucial and Webb et al (2019) highlight the importance of having a strong local party organisation. This is an important modification to Whiteley and Seyd’s GIM (2002) as it indicates that incentives on their own will not be sufficient to explain high-intensity activism. Nevertheless, the quantitative-based and nationally focused methodology of this research is such that there remains a lack of data on the significance and role of local party organisation for both recruiting and sustaining activists,

especially outside the intense yet narrow periods of electoral campaigning in constituencies (see also: Denver et al, 2003; Pattie et al, 1995).

This paper deploys an in-depth qualitative study of local party organisation to further explain the growth of party on the ground activism. Specifically, it analyses territorial organisational strategy in order to elaborate the practices and mechanisms through which grassroots party activism is built and sustained. Territorial organisation is a strategy to build a party on the ground through local branches and community linkages, often at the scale of the neighbourhood. A qualitative analysis of a parties' territorial organisation directs attention to everyday practices and discourse and allows for an appreciation of how social relations are sustained in and through space. Following previous geographical work on political organisation (Jessop, 2008; Jessop et al, 2008; Nicholls et al, 2013), the paper understands party organisation as constituted by socio-spatial relations, i.e. social relations that are embedded in particular spatialities, e.g. party branch, neighbourhood scale. Acknowledging the co-constitution of spatiality and sociality in party organisation can provide greater insights into the opportunities and constraints of their organisational strategies. Moreover, by focusing on territorial organisation and socio-spatial relations the paper adds to a small yet growing body of geographical research into party organisation that both eschews methodological state-centrism and provides in-depth analyses of the significance of local party life (Bob-Milliar, 2018; Bénit-Gbaffou, 2012; Scott and Wills, 2017; Sinwell, 2012).

The paper also takes forward recent literature on party-building in emerging democracies that has emphasised either clientelism/patronage or organisational inheritance for explaining grassroots activism. In the context of political decentralisation in Latin America, studies have demonstrated that patronage, via subnational party linkages to state funds (Grindle, 2012; Muñoz and Dargent, 2016), alongside local, clientelist networks (Levtiksy, 2003), have provided the necessary resources to sustain party on the ground organisations. In the case of opposition parties without access to state funds, studies in Latin America (Levtiksy et al, 2016) Africa (2011) and Eastern Europe (Szczerbiak, 1999) argue that the inheritance of local infrastructures from pre-existing organisations such as social movements, trade unions and churches is crucial for explaining successful building of party on the ground organisations. While insightful, these literatures fail to explain the case study explored in this paper, which relied neither on state funds nor on inherited organisational infrastructure to build itself. Moreover, there remains a need to better understand the specific function of territorial, grassroots party organisation to party-building strategies. Building on the above literatures, the case study presented here is thus expected to provide insights to party scholars of both advanced and emerging democracies where similar tendencies and challenges of party organisation exist.

Methodology and Case Study

Encuentro por la Democracia y la Equidad, commonly known as *Nuevo Encuentro* (New Encounter, NE), was formed in 2004 in the district of Morón, Greater Buenos Aires, by its then mayor Martín Sabbatella. During the 1990s Argentina's two-party system – consisting of the *Unión Cívil Radical* (UCR) and the *Partido Justicialista* (PJ, or “Peronist” party) – collapsed, and was replaced by a system dominated by new cross-party alliances, many of them operating at the federal scale (Calvo and Escolar, 2005). The early 2000s saw a broader deinstitutionalisation of Argentina's democracy (Gervasoni, 2018) that reached crisis point in late 2001 when four presidents resigned in ten days. In this context NE sought to represent a new progressive, centre-left political party, bringing together a heterogeneous mix of ex-Communist Party members and progressive politicians. In 1999 Sabbatella became mayor of the provincial town Morón, then under the centre-left FREPASO alliance, which collapsed during the 2001 crisis. In 2002, Sabbatella founded *Nuevo Morón* (New Morón) as a local party to take forward his mayorship and, following

his landslide re-election in 2003 and setting his ambitions beyond the locality of Morón, created NE.

