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Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

Published in:

Culture and Organization

DOI:

[10.1080/14759551.2018.1518325](https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2018.1518325)

Publication date:

2020

License

Unspecified

Citation for published version (APA):

Husted, E. (2020). 'Some Have Ideologies, We Have Values': The Relationship Between Organizational Values and Commitment in a Political Party. *Culture and Organization*, 26(3), 175-195.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2018.1518325>

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Journal article (Accepted manuscript*)

Please cite this article as:

Husted, E. (2018). 'Some Have Ideologies, We Have Values': The Relationship Between Organizational Values and Commitment in a Political Party. *Culture and Organization*. DOI: 10.1080/14759551.2018.1518325

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Culture and Organization* on 06 Sep 2018, available online:

DOI: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14759551.2018.1518325>

* This version of the article has been accepted for publication and undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the publisher's final version AKA Version of Record.

Uploaded to [CBS Research Portal](#): May 2019

‘Some have ideologies, we have values’: The relationship between organizational values and commitment in a political party

This paper seeks to advance the study of organizational values by analyzing the role of values in a Danish political party called The Alternative, a party claiming to be guided by values rather than ideology. Inspired by recent work in organizational psychology, I group The Alternative’s values into two categories: vision values and humanity values. Through an empirical investigation, I show how the vision values encourage members to take initiative in realizing their own political ideas, while the humanity values encourage them to remain morally inclusive towards people with different views. The combination of vision and humanity values allows The Alternative to maintain commitment from members who might otherwise feel marginalized by the emergence of dominant ideas within the party. The paper’s contribution consists in highlighting the importance of using qualitative methods to study how values influence commitment and to expose the political dimension of this relationship.

Keywords: Political parties, organizational values, commitment, trust, alternative organization

Introduction

As emphasized by some of the most celebrated scholars within organization and management studies, values play a decisive role in organizational life (e.g., Barnard 1938; Simon 1945; Selznick 1957). Particularly since the introduction of similar concepts such as culture and attitudes, the interest in organizational values has increased significantly (Hofstede 1998). This has led to a series of studies exploring the relationship between values and numerous organizational phenomena such as strategic change (Carlisle and Baden-Fuller 2004), organizational structure (Hinings et al. 1996), issues response (Bansal 2003), output performance (Jurkiewiicz and Giacalone 2004), and social control (O’Reilly and Chatman 1996). The ongoing concern with organizational values is, however, not only restricted to academia. Practitioners within various fields have likewise taken an interest in values. Hence, instead of managing by instructions or by objectives, many organizations today prefer to manage by values (Dolan and Garcia 2001). As argued by Kraemer (2011, n.p.), a former CEO turned professor, in the columns of Forbes Magazine: ‘The only true leadership is value-based leadership’.

Despite growing interest among scholars and practitioners alike, research on organizational values remains inconclusive. In fact, as Cha and Edmondson (2006, 58) note, ‘research on values in organizations is in nascent stages’. This is partly because no apparent agreement exists on what actually constitutes a value, let alone how it guides organizational practices. While most studies appropriate Rokeach’s (1973, 5) definition of a value as ‘an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence’, others argue that this conception concerns only *human* values and not *organizational* values (Jaakson 2010). Furthermore, while some argue that organizations causally reflect the intrinsic values of their members (O’Reilly et al. 1991), others see values as nothing but ‘necessary illusions’ that allow the organization to navigate a world of constant change (Thyssen 2001). Such fundamental disagreements have curbed researchers’ ability to move the study of organizational values forward (Bourne and Jenkins 2013), resulting in a situation where new and more imaginative modes of inquiry are needed to advance this important field of research (Agle and Caldwell 1999), which is currently dominated by quantitative, survey-based studies (Stavru 2013).

