INTRODUCTION

The Women's Equality Party began with a (seemingly) throw-away comment made at the London Women of the World Festival in March 2015, from author and journalist Catherine Mayer. Frustrated by a panel discussion on women in politics, Mayer made an off-the-cuff intervention from the audience: 'Let's form a women's party and see what happens. I'll be in the bar afterwards if anyone wants to discuss it.'

By the end of the festival, Mayer had already acquired a party co-founder in comedian and presenter Sandi Toksvig. The first meeting of the Women's Equality Party (WEP) took place later that month, they were officially registered with the Electoral Commission in July 2015, and, in the same month, Reuters journalist Sophie Walker was announced as the party's new leader. WEP[1] fielded candidates for the first time in the May 2016 devolved and London Assembly and mayoral elections, and by the time of its first party conference in November of the same year, claimed to have acquired 65,000 members and registered supporters, with more than 70 branches across the four nations of the UK (Women's Equality Party, 2016a).

The idea of forming a women's party is not new. Since 1987 more than thirty women's parties in Europe have contested elections at the national level, including in the UK (Cowell-Meyers, 2016). Women's parties have had some electoral success – for example, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition won one seat in the inaugural Northern Ireland Assembly (as well as a subsequent council seat), whilst more recently, the Swedish Feminist Initiative (F!) won one seat in the 2014 European Parliament elections, as well as multiple seats in the 2014 Swedish municipal elections. Yet, until recently, there have been few in-depth studies of women's parties, resulting in little systematic analysis of why and when these parties emerge and how they organise. We argue that the study of women's parties can offer insights into questions concerning inter and intra-party power relations and the relationship between social movements and political parties, whilst also contributing to broader debates around the 'big questions' of representation, gender (in)equality, and the dynamics of political inclusion and exclusion.

This article seeks to address these issues through a qualitative case study analysis of the Women's Equality Party in the first eighteen months of its existence. The article is structured as follows. First, we review existing research on women's parties, with regards to the origins, organisation and impact of women's parties, before setting out our theoretical case for the importance of women's parties. The next section assesses these expectations against the case of the Women's Equality Party, drawing together data from interviews, document analysis and observations of party meetings and events, to evaluate the development of a new women's party 'on the ground'. Our research finds that inter-party power dynamics have so far tended to adhere to traditional (male-dominated) patterns of party organisation; whilst its emergence alongside, rather than from within, the women's movement has resulted in it being perceived as an 'outsider' by the wider movement. The combined impact of the electoral and party systems also raises specific challenges for a party with no clear geographical constituency, limiting its ability to pressure other UK parties on women's issues. More broadly, we find that whilst the party's impact thus far has

been constrained by wider organizational logics and an unequal party system, it has managed to 'do some things differently' within these wider constraints, offering new opportunities for the representation of women in British party politics.

THEORIZING WOMEN'S PARTIES

The study of women's parties provides important insights into the dynamics and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within political parties. Mainstream studies of party politics have generally failed to acknowledge the extent to which parties' ideologies, organizational structures, procedures and practices are 'saturated with gender' (Childs, 2008: xix; Kenny and Verge, 2016: 355). Traditional parties have historically been dominated by men and are characterized, as a result, by traditional (and often unacknowledged) conceptions of gender relations that generally disadvantage women. What happens, then, in women's parties, which build their rationale for existing on the inequality between men and women (cf. Bjarnegard and Freidenvall, 2015)? To what extent do women's parties 'do things differently' in terms of internal power and organisational dynamics? What is their relationship to and with the wider women's movement? Do women's parties offer new representational pathways for the inclusion of previously marginalized groups?

While women's parties have received little academic attention thus far, a notable recent exception is Kimberly Cowell-Meyers's (2016) comparative analysis, which offers a concise definition of these organisations:

> Women's parties are autonomous organizations of or for women that run candidates for elected office. What makes them women's parties is the explicit agenda to advance the volume and range of women's voices in politics. In other words, a women's party is an organ designed specifically and primarily to increase women's representation in politics (Cowell-Meyers, 2016: 4).

As Cowell-Meyers observes, women's parties typically emerge because of the failure of mainstream political parties to include women and women's issues, and can serve as important channels of representation and mobilisation for women. Although usually small in terms of membership, women's parties can challenge mainstream parties to address women's issues (Levin, 1999), whilst also utilising consciousness-raising tactics to educate women about feminism and gender inequality (Zaborszky, 1987).

Existing studies of women's parties demonstrate that they are a response to the marginalisation of women in political decision-making and established parties. Indeed, while women's parties may differ in terms of how they conceive of 'women's interests', broadly defined, they share a common agenda that 'reflects a *perception* of exclusion from mainstream political processes' (Cowell-Meyers, 2016: 16; emphasis added). In terms of emergence, women's parties are more likely to emerge when a gap exists between levels of women's political representation and levels of women's workforce participation (Cowell-Meyers, 2016). Hence, women's parties emerge in contexts where women are unevenly empowered, and should be seen as an indication of the 'failures' of the established party system to include women (Cowell-Meyers, 2016: 23). They are also more likely to emerge in

historical moments characterised by electoral uncertainty, transition and institutional 'newness' (Cowell-Meyers, 2011), before party support bases crystallize.

Whilst much has been written on the 'decline' of political parties, part of the specific electoral appeal of women's parties is their antecedents within the wider women's movement (Cowell-Meyers, 2016). Reinforcing the narrative that they have emerged organically from within existing grassroots networks, therefore, becomes an important way in which women's parties can distinguish themselves from the 'distrusted' mainstream parties (Cowell-Meyers, 2014). Whilst some women's parties are indeed largely comprised of activists from the women's movement with no prior experience of electoral politics (Zaboszky, 1987), other studies highlight that these parties are often led by elite women with previous political experience (Ishiyama, 2003; Bjarnegård and Freidenvall, 2015), which can sometimes create tensions between the party in office and the wider women's movement (Dominelli and Jonsdottir, 1988).