NE was first established in the large province of Buenos Aires (where they had a foothold in Morón), going on to win a seat on the national congress in 2009, before establishing the party in Buenos Aires City (CABA). CABA is not only the symbolic centre of political life in Argentina but also a significant electoral battleground with residents voting for: a directly elected mayor; 60 city legislators; 105 local councillors; 24 national deputies and 3 national senators. Since their arrival in the city NE's most distinctive feature has been its remarkable growth of a strong party on the ground organisation. By 2014 the party counted on approximately 3000 activists of which over half were part of a territorial organisation across several dozen neighbourhood branches, a further 30-40% were involved in student organising (in university and secondary school student unions), with the remainder involved in various social or cultural working groups (including press, social media, etc.).¹ Since 2011 NE have stood for elections in CABA and have consistently held approximately 2-6% of seats in the city legislators and 4-8% of national deputy representatives. These figures are not insignificant given that CABA has a highly fragmented party system dominated by alliances and that most parties hold very few seats (Mauro, 2012).

Since their arrival in CABA NE have been strongly opposed to the ruling right-wrong “PRO” party, who have also held Argentina's Presidency since 2015, yet between NE 2012 and 2015 they entered into alliance with the national government. Although NE were formed as a new left-wing party, by the time of their arrival in CABA their “progressive” programmatic appeal, on issues such as social justice and human rights, had been undercut by the governments of the late Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015). Although the Kirchners were political outsiders in 2003, they quickly grew to prominence, winning landslide elections in 2007 and 2011, and formed an alliance with progressive sectors of Peronism alongside allies from other parties. In late 2011 NE decided to formally join the national “Kirchnerist” political movement and its *Frente Para Victoria* (Front for Victory) electoral alliance, which they maintain at the time of writing.

The following analysis draws on fieldwork conducted across three research trips to CABA covering a total of 9 months between 2016 and 2018. In 2017 I undertook a 6-month ethnographic study by embedding myself one neighbourhood branch while also participating in city-wide events. I conducted 67 in-depth interviews (1-2 hours in length), including most of the party leaders in CABA, the national leader, most mid-level activists involved in territorial organisation, and a sample of new activists. I also spoke to ex-members of the party as well as to activists from other parties who provided further insights and criticisms. Finally, I have drawn on secondary material, including press releases from EDE's office and online searches from local and national Argentine press.

Territorial organisation: managing the growing demand for activism

The remarkable growth of NE's party on the ground can be partially attributed to its programmatic offering. Although CABA is the centre of Argentina's political activity and inevitably contains high numbers of potential party activists, there was a boom of newly mobilised activists from approximately 2010 in the context of growing grassroots support for the centre-left President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Retamozo et al, 2013). Initially, NE had sought to capture the left-wing “progressive” sector of CABA, filling a space that had been absent since the government of centre-left Mayor Aníbal Ibarra (2000-2006) fell apart following his impeachment in the context of nightclub fire tragedy. Upon arrival in the city, NE's best-

¹ This estimate were given to be by party leaders and their own data collection. My fieldwork undertaken in 2016, 2017 and 2018 confirmed this approximately size of the party's grassroots.

known attribute was its centre-left government in Morón and the figure of its leader Sabbatella, which attracted activists motivated by the potential to (re)create a similar movement in CABA. In late 2011 NE formally entered into alliance with President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's government (2007-2015) and the party now appealed to a generation of newly mobilised activists eager to support the “national popular” movement of “Kirchnerism”. NE distinguished itself from other Kirchnerist organisations due to its non-Peronist history, and thus appealed to those who came from outside Peronism (for example those who grew up in anti-Peronist families) and felt affinity with the government but not the political baggage of being labelled a Peronist in Argentina. During this period of rapid party growth, NE counted on a constant supply of activists who were actively looking to become party activists. The central strategic concern for NE's leaders was making sure they had an organisation in place to absorb them. As the NE's president, José Cruz Campagnoli in CABA told me:

“We knew that there were already many Kirchnerists in the city who wanted to be [party] activists. You didn't have to convince them...you had to go and organise them. And where are you going to find them? In the territory. You found them by opening a branch of Nuevo Encuentro, which was a part of Kirchnerism, and people would approach you...”