One way of advancing research on organizational values is by studying organizations that usually escape the analytic gaze of mainstream organization science such as political parties and social movements, as a way of generating new insights and deeper understandings of the political dimension of such phenomena (e.g., Moufahim et al. 2015; Reedy et al. 2016; Sutherland et al. 2014). A prime example of this research strategy is Michels’ (1911) famous study of the oligarchic tendencies in political parties and trade unions in early twentieth-century Europe. By studying how political organizations, thoroughly committed to democratic ideals, slowly grew into bureaucratic machines and eventually succumbed to elite rule, he arrived at the much-cited conclusion: ‘Who says organization, says oligarchy’ (Michels 1911, 401). These valuable insights about the so-called ‘iron law of oligarchy’ have since been widely used, not only in political science and sociology but also in organization studies (Tolbert and Hiatt 2009).

In this paper, I follow Michels’ lead by exploring the role of organizational values in a young political party in Denmark called *The Alternative* as a way of generating new insights about the use of organizational values in general. The Alternative was founded in late 2013 as a reaction to the unsustainable program of neoliberalism and the ‘old political culture’ characterized by spin and tactics. Less than two years later, the party entered parliament with almost five percent of the votes.

From the outset, The Alternative's main objective was to represent various alternatives to the economic, social, and environmental state of affairs. However, instead of presenting a number of trademark issues or a detailed list of demands, The Alternative started out with no political program whatsoever; and instead of claiming allegiance to any existing ideology, they claimed to be guided solely by six core values: *courage*, *generosity*, *transparency*, *humility*, *humor*, and *empathy*.

In order to explore The Alternative's organizational values, I use the dynamic framework proposed by Bourne and Jenkins (2013) to chart the role of 'espoused' and 'attributed' values within the party. While the six core values mentioned above constitute the former, two additional values constitute the latter, namely *curiosity* and *trust*. With inspiration from recent work in organizational psychology (Finegan 2000; Abott et al. 2005), I group these values into two new categories: 'vision values' and 'humanity values'. Through an empirical investigation, I observe how The Alternative's vision values encourage the party's members to pursue their own objectives and to take initiative in realizing these. Contrary to this, the humanity values encourage members to remain morally inclusive towards members with different views and to avoid any kind of marginalizing behavior. This, I argue, is what allows The Alternative to maintain a universal appeal despite going through a process of particularization, in which the scope of political representation is narrowed as a consequence of entering parliament (Husted and Hansen 2017).

As implied by the above, the paper's *empirical* research interest is to explore how values can be used to mitigate a loss of support from members that might otherwise feel marginalized by the emergence of dominant ideas within the party. In other words, the paper's ambition is to explore empirically how organizational values help foster and maintain organizational commitment in a context of party politics. The paper's *theoretical* interest is to understand more thoroughly the relationship between values and commitment. However, instead following the dominant approach in organization studies by asking *if* and *why* organizational values influence commitment (e.g., Dubin et al. 1975; Kidron 1978; O'Reilly et al. 1991; Amos and Weathington 2008), the paper sets out to explore *how* organizational values influence commitment.

The paper's contribution is twofold. First, it heeds the somewhat neglected call for 'greater imagination in research methods' in relation to organizational values (Agle and Caldwell 1999, 370) by using qualitative methods to study a political organization instead of using quantitative methods

to study a business organization. Secondly, it seeks to supplement the growing literature within organizational psychology on the relationship between values and commitment by providing a sociological account of how these two phenomena intersect in practice. This helps us see that the meaning of organizational values is fully dependent on the context in which they are articulated. Whenever values are counterpoised to the notion of ideology, they appear as universal ideals capable of crossing political boundaries, but as soon as they are brought to life in a specific organizational context, they acquire a much more particular meaning. This finding has interesting implications for the study of organizational values, which will be discussed towards the end of the article.