Women's parties, which often claim to 'do' politics differently than mainstream male-dominated parties, tend to adopt non-hierarchical and decentralised power structures (Dominelli and Jonsdottir, 1988). Of course, party organisational dynamics change over time – and may cause tensions when the business of selecting candidates and fighting elections begins. In the case of the Icelandic women's party Kwenna Frambothid (KF), for example, the organisational dynamics of the party shifted once the party gained seats on the city council (Dominelli and Jonsdottir, 1988). While the party continued to hold regular meetings with its supporters, organised as non-hierarchical forums aimed at facilitating democratic dialogue, the party quickly slipped into the 'enactment of traditional leadership roles', and soon found itself making policy and political decisions without the mandate of the grassroots membership (Dominelli and Jonsdottir, 1988: 44).

Studies of smaller parties show that they tend to do better when proportional electoral systems are in place, allowing voters to cast their vote for more than one party, and in more fragmented party systems, where smaller parties become more viable (Mair, 1997). In these analyses, 'success' for new parties is usually defined in electoral terms, focusing on seats and vote share. On this measure, women's parties have limited success - they are generally short-lived organisations lasting on average two to three electoral cycles and pick up few (if any) seats (Cowell-Meyers, 2016). And while, historically, some women's parties have made notable electoral inroads (Dominelli and Jonsdottir, 1988; Levin, 1999), these have generally been followed by dramatic collapses in electoral support (Ishiyama, 2003; Cowell-Meyers, 2016). Accordingly, part of the electoral strategy adopted by women's parties has been to frame themselves as non-partisan in order to broaden their electoral appeal (Cowell-Meyers, 2016).

If women's parties are unlikely to gain electoral success or to be long-term players within a political system, then why should they be of interest? For women's parties, electoral success is not always the goal: they can impact women's descriptive and substantive representation by pressuring other larger parties to increase women's representation and to pay attention to women's policy concerns. Women's parties have an impact on women's representation by 'improving women's status in other parties', rather than by winning large amounts of votes or seats on their own (Cowell-Meyers, 2016: 5; see also Cowell-Meyers,

2017). For example, Levin's (1999) analysis of the Israeli Women's Party highlights its primary goal of consciousness-raising, rather than winning votes, but also points to the party's substantive impact on the manifestos of larger parties. Meanwhile, Cowell-Meyers's (2011, 2014) analysis of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition highlights its importance in placing gender equality on the agenda of the other Northern Irish parties, despite its low vote share. However, the potential impact of women's parties on women's representation is still shaped by the dynamics of electoral competition and the wider institutional context (Cowell-Meyers, 2011). For women's representation and issues of gender equality to 'catch on' – in what is often referred in the literature as a process of 'contagion' (cf. Matland and Studlar, 1996; see also Cowell-Meyers, 2011, Kenny and Mackay, 2014) – women's parties must pose a degree of electoral 'threat' to established parties in order for their claims to be taken seriously.

Women's parties are, therefore, important organisations that speak to a number of debates within political science, especially those concerned with the unequal distribution of political power, the dynamics of party organisation and competition, and the links between social movements actors, civil society and the formal political process. In particular, we argue that women's parties constitute an important intervention in the political process, highlighting the failures of the existing system to represent women or women's issues and interests; whilst at the same time offering new pathways to inclusion in terms of their own ways of working, the substantive representation of women's policy concerns, and their ability to pressure other parties in the system. Increasing attention is being paid to the links between social movements and elections, and the variety of ways in which movements can work with, through and against political parties to effect change (Goldstone, 2003; McAdam and Tarrow, 2010; Della Porta, Fernandez, Kouki and Mosca, 2017). WEP's status as 'movement-parties', rather than pressure groups, therefore affords them the ability to contest existing ideas and proposals directly through the electoral process, and potentially increase the access and inclusion of marginalized groups in the policy-making process (Cowell-Meyers, 2014). At the same time, they provide fascinating insights into the difficulties and challenges that face activists as they seek to work with and within institutional and organisational frameworks that have long proven inhospitable for feminists.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Research on gender and political parties has a tradition of multi-method approaches, making use of interviews, surveys, focus groups and semi-ethnographic methods (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). Increasingly, research in this area has conceptualised political parties as gendered organizations, focusing not only on formal party rules and regulations, but also informal norms and party practices and their gendered effects (Lovenduski, 2005; Kenny, 2013; Bjarnegård, 2013; Kenny and Verge 2016). As studies in this area have noted, informal party rules are notoriously difficult to research (Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2015). Large-scale cross-national studies have the potential to identify interesting patterns and give a sense of the wider global context (Kittilson, 2006); however, uncovering the informal and gendered dimensions of political parties requires in-depth and detailed qualitative work.

Thus, studies of gender and political parties often rely on in-depth interviews to understand the 'way things are done' (Evans, 2011; Bjarnegård, 2013; Kenny, 2013). Rather than make a

strict separation between informal and formal rules or prejudge their relative significance, these studies instead see the mix of elements as an empirical question. This requires that researchers talk to actors themselves about 'how things are done around here' and 'why is X done, but not Y?' (Lowndes, 2014: 688). Such an approach is important not just to understand the role of informal rules, but also to investigate whether or not the formal rules found in official party statements really do structure behaviour on the ground.

This was particularly important in the case of WEP, where many of the party rules were either not written down, or were in the process of being written down as we conducted our research. Interviews were often the most effective method for understanding decision-making with regards to organisation, candidate selection and policy-making. Our research draws on interviews with party activists, candidates, staff, branch, steering and policy committee members, as well as with representatives from national and regional women's organisations to explore their responses to and relationship with WEP. We focus in this paper on the period between the party's initial formation in July 2015, and its first elections in which it stood candidates in May 2016, up to its first party conference in November 2016. Alongside formal interviews and document analysis, we have also made use of 'rapid ethnographic' techniques, undertaking 'short intensive and focussed investigations' to gain a greater understanding of party dynamics at work 'on the ground' (Galea et al, 2015).