A crucial factor in explaining NE's rapid growth in party activism was in its strategic prioritisation of developing a territorial infrastructure to meet and then manage the grassroots supply of activism. Soon after arriving in CABA, Campagnoli appointed a close advisor to be in charge of all territorial organisation in the city, providing a top-down overview of its party on the ground. This figure worked closely with three mid-level leaders, each responsible for geographical segments of the city (north, west, and south), below which there were fifteen people, each responsible for one of the five city communes, followed by those in charge of individual neighbourhoods (sub-unit of communes) and then branches. This tight-knit and highly experienced cadre in charge of the party's territorial organisation was crucial to their success

The party's “territorial penetration” (Panebianco, 1988) of CABA begun by sending people to neighbourhoods where the party had a small foothold. For example, NE's first branch was in a neighbourhood on the western boundary of the city where a sympathetic resident had offered the front living room of their house as an office space. Over the coming weeks when new members contacted the central office looking to get involved in party activism, they were sent out to this branch to help consolidate it. Occasionally, local residents spontaneously opened a branch (what Panebianco terms “territorial diffusion”), which the central office then supported and incorporated within its city-wide territorial structure. NE's objective was to have at least one branch in every commune (15) and, ideally, one in each neighbourhood (48). This required a macro-vision of the city's territory in order to map out places where there was a surplus of activists who could potentially be relocated to places where there was a deficit. A further source of incoming activists was university students who, following graduation, were relocated from campus activism to get involved with a local branch. Relocation of activists was generally facilitated by the material incentive of being “promoted” to a high level of responsibility within the party. Occasionally, a small team was sent to penetrate neighbourhoods where there was no prior NE presence.

NE's strategy of territorial penetration demonstrated both the agency of party leaders in directing its organisational strategy and their astute reading to the political environment in CABA. This concurs with scholars who argue that party organisation is informed by a dialectic of both external “environmental” structures and the agency of internal decision-making (Harmel

and Janda, 1982; Hellmann, 2011; Panebianco, 1998). On the one hand, NE's decision to grow through territorial organisation was informed by the historical legacy of party-organising in Argentina. NE inherited a political culture of territorial organising rooted in the experiences of Argentina's two traditional parties, both of which contained a mass basis at points during the twentieth century. The Peronist party (eventually named the Partido Justicialista) has, following Perón's explicit organisational strategy (see Perón, 1952), centred its political organisation on so-called "basic units" (*unidades básicas*), local party branches that have provided a range of functions including political formation and recruiting from communities (Quiroga, 2008) alongside the facilitation of constructing clientelist linkages (Levitsky, 2003). The UCR "radical" party also organised itself through branches known as "comités", that emerged in the early twentieth century to sustain party machines, which were more directly oriented towards electoral campaigning (Rock, 1975). This legacy was such that NE's newly mobilised activists told me that joining its territorial structure was instinctive. As Mario, who joined in 2012, told me:

"I had seen the [party] flag at a rally outside the Venezuelan embassy and decided I wanted to become active....Instinctively, I wanted to get involved in the neighbourhood where I lived and so I went to my local party branch..."

On the other hand, however, party leaders made the conscious decision to develop a territorial strategy as an active means of (re)creating a mass party organisation in the city. One of NE's leaders in CABA told me that upon arrival in the city they wanted to create a "founding myth" in which the party would be established via face-to-face contact and dialogues with neighbours across the city in the course of territorial penetration. In part, this reflected an ideological belief in the vocation to construct a mass, "popular" political movement, in reference to historical experiences, most notably Peronism. As Juan, a highly experienced activist who took on the responsibility for NE in one of CABA's 15 communes, told me:

"...territory is always important here, there is no force that has been able to construct popular power in this country by itself without territory".