The curious case of The Alternative

A few months prior to the launch of The Alternative, the party's coming leader and former minister of culture in Denmark, Uffe Elbæk, authored a conceptual sketch for The Alternative as a political organization. In this document, Elbæk repeatedly stressed the need for a political party and a social movement that is willing and able to imagine a 'radically different future' and to provide a progressive answer to the 'massive global challenges' that dominate contemporary societies. 'Paradoxically', he continued, 'while the challenges are stacking up, we have never seen so many inspiring examples of individuals and groups of citizens who, on their own accord, develop concrete, positive answers to the problems we currently face'. The question for Elbæk then became how to forge connections between all these citizen-driven initiatives and how to channel all that political energy into one single project. Eventually, he came up with a solution and called it 'The Alternative - an international party, a movement, and a cultural voice' (The Alternative 2013a, 1).

It seemed clear from the outset that no existing ideological formation would be able to tie all these initiatives together and to represent all those who believed in a radically different future – or, as stated in the party's manifesto, anyone 'who can feel that something new is starting to replace something old' (The Alternative 2013b). Hence, in order to accommodate such an objective, The Alternative had to be based on something broader, something more universal than any existing ideology. To this end, Elbæk and his team came up with the notion of value-based politics. Instead of claiming allegiance to any one ideology, The Alternative would be based on six core values that should guide both internal processes and political messages. These are the values that I refer to as the party's 'espoused values' (The Alternative 2013b):

1. *Courage*. Courage to look problems in the eye. But also courage about the future we share.
2. *Generosity*. Everything which can be shared will be shared with anyone interested.
3. *Transparency*. Everybody should be able to look over our shoulders. On good days and on bad.
4. *Humility*. To the task. To those on whose shoulders we stand. And to those who will follow us.
5. *Humour*. Without humour there can be no creativity. Without creativity there can be no good ideas. Without good ideas there can be no creative power. Without creative power there can be no results.
6. *Empathy*. Putting yourself in other people's shoes. Looking at the world from that point of view. And creating win-win solutions for everyone.

The Alternative was officially launched at a press conference in late 2013 by Uffe Elbæk and his colleague, Josephine Fock. However, instead of presenting a complete political program, or at least a set of demands, Elbæk and Fock announced that they did not have a 'grand party bible on the shelf' (The Alternative 2013c). In fact, save for a short manifesto, all they had was the six core values. The political program, they proclaimed, would be developed later through a series of publically accessible workshops called 'Political Laboratories'. The surprising lack of concrete policies initially provided The Alternative with important momentum, as it allowed anyone who identified with the need for something 'alternative' to read their own personal preferences into the project. This kind of mobilization, however, made it equally difficult for the party to particularize its political project, because every proposal added to the political program risked marginalizing all those who thought The Alternative was going to be something else than what it turned out to be (see Laclau 2005, 89). This naturally caused a problem for a party thoroughly dependent on membership support. I will refer to this problem as *the problem of particularization* (Husted and Hansen 2017).

In order to cope with the problem of particularization, The Alternative needed to implement a range of organizational procedures that would allow the party to maintain its universal appeal. As argued in this paper, the notion of value-based politics constitutes one such procedure. While there is little clarity as to what value-based politics actually implies, and what the individual values truly signify, one thing is certain: it implies something different from ideology-based politics. Within The

Alternative, ideologies are often framed as rigid and restrictive programs that prevent productive dialogue and cooperation across the political spectrum, whereas values are framed as uncontaminated ideas capable of crossing political borders. As Elbæk explains:

Apparently, we did something that makes sense for a lot of people. Instead of being tied to an ideology, we are tied to values. This means that people who are former members of socialist parties and people who used to be members of liberal [parties] suddenly unite because the values tie them together. It's not a specific history or a particular understanding of system or class – it's the values. (The Alternative 2016a, n.p.)