THE WOMEN'S EQUALITY PARTY: EMERGENCE

We expect women's parties to emerge in contexts with favourable institutional opportunity structures, and, in particular, where women are unevenly empowered. However, the UK presents a closed opportunity structure for women's parties. The UK is an established democracy that presents significant barriers for small parties, including the substantial vote threshold required for first-past-the-post elections to the House of Commons, an issue to which we return later. And while British political parties are far from fully 'feminized' – with respect to either the integration of women or the integration of women's policy concerns – all of the main parties have responded to women's demands for individual and collective representation (Childs, 2008). In particular, the Labour Party has sought to capitalise on its position as the party for women, playing a crucial innovating role in promoting women's representation in both UK and devolved elections (Annesley et al, 2007; Kenny and Mackay, 2014). Our analysis of WEP's emergence focuses on two inter-related questions: why did the party launch in 2015? And what is its relationship to and with the women's movement? We find that the uncertain political climate post-2010 and the rise of other newer voices within UK politics proved to be an important factor in WEP's emergence. However, despite the presence of a vibrant women's movement, the party emerged alongside, rather than from within the ranks of activists and established networks, which has at times created an uneasy relationship between the two.

In many respects 2015 was a surprising year for the launch of a women's party in the UK. The 2015 general election witnessed the highest number and percentage of women candidates. Labour's continued use of all-women shortlists meant that 43 per cent of their parliamentary party were women; the Conservative party expanded the number of women MPs to 21 per cent of their parliamentary party; and the gains made by the Scottish

National Party (SNP) increased the overall number of women MPs to 191 – an all-time high (29.4 per cent), though still well short of parity.

In other respects, however, WEP's emergence reflects a broader story of political and party change and electoral uncertainty in UK politics. The 2010 General Election resulted in the first coalition government in the UK for seventy years, and, in the run-up to 2015, many were predicting another hung Parliament. Whilst the May 2015 elections returned a Conservative majority government, it also resulted in a shake-up of 'business as usual', with the electoral wipe-out of the Labour party in Scotland (and the subsequent election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader), and the significant electoral growth of the UK Independence Party (UKIP). As with new parties elsewhere, UKIP capitalised on wider trends of partisan dealignment and economic and social change in Britain, channelling the frustrations of the so-called 'left behind' (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). UKIP was frequently cited as a comparator example in media coverage of WEP[2]; indeed, interviewees highlighted the rise of UKIP as a key factor shaping the launch of their party:

> The point that [WEP] made at the beginning was that they were differentiating themselves from a campaigning group because they were seeking real political power, and that was what was going to create a threat to mainstream politics. It was a new approach, and it seemed to make sense, and we've seen it work with UKIP.[3]

As with other women's parties, WEP's initial framing of its message very much focused on the perception of exclusion from mainstream political processes, arguing that established political parties were not prioritizing women's issues, and highlighting persistent patterns of gender inequality in the UK: 'WE are not going to wait for equality, WE are going to make it happen – now' (Women's Equality Party, 2016b). This message was reiterated by Sophie Walker in the run-up to the May 2016 elections, where she argued that 'all of the parties have competing priorities, and they are simply unable to give [women's issues] the attention they need.'[4] Indeed, the argument that the main British parties had failed to integrate women in decision-making processes and represent women's interests was articulated by several interviewees within the party:

> None of the other parties had really taken gender seriously and I was really excited that there was this opportunity to shake things up.[5]

> The other parties, they just don't really seem to have anything much to say about women.[6]

WEP's emergence also coincided with a wider and sustained resurgence of the UK feminist movement[7] (Evans and Chamberlain, 2014; Evans, 2015). Studies on women's activism in the UK have noted that over the past decade or so, the number of grassroots organisations has increased, as has the range of issues which they seek to address. For instance, whilst the anti-violence against women sector is well-established in the UK, it has been strengthened in recent years by new and emerging groups and campaigns (Mackay, 2015). Studies exploring the impact of government cuts on some of the most vulnerable women in society have emphasised the role of ethnic minority women in anti-austerity activism (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017); whilst a neo-imperialist foreign policy and Islamophobic cultural discourse

has led to a growing visibility of Muslim women's activism (Joly and Wadia, 2017). Meanwhile, the size and scope of feminist societies on UK University campuses indicates that there is a younger generation of (mainly) women who are eager to engage in women's activism (Evans, 2016). Within this context, one might expect WEP to have emerged out of the women's movement, as has been the case with previous women's parties (Cowell-Meyers, 2014). However, our research complicates this theory and in fact reveals a set of tensions between the party and the wider movement.

Interviews with activists involved in WEP revealed patchy knowledge of the women's movement. Whilst many interviewees named large civil society organisations, specifically The Fawcett Society, as having played a key role in advancing women's interests, there was relatively little awareness of, or experience of working with, smaller or emerging grassroots groups. In terms of previous engagement with the women's movement, some had participated in large-scale events such as Reclaim the Night, but most did not appear to be networked within the women's movement, something reflected in an interview with one activist: 'I've always supported women's rights but I've never really done anything about it which is why this [joining WEP] appealed.'[8] WEP interviewees often highlighted a sense of disconnect with the women's movement, as well as recurring problems of 'treading on the toes' of the women's sector.[9]

This sense of disconnect between WEP and the party was also observed by representatives from women's organisations, who expressed some irritation that the party had not sought to engage with the wider movement:

> WEP engagement with and knowledge of the activist movement is minimal. More lone wolves than activists really - very little appreciation of the strong activist networks who have been plugging away for decades.[10]

> WEP don't really seem to have formal links with the women's lib movement or whatever there is of it or could be seen to be of it. Yes it's strained.[11]

The depiction of the party as 'lone wolves' rather than 'activists' is telling, and hints at a perception of the party as newcomers with little appreciation for either the historical context or political gains achieved by the women's movement. This interpretation was also reflected in a piece by well-known activist Holly Dustin on the feminist website *Trouble and Strife* (2016)*.* In evaluating the party's commitment to 'creating policy from the grassroots up', Dustin argued that the party risked 'reinventing the wheel'. For example, in relation to their policy on violence against women and girls, WEP had failed to recognize that a cross-party VAW strategy already existed at Westminster, one that activists had spent a long time helping to establish and which WEP, in launching its own policy in this area, had failed to acknowledge. In short, the charge was that the party wasn't sufficiently grounded in the knowledge and networks of the women's movement, to be able to actually deliver for women.