Similarly, Diego, who was in charge of all neighbourhoods in the north of CABA told me:

"for me, organising sectors of society is important, and I always had a conception, I was always critical of parties and their leadership and for me popular organisation is a necessity, this could be via unions or other sectors, but often territorial"

The "instinctive" decision of activists to join NE's territorial organisation thus needs to be understood in the intersection of both Argentina's political culture and party leaders' strategic decisions, both of which coalesced around a decision to build a strong party on the ground in and through territory. NE's well-managed territorial organisational structure left it well-placed to accumulate the growing supply of party activists in the city.

Local branches: spaces of political socialisation and responsibilities

In addition to absorbing the supply of already mobilised activists, NE's territorial organisation provided a crucial function of keeping hold of new activists following their entry to the party. This relied heavily on the everyday practices that were sustained through the party's local branches where the majority of party activists spent much of their time. By 2014 NE had developed a territorially rooted network of dozens of local branches, known by activists as "*locales*", across the cities' neighbourhoods that sustained a core of several hundred (i.e. everyday participation) and a periphery of several thousand (e.g. would turn up at marches and meetings)

activists. Branches consist of an office or residential space, usually with a shop front style façade making it visible to passers-by (the more visible the better) containing a meeting room, a small toilet and/or kitchen, in some cases with additional rooms/patios for political and cultural activities. NE rents these spaces and relies almost entirely on the voluntary donations of local activists to do so, occasionally supplementing this through local fundraising activities. Through their regular, everyday activities local branches serve two crucial roles in facilitating the growth of NE's party on the ground.

First, local branches provide activists with a regular set of activities that aim to both fulfil their political needs and prevent their drift to other organisations or away from activism altogether. Party leaders described this function to me as the importance of “*contenter*” (literally, to contain or include) activists by giving them tasks and growing responsibilities. The physical space of the party branch allowed for a range of activities that could be tailored to the particular interests of activists. For example, in the branch where I participated one young activist, Sara, decided she wanted to offer a Zumba (dance) course to the community and was soon given the responsibility for running this activity (which would mean holding a copy of the keys to the office and attending management meetings). This gave her a clear practical function to Sara's activism and also served to build linkages with the community from which new potential activists could later be recruited, as I discuss below. The sheer variety of cultural and political tasks, that ranged from dance classes to intervening in local disputes of housing, meant that activists would rarely get bored or fail to find an area of interest to them. As a mid-level leader in charge of five communes told me:

“the most dynamic area is territory, and everyone wants to do activism in territory, it's the most dynamic”

This quote is also a reference to why territory, as opposed to student organising or the party's minor presence in trade unions, tended to grow the fastest. Over time, party leaders would seek to provide opportunities to take on greater responsibilities and roles. For example, Sara was eventually asked to be in charge of all cultural activities in the neighbourhood. The material incentives for activists in NE's territorial organisation were bolstered by the party's policy of “tactical autonomy” in which local branches are given the capacity to make decisions in dialogue with, but independently from, the central office, tending to make it a more rewarding space for local leaders and activists.

In this context one mid-level territorial leader defined their role as one of facilitating dialogue rather than instructing local activists what to do:

“our task is not so much sending a message, that a machine could do, its about politicising certain debates in the city and managing that in territory...we facilitate political analysis with a territorial vision”

The party's territorial leadership structure was made up of highly experienced party activists who were well placed to counsel local activists and support them in local decisions, with the crucial task on keeping them active within the party's structure.

Second, the local branch is a place for political socialisation and the construction of strong-tie relations among activists. Party scholars have acknowledged the importance of social capital, following Putnam (2000), as a means of explaining the levels of trust and strength of affective ties that sustain activism (Pattie et al, 2003; Webb et al, 2019; Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). While they note that local organisation facilitates social network building it is important to emphasise

that specific, physical spaces of activism, such as branches, play a crucial role in forging strong tie relations that generate social capital, solidarity and emotional bonds (Nicholls, 2009), which have long provided the key motivating factor for intense political activism (Gould, 1994). In NE the party branch was a space of everyday encounter among activists, which they maintained through their own finances and labour, and which was the most frequent site in which they would socialise. Branches provided highly affective spaces of activism that hosted events including activists' birthday parties and provided spaces for the community to come together and celebrate symbolic events (e.g. patriotic dates). Local branches became places that activists enjoyed being and would spend many long hours in conversation with each other, forging not only political but social bonds with each other. Crucially, these relations are rooted in the physical space of the branch, a space that produces strong attachments, as one activist, Laura, told me:

I feel a strong belonging to this place, the branch, the neighbourhood...this branch was opened at the same time I started being an activist and it's like we grew up together.