The pursuit of a non-ideological position is far from novel in politics (Freedden 2006). However, as several post-structuralist writers have shown, it is a quest bound to fail. For instance, Laclau (1997, 304) argues that ideologies are nothing but discourses structured around signifiers that have been emptied of meaning in an attempt to represent what he calls 'the absent fullness of the community'. The notion of ideology is thus synonymous with the notion of discourse to the extent that a dominant ideology is the same as a hegemonic discourse. The point is that the critique of ideology *as such* depends on the possibility of finding a place external to ideology, which would be the same as trying to find an extra-discursive point of observation – and that is not possible. Hence, value-based politics cannot be seen as a non-ideological type of politics, but as an ideology that pretends to be something else. In fact, as Žižek (1989, 2) notes with a reference to Althusser: 'the idea of the possible end of ideology is an ideological idea *par excellence*'. Crucially, however, the practical implications of invoking values rather than ideologies are very different. Not least because, as Eagleton (2007) observes, ideologies are most effective when invisible. As we shall see, the explicit rejection of ideology not only allows The Alternative to mobilize support from across the political spectrum, it also installs a certain type of self-management in the individual 'Alternativist' (see Husted in press).

Today, The Alternative holds 10 of the 179 seats in the Danish parliament. This makes it the sixth largest party in Denmark and the third largest party in the center-left opposition. In terms of memberships, however, The Alternative is one of the biggest parties in Denmark, only surpassed by the Social Democrats, Venstre, and Danish People's Party (Danish Parliament 2018). Structurally, The Alternative is modelled on the Social Liberal Party (Elbæk's former party), with a political leadership (the MPs) and a central board as the two main executive bodies. However, unlike the Social Liberals, The Alternative's policies are developed bottom-up through Political Laboratories, in which

anyone (also non-members) is allowed to participate. This highly inclusive process naturally helps The Alternative maintain a universal appeal, but once the policies reach the executive bodies, they are frequently modified and rewritten to fit the logic of the parliamentary system. This modification creates a decoupling between the ordinary members and the political leadership that occasionally threatens to tear the party apart (Husted and Plesner 2017). In this paper, I will argue that what keeps The Alternative from fracturing is a sophisticated combination of vision values and humanity values. However, before we get thus far, we need to consider the literature on organizational values.

Organizational values: A short review

Organizational values have played an important role in some of the most canonical texts within organization and management studies. For instance, Barnard (1938) spoke of the ‘moral factor’ as an important yardstick for any responsible executive, and Selznick (1957) stressed the need for organizations to incorporate institutional values into their social structure as a way of attaining legitimacy. Often understood as ‘yardsticks or criteria for the operation of an organization’ (Walsh et al. 1981, 137), organizational values have figured in research on a wide range of organizational phenomena (Agle and Caldwell 1999). While the lion’s share of these studies seem to focus on the relationship between organizational values and organizational structure (e.g., Hage and Dewar 1973; Connor and Becker 1975; Greenwood and Hinings 1988; Hinings et al. 1996; Perkmann and Spicer 2014), others have investigated the link between organizational values and strategic change (Carlisle and Baden-Fuller 2004), output performance (Jurkiewiicz and Giacalone 2004), enrollment management (Kraatz et al. 2010), social control (O’Reilly and Chatman 1996), issues response (Bansal 2003), and much more.

One particularly interesting area of research, at least for this paper, concerns the relationship between organizational values and organizational commitment. However, despite the apparent relevance for sociological studies of organizations, the intersection of values and commitment has primarily been investigated by scholars working within the field of organizational psychology. For instance, an early study by Dubin et al. (1975) found that workers who have job-oriented ‘central life values’ are more inclined to develop strong organizational commitment than workers whose life values are oriented elsewhere. Kidron (1978) confirmed this finding and added that organizations that are based on ‘protestant ethics’ are more likely to foster morally committed members. Later, O’Reilly et al. (1991) argued that moral commitment and job satisfaction is often driven by values rather than more

instrumental concerns like wage and job security. The common thread in these works and *plenty* of similar studies is that so-called person-organization ‘value congruence’ (Liedtka 1989) is of utmost importance to organizational commitment. In other words, the more an organization is perceived as displaying the same values as an individual member, the more committed to the organization that member is likely to be (see also Amos and Weathington 2008; Boxx et al. 1991; Cable and Edwards 2004; Posner 1992).