Partly in response to the early criticism they received from the women's movement, WEP included within their manifesto a commitment to the 'Nordic model' of prostitution which criminalizes the purchase, but not selling, of sex and is traditionally, at least in the UK,

associated with radical feminism. We suggest that WEP adopted this policy, at least in part, in reaction to the early criticism that they attracted from sections of the women's movement. Adopting such a position has enabled the party to establish a better working relationship with key groups. This interpretation is supported by one interviewee who noted that it was important for the party's 'credibility', and would ensure that they were taken seriously by, the wider women's movement.[12] Interviews with women's organizations suggested that this was one policy area where some sections of the women's movement had actively lobbied the new party, highlighting that the party's grassroots policy development process provides a potential route by which women's movement organisations can mobilize to lobby for the inclusion of specific policies in the party's formal platform. Local activists we interviewed were unsure as to why this specific contentious policy issue had been adopted as party policy; indeed some thought that the party could change its position if 'further evidence' was provided.[13]

The tension between those active in the women's movement and WEP was also identified by some interviewees in Scotland, where the civic awakening that accompanied the 2014 independence referendum saw a resulting surge in women's grassroots activism, including the establishment of groups like Women for Independence. Indeed, as one Scottish interviewee noted:

> If Women for Indy had become a political party, I would have joined in a heartbeat. But unfortunately they didn't become a political party, and then, almost immediately WEP arose, so I joined as a founding member.[14]

WEP's emergence, then, does not constitute a 'tactic' adopted by the women's movement to further advance the cause of women's equality, calling into question whether it fits the classification of a 'movement-party' (cf. Cowell-Meyers, 2016). Being considered an effective outsider to an energized and vibrant women's movement has meant that WEP have had to contend with both the criticism from women within existing political parties, who resent the implication that it is only through the creation of a new women's party that women's equality can be achieved, but also the charge from activists that the party represents a top-down approach to political organising, which we consider below.

WOMEN'S EQUALITY PARTY: ORGANISATION

Women's parties are 'organisationally new actors' with lower levels of institutionalisation (cf. Bolleyer et al, 2012, p. 973; Mair, 1999) – which means that their party rules and organisational structures are less consolidated, more basic, and more open to change than those of established mainstream parties. This is certainly the case for WEP, which continues to be marked by a large degree of organisational fluidity as the party establishes its infrastructure. In the first year of its existence, the party was governed by central headquarters, which employed six people (including party leader Sophie Walker, and additional staff focused on policy and elections). WEP did not initially establish the equivalent of a national executive committee, which meant that, in practice, all strategic decisions were taken by the leadership.

The party subsequently put into place a written constitution, adopted at the first party conference in November 2016 (Women's Equality Party, 2016c). The Constitution established a structure with an Executive Committee, responsible for the Party's operational decisions; a Steering Committee, as the Party's main decision-making body between Conferences; and a Policy Committee, focused on the Party's core policy areas. Party members are elected to the Steering Committee through a combination of simple majority vote at Party Conference or random selection through the party membership database[15]. Policy Committee members, meanwhile, are elected by a simple majority vote at Party Conference, encompassing policy spokespeople and 'movement-builders' focused on the party's key policy areas, as well as a policy spokesperson and movement-builder for Scotland. Below this level, the party has several regional 'hubs', which facilitate collaboration between local branches, though these do not exist across all parts of the UK. This is then followed by local branches, which have a minimum of three appointed officers – a Branch Leader, Data Manager, and a Treasurer – though they may appoint other officers as they see fit. Finally, members and registered supporters make up the membership of the branches.

Our analysis reveals WEP to have so far remained highly centralised – there is no formal regional representation on the Steering Committee, and decisions are still often made at the centre, with the party thus far resisting wider decentralizing pressures. Criticisms have arisen over whether the party is too 'London-centric', given in particular that its founders are all London-based media professionals, a charge which the party has consciously tried to avoid:

> We are determined not to be seen as a London party – so much so that we've prioritised the branches being set up in Lincoln over those set up in London – we put Lincoln before West Ealing.[16]

At the party's 2016 conference, for example, several motions were proposed with regards to devolution – including a joint proposal for a constitutional amendment from the Stirling and Lothian branches pushing for a national Scottish hub. This was voted down by the party conference, with a central party staff member speaking against it. As above, whilst the party does now have the possibility for regional 'hubs' to be formed and participate in central decision-making structures, these are branches working together, rather than, for example, a central Scottish headquarters as part of a federal or devolved party structure. As one Scottish committee member noted:

> It's going to take them a long time to understand Scotland, and the fact that we do have a different Parliament and that we have devolved matters that they are not taking into consideration when they are making some of their announcements and things. It's very London-centric.[17]

How a party organises also has important implications for internal gender power dynamics, influencing *who* has power and to *what degree* (Childs, 2013; Kenny and Verge, 2016). Research suggests bureaucratized party rules are more favourable for women – that is, rules that are not only formally written down, but are also actually implemented (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2016). It is more difficult for party actors to discriminate against certain types of

candidates, for example, if the selection process is guided by clear and transparent rules with sanctions for non-compliance (Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2015). Yet, studies of women's parties suggest that may be reluctant to bureaucratize party rules, not only because they are 'new' and are still in the process of developing formal frameworks, but also because they do not want to reinforce and entrench political hierarchies (Bjarnegård and Freidenvall, 2015).