In this, and so many other cases, Laura's political activism became inseparable from the place that structure most of her day-to-day activities: the party branch.

Territorial linkages: recruiting from urban communities

In addition to absorbing and keeping hold of the supply of new activists, NE's territorial organisation also facilitated the active recruitment of new activists via the linkages constructed with neighbourhood communities. Unlike strategies of constituent campaigning, that rely on a heavy local presence of party activists during the build-up to elections, NE's branches did not explicitly serve any electoral purpose, as party leaders made clear to me. Instead, in line with experiences of mass parties, branches were deployed to serve three functions: organise the masses, educate the masses, and recruit from the masses (Duverger, 1954: 25). NE's leaders made reference to all three functions but of most relevance here is the role of branches for activist recruitment. All branches in CABA made a concerted effort to build linkages with their surrounding community although the strategies for doing so varied considerably and were influenced by the socio-economic profile of each neighbourhood. For example, middle class neighbourhoods tended to focus on political education and public talks, whereas branches in shantytowns and poorer neighbourhoods would prioritise providing social assistance (e.g. after-school literacy clubs, food kitchens). The general pattern in NE's branches is that over time, in the course of establishing linkages with the neighbourhood, they start to attract locals to participate and support the local party organisation. I observed this through my participation of NE's activities in a large commune in south CABA, which consists of several sub-neighbourhoods including a shantytown.

Pedro, who was in charge of this commune, spoke to me of NE's trajectory in one of the party's first branches that was established (in 2011):

When we arrived in the neighbourhood, the majority of activists weren't from there. Now it's the opposite, the majority of activists are from the neighbourhood and there are only a few that don't live there.

Recruiting from local neighbourhoods is a slow process that involves extensive networking in order to building trust and awareness among locals. A key means of doing this is by establishing relations with pre-existing nodes of social capital, be they individuals or groups. Pedro told me that in this case a key entry point was a local "murga" (street carnival band), that were a key

social reference points for locals, and with whom they made initial contact with and built a relationship. This opened up a path towards being recognised and accepted by neighbours:

...the best way of reaching people directly in territory is through mediators that allow you to get involved in activities with the living forces of society...in other words it's a way of indirectly getting involved with societies....many people in a neighbourhood are unlikely to get involved in a political force and may have a load of preconceptions against them, and think we are this or the other....and so we build indirect links with groups who the neighbours have trust in....

In addition to drawing in 10-20 new, high-intensity activists, the branch's linkages to the local community generated a larger group of supporters and part time activists who could be counted on at events such as large political rallies or end of year parties. Unlike some mass parties, including the PJ, I saw no signs of clientelism, and NE's participation was mobilised by the long-term work that NE undertook in gaining local trust and political support rather than by distributing favours. Carlos, who was in charge of a branch from a another lower-middle class commune, told me of a similar long-term strategy of building trust by engaging with local residents, in this case through social activities:

...we open schools in the neighbourhood in order to create a link with the kids and their parents...[or] we start a football club and this is an excuse to speak to their parents or their mum....bit by bit we become references for them in the neighbourhood.

The significance of becoming the central political “reference” point for local neighbours is heightened when NE has to compete with other parties also seeking to establish themselves in a given territory. This is particularly the case in shantytowns which have tended to attract multiple parties in the hope of winning over dense clusters of residents by installing clientelist relations with CABA's poorest citizens (Grimson et al, 2009). In this context Pedro told me that, upon arriving in the shantytown in his commune, they relied on building a relationship of trust with key individuals that hold social capital and/or influential positions on the neighbourhood council. Soon after arriving, they developed a relationship with a resident who was well-known due to his long-term management of the local sports centre. This resident gave NE a foothold by, first, letting them borrow a physical space above a shop that he owned and, second, encouraging local residents to turn up to their meetings and support the party. Over time, they established themselves and brought in new activists from the neighbourhood, thus further bolstering NE's on the ground organisation.