The notion of person-organization value-congruence provides us with an interesting perspective on what commitment actually is, beyond the simple explanation that it is a way of accounting for people’s willingness to maintain organizational membership. As several scholars have shown, organizational commitment is essentially about identification (Meyer and Herscovitch 2001), in the sense that commitment is predicated on ‘an individual’s identification with and involvement in a particular organization’ (Mowday et al. 1979, 226). This means that there is an element of social control embedded in the notion of commitment, as the process of identification ties individuals to a certain mode of being (Kanter 1973; Kunda 1992; O’Reilly and Chatman 1991). In the words of Salancik (1977: 62): ‘commitment is a strikingly powerful and subtle way of coopting the individual to the point of view of the organization’ (see also Weiner 1982). Such statements challenge the traditional way of thinking about commitment in politics, namely in terms of political representation running unidirectionally from represented to representative (Disch 2011 calls this the ‘bedrock norm’ of democratic theory). Hence, focusing on commitment in a political party allows us to see why values are central to the process of identification, but it also alerts us to the fact that ‘representation is a two-way process’ (Laclau 2005: 158) that – like commitment – ‘restricts freedom of action’ (Oxford English Dictionary 1969, quoted in Meyer and Herscovitch 2001, 302).

Vision values and humanity values

More recent studies have confirmed the tight link between values, commitment, and control. One particularly interesting example is Finegan’s (2000) study of the relationship between values and commitment at a large petrochemical company. Through a survey-based analysis, Finegan investigates four kinds of value clusters and how these clusters relate to organizational commitment. The study shows that highly committed employees generally prefer values such as courtesy and cooperation, which belong to the cluster called ‘humanity’, and values such as creativity and initiative, which belong to the cluster called ‘vision’. More specifically, values belonging to the

humanity and the vision clusters are closely connected to two types of commitment, namely affective and normative commitment. While the former designates a type of commitment driven by a *desire* to remain part of the organization, the latter designates an *obligation* to stay with the organization (Meyer and Allen 1991). This finding is particularly interesting, not only because – as we shall see – the notions of humanity values and vision values fit nicely with The Alternative’s values, but also because the connection between the values and affective/normative commitment can help us make sense of the role that organizational values play in a political context.

The importance of the focus on commitment becomes evident if we recall this paper’s main research interest, which is to explore how organizational values help political parties sustain support from members otherwise expected to feel marginalized by the process of particularization (i.e., the emergence of dominant ideas). If we reconsider this interest in light of the above, it becomes clear that The Alternative’s effort to sustain political support by maintaining a universal appeal is invariably linked to the question of commitment. In fact, one could even argue that the previously mentioned ‘problem of particularization’ is essentially a problem of commitment (see also Husted 2017). However, while Finegan’s study, and studies confirming her findings (e.g., Abbott et al. 2005), provide us with valuable insights into *why* individuals commit to an organization, we still lack informed accounts of *how* values influence organizational life in relation to questions of commitment. This is the theoretical gap that this paper sets out to cover.

In order to analyze The Alternative’s use of organizational values, I take inspiration from Bourne and Jenkins’ (2013) dynamic framework, which delineates four different types of values: *espoused* (collective values sanctioned by management), *attributed* (collective values ascribed by ordinary members), *shared* (the aggregation of individual values), and *aspirational* (values that individuals believe should represent the organization in the future). However, instead of investigating all four value-forms, I limit my inquiry to espoused and attributed values only. The reason for doing so is that shared and attributed values operate at an individual level, which gives them an essentialist bend, in the sense that they are concerned with intrinsic beliefs and intentions. As such, the study of shared and aspirational values is a job for (socio-) psychologists rather than social theorists (ibid.). Espoused and attributed values, on the other hand, operate at the collective level, which means that they are thoroughly embedded in historical circumstances, power relations, and group dynamics (d’Andrade 2008). Another reason for choosing to focus on the ‘collective’ rather than the ‘individual’ level is

that the former represents the articulated values – that is, those who are explicitly invoked – while the latter represents the implicit values that underlie cognitive structures (Bourne and Jenkins, 2013).