At the time of our research, WEP was highly informalized. Few rules were written down, and those that were written down were not necessarily followed. Candidate selection, for example, in the 2016 devolved and London Assembly elections operated through a centralized application process – with branches encouraged to nominate candidates, as well as an online application form that was open to all members. Party spokeswomen emphasized the importance of doing things 'differently' in selecting candidates – reflecting 'the uniqueness of our model and the newness of our party' (Women's Equality Party, 2016d). Yet, beyond the application form and a short candidate information sheet that laid out very broad selection criteria (Women's Equality Party, 2016e), there were few formal rules in place for the selection of candidates, and those rules that were in place (formal or informal) were inconsistently applied. In London, for example, where higher numbers of members applied to stand for office, the candidate shortlist was voted on by party members. Some candidates also went through a vetting process, with candidates interviewed by central HQ, and branch members consulted for their opinion. In others, there was no branch or member involvement in selection – candidates were selected without an interview process and notified directly by party HQ of their selection:

> I got a phone call. I applied, and then within a week, I got a phone call [from central HQ] saying, hello, you are our candidate […] it's a good job that [my branch] were nice people, you know, because they accepted me and worked with me, and worked really hard for me, and we're all good friends now. But they could have gone, 'How dare they select someone we've never seen in our lives before.'[18]

In this respect, then, WEP resembles a more traditional male-dominated party, in that it is still highly informalized (though this informality is not as institutionalised as in established parties) (Bjarnegård and Freidenvall, 2015). In other respects, however, the party has tried to organise in alternative ways, for example through grassroots policy development, which is highlighted in the party's first policy statement:

> [This policy statement] has been shaped by our members and supporters, thousands of whom have contributed, working collaboratively with experts and policy makers online and at events across the country (Women's Equality Party, 2015).

Allowing members to have some say over the direction of policy is nothing new for UK parties: the Liberal Democrats allow members to propose and vote on policy proposals, even if power ultimately resides with the party leadership (Evans and Sanderson-Nash, 2012). Such mechanisms, however, can support 'value infusion' (Levitsky, 1998), socialising party members into the organisation and leading to greater engagement and investment in the party. It also provides an opportunity for WEP to facilitate member education, with members learning about policy, and policy development, through discussion with others.

Some WEP interviewees, however, highlighted the recruitment challenges that the party faced in the long term, particularly given many of the party's members did not have previous experience in campaigning or activism: 'I think we'll do really well getting people to pay their £4 a month, coming to branch meetings, having their say, but not necessarily doing the major legwork.'[19]

There is also evidence that the party has attempted to learn from other women's parties; for example, consciously adopting techniques of discussion moderation and collective decision-making from the 1980s Icelandic women's party in breakout sessions at the 2016 Party Conference. Yet, in other respects, the party remains a long way away from the organisational ideals held by many of its activists, including traditional methods of feminist organising. For example, whilst the party stressed its democratic grassroots policy-making process, some interviewees reported that policy amendments proposed by members had been subsequently reworded by central HQ. At branch level, structures are not horizontal, and there is a (often unelected) leader and steering committee that take decisions on behalf of the branch. Criticisms have also been raised of the ways in which certain decisions are and have been taken by the centre without any consultation of the branches or membership, for instance the initial decision not to take a position on the Brexit debate, which attracted some internal controversy.[20] And while the party does have new representative structures at the centre – including a Policy Committee – some members felt that policy was still being driven by staff in central HQ, with the Policy Committee 'promoting' pre-agreed policies, rather than leading on their development.[21]

WOMEN'S EQUALITY PARTY: CHALLENGES

If WEP are to somehow overcome the pattern that has dogged other women's parties - that they are short-lived and electorally unsuccessful (Ishiyama, 2003; Cowell-Meyers, 2016), then they must think carefully about how to address two key inter-related challenges: the electoral system and the party system. How WEP chooses to confront these difficulties will shape their ability to *exercise* power. Although women's parties are not always driven by the goal of electoral success, instead stressing the importance of influencing the agenda (Levin, 1999); WEP themselves have repeatedly emphasized that the way to exercise power is by contesting and winning elections.

Indeed, WEP have tried to position themselves as a long-term political force, a theme that party leader Sophie Walker repeatedly stressed after the 2016 elections, claiming that 'we're not going anywhere'.[22] As WEP's chief policy document clearly states: 'Our strategy is straightforward: to win seats and influence' (Women's Equality Party, 2015). In other words, in line with our theoretical expectations, the party believes that in order to exercise power it is also necessary to pose a credible electoral threat to the mainstream parties:

> We have a bigger presence as a political party than we do as a lobbying group or a pressure group, or just a group of women online shouting about how unfair the world is. My long-term goal would be that we do get some people in parliament, both Westminster and Holyrood and Wales as well. That we do have some local councillors.[23]

[WEP's contribution] needs to be to get people into elected positions, so they can influencing – not just influencing, but we can make alliances and our votes could be very important for influencing policy decisions. So I guess that's it really, we need to get people into positions of power.[24]