Conclusion

NE grew a strong grassroots activist base through its well-managed territorial organisational structure that provided a network of branches for absorbing and keeping hold of CABA's strong supply of activists, while also building linkages with urban communities in order to further recruit activists and supporters. Assessing the political outcomes of having a strong party on the ground organisation opens up a debate beyond the scope of this article (see Katz, 1990). Instead, the paper has demonstrated both the ongoing salience of grassroots organisation and explained how such a growth was made possible. Given that Argentine parties have, as with most democracies, been influenced by the shift to centralised, professional and social media savvy organisation, the case study of NE is notable and provides insights to experiences elsewhere, including Europe where there appears to be a surge of party on the ground organisation. I end

by drawing out three broader implications of the case study with suggestions for further research.

First, against the inevitability of declining parties on the ground (Katz and Mair, 2002) party leaders should be understood as having agency in their decisions over how to strategically organise (Hellmann, 2011). Beyond relying on inherited organisational structures and/or state resources, the case of NE demonstrates that party leaders make conscious decisions to build themselves as a territorial, on the ground organisation. Indeed, where parties lack either access to state funds or inherited structures, this may be the only effective strategy available for accumulating grassroots support. Yet when building parties on the ground, territorial organisation is not automatic and, in the case of NE, relied on the experience of mid-level leaders who had previously been involved in territorial organising and were able to advise new local activists. NE's innovative model of territorial penetration, involving the ongoing relocation of activists from elsewhere to facilitate the efficient and even development of party activists across the city, was highly successful. In cases where parties lack experienced cadres for their territorial organisation, it may be that they borrow from organisational experiences of social movements who have more consistently maintained a strong territorial presence (see Anria, 2013; della Porta et al, 2017).

Second, territory is not the only means of accumulating high-intensity activists and future work could compare other strategies. Approximately 30-40 percent of NE's activists have been generated through the parties' penetration of student organisation, particularly at universities, something that could be further explored in subsequent work. Most recently, party leaders have started to look at ways of expanding their presence within trade unions, where they aim to (re)locate a significant proportion of their territorially rooted activists. In hindsight, the lack of penetration into union organisations was held up to me as a failure of NE, leaving them in a weak position in the post-2015 period when, in the context of the austerity programme of the new right-wing government, trade union membership and activism appears to be rising in Argentina. Elsewhere, however, unions have provided a key source of grassroots activists (Allern and Bale, 2017). For NE territory provided what one leader told me was "the easiest and quickest" means of growing in the city given their experience and disposition. Different political environments and cultures may provide greater opportunities for building through other grassroots organisations and leaders will inevitably develop their strategies in response.

Finally, in a digital party age (Gerbaudo, 2019) it is important to reflect on how online organising may be reformulating the practice of territorial, on the ground activism. Indeed, one of NE's national leaders, the national deputy Gabriela Cerruti, has publicly expressed her critique of outdated territorial organising that she sees as inward looking (too much time spent inside branches) and less efficient as social media for mobilizing activists. Yet to present a binary of online vs. offline organising is unhelpful as it neglects the reality of NE's party on the ground. In CABA NE has a working group dedicated to social media organising that supports local branches to train their own social media officers. Many branches use sophisticated online techniques that compliment and support their offline activism (e.g. advertising events, making short videos of activities). One activist I spoke to specifically said that they got involved in NE by contacting their local branch via Facebook. Although there remains a debate on the efficiency of online vs. offline campaigning for electoral success (see Aldrich et al, 2015), the online/offline distinction is largely redundant when seeking to explain the growth or decline in grassroots party activists, as other party research has indicated (Lanzone and Tronconi, 2015). Nevertheless, the role of online organising in reconfiguring "on the ground" organisation provides much opportunity for further research.

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