The usefulness of this framework consists in the dual focus on espoused and attributed values, which allows the analysis to venture beyond those kinds of value statements found on websites and in annual reports. By highlighting the equal importance of attributed values, the framework incorporates a sensitivity towards those values that ordinary members (rather than just managers) use as guidelines for appropriate behavior within the organization. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of the framework directs the analytical focus not only at the different value-forms but also at the relationship between these forms. As we shall see, this focus proves particularly relevant for the forthcoming analysis. Here, it is the *interplay* between espoused and attributed that allows The Alternative to cope with the problem of particularization.

Before moving on to the method section, a few words should be said about the conceptual difference between the notion of ‘values’ and the notion of ‘culture’, as these concepts are frequently confused (Hofstede 1998). Drawing on the work of Geertz (1973) and Kunda (1986), I understand culture to be broadly synonymous with ideology and discourse, in the sense that all three concepts represent systems of meaning for understanding the social world. From this perspective, ideologies (or cultures or discourses) are seen as collective schemas that ‘provide concepts and images that render meaningful otherwise incomprehensible social situations’ (ibid, 56). In my understanding, values are examples of such concepts and images. Hence, whereas cultures may be understood as enigmatic and often unspoken ‘webs of significance’ (Geertz 1973, 5), values can be seen as ‘nodal points’ used to partially fix the meaning of these webs (see Smircich 1995). In other words, organizational values represent the articulated center of a given culture.

Methods

Empirically, the paper is based on a total of 34 semi-structured interviews, approximately 200 hours of participant observation, and more than 1,000 pages of written material. While all three data sources have been important in terms of arriving at the paper’s conclusions, the interviews and the observations have proven particularly valuable and will thus be used most extensively in the forthcoming analysis. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were all conducted and coded by the author himself. The respondents were mostly recruited through the method of

‘snowballing’, where the researcher allows one respondent to guide him/her to the next (Ekman 2015). A handful of respondents were, however, recruited through the method of ‘purposeful sampling’, where the researcher selects so-called ‘information-rich cases’ (Patton 1990, 169). The latter type of respondents are people who, prior to the launch of The Alternative, were active in developing and authoring the official value statement and thus knew something about the motivation for engaging with value-based politics. Although the focus of the interviews varied accordingly, all respondents were asked about their perception of The Alternative’s values, and how they related to the values on a daily basis.

The observations, which constitute the second primary data source, took place from June 2014 to November 2015 during both public and non-public events. While I kept a low profile during most of these events (especially the non-public ones), I participated actively in others. The reason for doing so was to get a first-hand experience of value-based politics and to engage actively with the ‘implicit meanings’ (Lichterman 1998, 402) that members of The Alternative use to make sense of their daily life. Contrary to some ethnographers, I did not conduct the fieldwork with the hope of arriving at a true understanding of reality ‘out there’ but with the ambition of experiencing how values influence life within The Alternative. As such, the rationale guiding this part of the fieldwork was one of immersion and sensitivity rather than revelation and disclosure (Schatz 2009).

Participant observation has previously proven fruitful when studying political organizations. Besides allowing researchers access to the implicit meanings that exist within activist circles, participant observation often improves the interpretation of additional data, precisely because the researcher is acquainted with the local language and practices of the organization (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). However, as argued by McCurdy and Uldam (2013), when conducting participant observation in political organizations, it is particularly important to remain reflexive about one’s own position in the field. In order to maintain a critical distance, I assumed the role of an ‘overt outsider’ (ibid, 48). This meant that I never became a member of The Alternative and that I only rarely voiced my personal opinion about the party’s policies, but that I was always open about my research. The outsider role also meant that I commenced the observations before I knew what to look for. In fact, I knew very little about The Alternative, let alone the use of organizational values, prior to my engagement with the field. Hence, rather than arriving at the research site with a number of preconceived hypotheses and preliminary conclusions, I allowed the data to lead my analytic gaze from the outset.