The party views electoral success as a key strategy for exercising power despite the significant challenges presented by the UK political system. For a small party to thrive in the UK's political system, they have to learn to negotiate the electoral system. At the UK level, the first-past-the-post electoral system has proven particularly hostile to small parties. Our observations of some local party meetings revealed a certain degree of naiveté with regards this particular challenge. Indeed, when asked, some activists were not aware of either the different electoral systems in use across the UK, or what the party's strategy might be in different elections and under different conditions. Whilst other smaller parties have sought to build themselves up incrementally by concentrating their efforts on specific geographical areas (for example, the Liberal Democrats; see Evans, 2011), for a women's party with no obvious geographical constituency, the task is significantly harder. In the case of WEP, the party took advantage of the more favourable institutional opportunity structure presented by the devolved and London Assembly elections, which use mixed proportional electoral systems and hence are theoretically more favourable to small parties. But, ultimately WEP did not win any seats in the 2016 elections, although its share of the vote was higher than expected in some areas, particularly in London (see Table 1).[25]

(INSERT TABLE 1 HERE)

WEP were able to gain some significant media coverage during the London Mayoral race, with party leader Sophie Walker participating in a number of high profile debates and media interviews. Given that the Mayoral race is run using the supplementary vote system, WEP activists were able to encourage voters to cast their second vote for equality, a strategy that worked well (see Table 1). Meanwhile, one interviewee recounted that London Mayor Sadiq Khan had told the party that he was going to 'steal their policies', subsequently delivering a virtually word for word identical speech to one delivered by Walker.[26] During a general election it will obviously be much harder for the party to attract attention, however the party are confident that their very presence within an electoral race, even if the conditions are not propitious, will enable them to influence the agenda of other mainstream parties.

One way in which WEP has tried to distinguish itself electorally, and to gain a foothold in the UK's party system, is by adopting a 'non-partisan' label; thereby allowing it to appeal to voters on the left and the right as well as facilitating collaborative partnerships with other parties across the political spectrum. The avoidance of the left-right dimension was a tactic also adopted by the Swedish Feminist Initiative; although, as Bjarnegård and Freidenvall (2015) note, when pushed, the party leans left. Previous studies have shown that non-partisan political alternatives can be effective at mobilising voters (Aars et al., 2005) and perhaps more importantly, that they can help to bridge the gap between parties and social movements (Ignazi, 1996). Meanwhile, Cowell-Meyers (2011) argues that women's parties that position themselves at the centre of the political spectrum may have a bigger impact on

the agenda, setting off processes of 'contagion' amongst electoral rivals on both the left and the right.

The party sought initially to make something of a virtue of having neither economic nor foreign policy goals. Some party members saw this strategy as central to the party's appeal to the electorate, with one activist noting that voters 'didn't really ask too much' when they were out canvassing.[27] Others, however, highlighted the potential electoral trade-offs for the party, particularly in terms of recruiting potential members:

> It's become quite difficult when you're trying to talk to people, trying to recruit people, when they say 'How does the Women's Equality Party feel about Trident'. That's come up quite a lot in Scotland. What do we feel about the environment. About the economy. And it's trying to bring all those arguments back to, well, how does it affect women.[28]

In particular, the party's refusal to take a stance on two key issues in the first years of its development – Scottish independence and the EU referendum – proved controversial with some members, who highlighted the irony of setting up a women's party to represent women, whilst simultaneously absenting themselves from two major political debates:

> I don't know what the party's view would be of [Scottish independence]. Because we're supposed to be non-partisan. And I think if it came to it, I would possibly have to leave the party.[29]

> I really thought about leaving after the decision not to campaign against Brexit – what's the point of a party that doesn't know what it's for.[30]

As the above quotations indicate, some party members are frustrated by the (leadership's) initial decision not to engage with such pivotal issues in UK politics. Indeed, activists were fully aware of the irony of setting up a women's party to ensure women's voices were heard in political debate, whilst simultaneously absenting themselves from two major debates. Such an approach says much about their political aspiration, which appears to be driven more by the desire to attract votes than by a desire to insert women's voices into the debate.

WEP's non-partisan approach is also intended to enable them to create cross-party alliances. In other countries, women's parties have had significant effects on the descriptive and substantive representation of women, particularly, but not exclusively, pressuring parties on the left to address women's issues (Styrkarsdottir, 1986; Cowell-Meyers, 2017) However, WEP has run into trouble in terms of its relationships with other British political parties – for example, initially suggesting at some party events and meetings that members could join WEP while retaining their membership in other parties. This raised particular tensions with the Labour Party, whose party rules ask members to confirm that they are not a registered member of any other political party (save the Co-operative Party).[31] Indeed, interviews with those involved with Party HQ, and with party activists, revealed that the Labour party had been particularly hostile at both UK and devolved levels: 'they don't invite

us to anything or let us know what's going on. They're too tribal.'[32] WEP had not foreseen Labour's antagonism toward them. Given that Labour has long prided itself on its record in delivering for women, this oversight suggests perhaps a lack of understanding of the UK's party system. The party has managed to collaborate with other parties, for instance they worked with the Liberal Democrats to propose an amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill to better protect victims of revenge porn. It is clear that if they wish to work collaboratively with Labour, which in terms of size and electability is most likely to be able to bring about change at UK level, then a clear strategy for managing that relationship is required in order to enhance women's representation and impact public discourse about gender, power and (in)equality.

CONCLUSION

Studies of women's parties provide important insights into political power - specifically, the dynamics of power within parties and between parties. Additionally, they reveal the contentious and sometimes messy ways in which social movements can work with, through and against political parties. Moreover, their very presence within a political system raises questions regarding representation, gender (in)equality and political inclusion and exclusion.   The UK Women's Equality Party is a new and rapidly changing party that is still negotiating its own direction and organisational structure. Nevertheless, our analysis of its initial development suggests that WEP is an important case for exploring when and why women's parties emerge, how they organise and the ways in which they frame their message(s).

Research on women's parties argues that they are essentially a strategic tactic used by women's movements to challenge their exclusion from decision-making through formal means, usually in contexts where women are unevenly empowered and where the electoral costs of entering the political arena are low. Our findings complicate this: on the one hand, WEP has emerged in a time of electoral uncertainty and political and party change; on the other hand, it faces a relatively closed political opportunity structure in terms of an unfavourable electoral system at UK level, and an established (and partially feminized) party system. WEP also appears to be distinct in that it has emerged alongside but not necessarily from within the women's movement, raising questions as to whether categorisations of women's parties as 'movement-parties' hold in all cases.