Accordingly, the analytical work began as the observations unfolded. Intrigued by the claim to be non-ideological and value-based, I quickly developed an interest in the role of organizational values within The Alternative. This led me to look for moments where references to the values had a visible impact on the practices of party members. I analyzed the data by moving back and forth between different data sources in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the role that values play, but the observations often constituted the analytical starting point. For instance, the decision to categorize some values as ‘vision values’ and others as ‘humanity values’ was first and foremost guided by observations. Having observed at various events the explicit articulation of values, I revisited already conducted interviews and compared accounts given by the respondents with my ethnographic notes. Only then did I decide how to categorize the values. This means that my categorization does not necessarily correspond to the way other researchers have grouped similar values. For example, as explained below, humor could easily be conceived as a humanity value (e.g., Ghosh & Shejwal 2006), but the way humor is articulated within The Alternative suggests that it belongs to the vision category. As such, the categorization should *not* be read as an attempt to delineate the essential characteristics of the respective values but as a way of distinguishing between two separate modes of behavior that seem to guide members of the party.

In what follows, I analyze The Alternative’s version of value-based politics with the aim of providing new insights about the relationship between values and commitment. I thus consider The Alternative an ‘extreme/deviant case’ (Flyvbjerg 2006), in the sense that it provides more information about the use of organizational values than traditional cases of value-driven organizations. In particular, it allows me to generate new insights about the political dimensions of organizational values, since such dynamics are naturally accentuated within a political organization (e.g., Moufahim et al. 2015; Reedy et al. 2016; Sutherland et al. 2014). What makes the study of a political organization relevant to research on values and commitment more generally is that the members’ willingness to stay with the organization is almost exclusively driven by normative and/or affective motives, rather than by more instrumental concerns like job opportunities or membership benefits (Wagner 2016). In business organizations, members usually have strong economic incentives to stay ‘on board’ and ‘in line’, which may shroud the dynamics of normative/affective commitment in a veil of conflicting interests. In political organizations – especially those charging membership fees – these dynamics are much more visible, as the exit-barriers in these cases are relatively low (see Whiteley 2011). Studying a

political party instead of a business organization thus provides us with a clearer picture of how the relationship between values and normative/affective commitment works in practice. In the conclusion, I will highlight what researchers interested in business organizations can learn from the present study.

The forthcoming analysis is divided into three sections. Beginning with a speech made by The Alternative's political spokesperson, the first section introduces the party's version of value-based politics in general. The second and third sections explore the party's vision values and humanity values, respectively, which then allows me to summarize the overall argument and provide reflections on the implications for studies of organizational values. Each part of the analysis is commenced by a vignette that briefly presents a short story from my fieldwork within The Alternative.

Analysis: Value-based politics in practice

There is a tradition in Danish politics that, on the opening day of parliament (first Tuesday in October), the prime minister delivers a speech on the current state of affairs. A few days later, representatives from all political parties will comment on the prime minister's speech and present their own visions for the coming year. Usually, the representatives use this occasion to fiercely criticize their political opponents and highlight the irresponsible nature of their policies. However, during the opening debate in 2015, The Alternative chose a different strategy. The Alternative's opening speech, delivered by the party's political spokesperson, was divided into two parts. In the first part of the speech, the spokesperson presented The Alternative's visions and ideas. Amongst other things, he talked about the vision of a sustainable society and the need to raise Denmark's financial contribution to developing countries. In the second part of the speech, he did something thoroughly unexpected. Instead of emphasizing the differences between The Alternative and other political parties, as a way of harnessing support through negative campaigning, the spokesperson used this part of the speech to highlight various points of agreement across all nine parties in parliament. In fact, he went through each party, one at a time, while promoting consensus instead of conflict. 'We really want to listen to all of you', he said in conclusion, 'because we fundamentally believe that more people know more' (The Alternative 2015a).