WEP also provides an interesting case with regards to the question of whether women's parties 'do things differently', in terms of their organisation and message. WEP has tried to set up alternative participatory structures and new 'ways of working', for example, its emphasis thus far on 'bottom up' grassroots policy development. Concomitantly, the party has fallen back on more traditional, hierarchical and centralised modes of party organising and leadership. Of particular note is the degree of informality within the party, raising issues of accountability and transparency. While informality often poses problems in more established parties, tending to favour well-networked male candidates, this is not necessarily a problem in women's parties, where the underlying ideology of the party is women-friendly. But, these tensions may also help explain why women's parties are often short-lived organisations – the survival of new parties depends in part on their ability to

respond effectively to intra-organisational demands and pressures, which requires formal rules and procedures for dealing with intra-party conflict between party sub-units, and between activists and the leadership.

It is too early to make strong claims about WEP's potential impact on women's descriptive and substantive representation. While the party continues to run for subsequent elections, it has not yet won any seats – losing all seven of its electoral deposits in the 2017 General Election, and attracting controversy over its decision to stand against sitting Labour women MPs. The party's electoral impact is constrained by both the electoral and party system, and in order for the party to wield any significant power, either in terms of shaping the debate or being electorally competitive, the party requires a more realistic strategy for success and a closer and more cooperative relationship with the wider women's movement.

NOTES

[1] The party itself uses the acronym 'WE'. However, for grammatical clarity, we refer to 'WEP' in this article.

[2] See, for example, 'The Women's Equality Party is long overdue', *The Guardian*, 27 September 2015; 'Women's Equality Party: UKIP for women?', *The Telegraph*, 20 October 2015; 'Women's Equality Party needs a strong dose of Nigel Farage', *The Telegraph,* 22 October 2015.

[3] WEP Interview 5

[4] BBC Daily Politics programme, 15 January 2016. Available at: http://bbc.in/1lk7aNZ (Accessed 15 August 2016).

[5] WEP Interview 4

[6] WEP Interview 2

[7] The documented resurgence of feminist activism in the UK has ranged from innovative online websites set up to document sexism, to groups established to oppose the proliferation of pornography, to campaigns to help deliver more women in Parliament, as well as a return to the Reclaim the Night Marches of the 1970s (Mackay, 2015; Evans, 2016).

[8] WEP Interview 7

[9] WEP Interview 12

[10] Women's Organisation Interview 2

[11] Women's Organisation Interview 3

[12] WEP Interview 1.

[13] WEP Interview 4.

[14] WEP Interview 9

[15] If a randomly selected member declines the role, it is then passed randomly on to another member, until all positions have been filled (Women's Equality Party, 2016c).

[16] WEP Interview 6

[17] WEP Interview 9.

[18] Given the small number of WEP candidates, we have not identified the location of this interviewee.

[19] WEP Interview 10

[20] In July 2018 Sophie Walker called upon the party to reconsider this stance in order to campaign for a second referendum or 'People's Vote', *The Guardian* 28 July 2018.

[21] WEP Interview 12.

[22] 'Women's Equality Party: "The Mayoral Election was a dress rehearsal. We're not going anywhere"', *The Telegraph*, 6 May 2016.

[23] WEP Interview 10.

[24] WEP Interview 9.

[25] The party did particularly well in capturing the second preferences in the Mayoral race, targetng the fact that voters could 'afford' to give WEP their second vote. This tactic was given a boost when Labour candidate (and eventual winner) Sadiq Khan pledged to give his second vote to the party.

[26] WEP Interview 1

[27] WEP Interview 4.

[28] WEP Interview 10.

[29] WEP Interview 9.

[30] WEP Interview 3

[31] The party currently offers an 'affiliate membership' for those who are a member of another political party.

[32] WEP Interview 1.

REFERENCES

Aars J and Ringkjøb H E (2005) Party politicisation reversed? Non-partisan alternatives in Norwegian local politics. *Scandinavian Political Studies 28*(2): 161-181.

Annesley C, Gains F and Rummery K (2007) *Women and New Labour.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Bassel, L, and Emejulu A. Minority (2017) *Women and Austerity: Survival and Resistance in France and Britain*. London: Policy Press.

Bjarnegård E (2013) *Gender, Informal Institutions and Political Recruitment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bjarnegård E and Freidenvall L (2015) How Inclusive is the Feminist Initiative? Revisiting Theories on Political Recruitment in a Party with Female Political Dominance. Paper presented to the European Conference on Politics and Gender, Uppsala University.

Bjarnegård E and Kenny M (2015) Revealing the "Secret Garden": The Informal Dimensions of Political Recruitment. *Politics & Gender* 11(4): 748-753.

Bjarnegård E and Kenny M (2016) Comparing Candidate Selection: A Feminist Institutionalist Approach. *Government & Opposition* 51(3): 370-392.

Bjarnegård E and Zetterberg P (2016) Political Parties and Gender Quota Implementation: The Role of Bureaucratized Candidate Selection Processes. *Comparative Politics* 48(3): 393-417.

Bolleyer N, Spanje J V and Wilson A (2012) New Parties in Government: Party Organisation and the Costs of Public Office. *West European Politics* 35(5): 971-988.

Campbell R and Childs S (2015) All aboard the pink battle bus? Women voters, women's issues, candidates and party leaders. *Parliamentary Affairs* 68(1): 206-223.

Childs S (2008) *Women and British Party Politics.* London: Routledge.

Childs S (2013) Intraparty Democracy: A Gendered Critique and a Feminist Agenda. In: Cross W and Katz R (eds) *The Challenges of Intra-Party Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 81-99.

Cowell-Meyers K (2011) A Collarette on a Donkey: The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition and the Limitations of Contagion Theory. *Political Studies 59*(2): 411-431.

Cowell-Meyers K (2014) The Social Movement as Political Party: The Northern Ireland Women's Campaign and the Campaign for Inclusion. *Perspectives on Politics* 12(1): 61-80.

Cowell-Meyers K (2016) Women's Political Parties in Europe. *Politics and Gender* 12(1): 1-27.

Cowell-Meyers K (2017) The Contagion Effects of the Feminist Initiative in Sweden: Agenda-setting, Niche Parties and Mainstream Parties. *Scandinavian Political Studies*. 40(4): 481-493.

Della Porta D, Fernandez J, Kouki H and Mosca L. (2017). *Movement Parties Against Austerity*. London: John Wiley & Sons.

Dominelli L and Jonsdottir G (1988) Feminist political organization in Iceland: Some reflections on the experience of Kwenna Frambothid. *Feminist Review* (30): 36-60.

Dustin H (2016) Party Lines. *Trouble & Strife,* 2 February 2016. Available at: http://www.troubleandstrife.org/2016/02/party-lines/ (Accessed 15 August 2016).

Evans E (2011) *Gender and the Liberal Democrats*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Evans E (2015) *The Politics of Third Wave Feminisms.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Evans E. (2016). Intersectionality as feminist praxis in the UK. In *Women's Studies International Forum* 59:67-75

Evans E and Chamberlain P (2015) Critical Waves: Exploring Feminist Identity, Discourse and Praxis in Western Feminism. *Social Movement Studies* 14(4): 396-409.

Evans E and Sanderson-Nash E (2011) From Sandals to Suits: Professionalisation, Coalition and the Liberal Democrats. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 4(13): 459-473.

Ford R and Goodwin M (2014) *Revolt on the Right*. London: Routledge.

Galea N, Powell A, Loosemore, M and Chappell L (2015) Designing robust and revisable policies for gender equality: lessons from the Australian construction industry. *Construction Management and Economics* 33(5-6): 375-389.

Goldstone, J (2003) *States, Parties and Social Movements.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ignazi P (1996) The crisis of parties and the rise of new political parties. *Party Politics 2*(4): 549-566.

Ishiyama J T (2003) Women's Parties in Post-Communist Politics. *East European Politics and Societies* 17(2): 266-304.

Joly D, and Wadia K (2017). *Muslim Women and Power: Political and Civic Engagement in West European Societies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Kenny M (2013) *Gender and Political Recruitment.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kenny M and Mackay F (2014) When is contagion not very contagious? Dynamics of women's political representation in Scotland. *Parliamentary Affairs* 67(4): 866-886.

Kenny M and Verge T (2013) Decentralization, Political Parties and Women's Representation: Evidence from Spain and Britain. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 43(1): 109-128.

Kenny M and Verge T (2016) Opening up the Black Box: Gender and Candidate Selection in a New Era. *Government & Opposition* 51 (3): 351-369.

Kittilson M C (2006) *Challenging Parties, Changing Parliaments.* Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.

Levin L S (1999) Setting the Agenda: The Impact of the 1977 Israel Women's Party. *Israel Studies* 4(2): 40-63.

Levitsky S (1998) Institutionalization and Peronism: The Concept, the Case, and the Case for Unpacking the Concept. *Party Politics* 4 (1): 77-92.

Lovenduski J (2005) *Feminizing Politics.* Cambridge: Polity.

Lowndes V (2014) How Are Things Done Around Here? Uncovering Institutional Rules and Their Gendered Effects. *Politics & Gender* 10(4): 685-691.

McAdam, D. and Tarrow, S (2010) Ballots and barricades: On the reciprocal relationship between elections and social movements. *Perspectives on Politics*, 8(2):529-542.

Mackay F (2015) *Radical Feminism.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mair P (1997) *Party system change: approaches and interpretations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Mair P (1999) New Political Parties in Established Party Systems: How Successful Are They? In: K.K. Klausen and P.E. Mouritzen (eds) *Elites, Parties and Democracy. Festschrift for Professor Mogens N. Pedersen.* Odense: Odense University Press, pp. 207-224.

Matland R E and Studlar D T (1996) The Contagion of Women Candidates in Single-Member District and Proportional Representation Electoral Systems: Canada and Norway. *Journal of Politics* 58(3): 707-733.

Norris P and Lovenduski J (1995) *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race and Class in the British Parliament.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Styrkarsdottir, A (1986) From Social Movement to Political Party: The New Women's Movement in Iceland. In D. Dahlerup (ed) *The New Women's Movement*. London: Sage.

Women's Equality Party (2015) *Policy Document*. Available at: http://www.womensequality.org.uk (Accessed 15 August 2016).

Women's Equality Party (2016a) 'Let's Make History Together: Welcome to the Women's Equality Party's First Conference'. London: Women's Equality Party.

Women's Equality Party (2016b) 'Why us, why now'. Available at: http://www.womensequality.org.uk/why-we (Accessed 15 August 2016)

Women's Equality Party (2016c) *Constitution of Women's Equality Party,* Available at: http://www.womensequality.org.uk (Accessed 23 April 2018)

Women's Equality Party (2016d) 'Be the first to stand up for Women's Equality. Available at: http://www.womensequality.org.uk/be_the_first_to_stand_up_for_women_s_equality (Accessed 15 August 2016).

Women's Equality Party (2016e) 'What it means to be a WE candidate'. London: Women's Equality Party.

Women's Equality Party (2016f) *Scotland Manifesto*. Available at: http://www.womensequality.org.uk/we_launch_our_scottish_manifesto (Accessed 15 August 2016).

Zaborszky D (1987) Feminist Politics: The Feminist Party of Canada. *Women's Studies International Forum* 10(6): 613-621.