When asked about what kind of values that guide The Alternative as an organization, most respondents interviewed for this study quickly echoed the party's six espoused values: *courage*, *generosity*, *transparency*, *humility*, *humor*, and *empathy*. Several respondents even managed to repeat the short description that follows each of the six values (The Alternative 2013b). Having done so, the respondents would often add values that they thought were missing in the party's official value statement. Some would talk about 'equality' as something that runs through all of The Alternative's activities. Others would mention words like 'truth' or even 'love'. However, the most frequently attributed values were, without comparison, *curiosity* and *trust*. Whereas the notion of curiosity was often framed as a missing core value, trust regularly surfaced as a meta-value that somehow constitutes the bedrock of The Alternative:

There's a value that I always miss and that's curiosity. I always mention it first when people ask me what our values are. (Respondent #21)

It's an extremely trust-based culture, but I think that's implied in the values. You can't have these values without trust, otherwise the math doesn't add up. (Respondent #28)

Tallying espoused and attributed values, we thus reach a total of eight values that constitute the epicenter of The Alternative's organizational ideology. As already mentioned, within the field of organizational psychology, values that promote creativity and openness to change are often labeled 'vision factor' values (Finegan 2000; Abott et al. 2005). These are values that encourage ideation and personal initiative based on the freedom to think and act independently (Schwarz 1994). On the other hand, values that promote courtesy and cooperation are frequently referred to as 'humanity factor' values (Finegan 2000; Abott et al. 2005). These are values that encourage a benevolent approach to other people, which means that those who share these values are inclined to cancel or disregard differences that usually separate people such as race, religion, or political convictions. In short, humanity factor values tend to foster what Schwartz (2007) calls 'moral inclusiveness'. In what follows, I will argue that the values *courage*, *curiosity*, and *humor* belong to the vision category, whereas the values *empathy*, *humility*, *generosity*, and *trust* belong to the humanity category. As such, The Alternative's organizational ideology can be said to consist of a combination of precisely these two types of values.

This was exemplified by The Alternative's political spokesperson, Rasmus Nordqvist, in the parliamentary speech referred to above. Nordqvist's speech is interesting in several ways. First, at the rhetorical level, the speech broke with the established tone of debate in parliament. Instead of employing a condescending attitude towards political opponents by highlighting deficiencies, it focused solely on the positive facets of their policies. Within The Alternative, this strategy of debate is known as 'talking up' rather than 'talking down'. Secondly, at the political level, the speech served to tear down political frontiers and promote a 'transversal politics' (Iglesias 2015, 18) that crosses political boundaries by encouraging consensus rather than conflict. In relation to this paper, however, the most interesting aspect of Nordqvist's speech is that it neatly reflects the combination of vision values and humanity values while illustrating the role that these values play within The Alternative. The first part of the speech, in which Nordqvist detailed The Alternative's own policies, illustrated the role of the vision values, which is to promote ideation, progress, and initiative. The second part of the speech, in which he accommodated the other parties' policies, illustrated the role of the humanity values, which is to encourage moral inclusiveness and discourage marginalizing behavior. Below, I will empirically investigate each of the two types of values and how they structure life within The Alternative.

I shall begin by considering the role of the vision values and then proceed to the humanity values. Before doing so, however, it should be noted that the value *transparency* has been excluded from the analysis, because it does not immediately relate to the argument conveyed here. Though transparency has previously been associated with vision values such as curiosity and openness to change (e.g., Van der Wal et al. 2008), it would require a lengthy argument to do so here. Accordingly, I will limit my study to only examining seven of the eight values.

Vision values: Courage, curiosity, and humor

On a sunny Wednesday morning in June 2014, I found myself in a small village hall in a small town on the northern tip of the island of Bornholm. Throughout the morning, people had arrived from all corners of Denmark to participate in the second part of The Alternative's first annual meeting. While this part of the meeting concerned The Alternative's legal statutes, the first part, held two weeks earlier in the city of Aarhus, concerned the party's political program. Upon my arrival, I immediately sensed that the Aarhus meeting had been a discouraging and somewhat tiresome experience. As one person said: 'Believe me, it was a thoroughly terrible day'. According to several participants, the

meeting had dragged out for hours on end because of a seemingly never-ending list of proposed amendments, submitted by participants wanting to push the political program in different directions. With this experience looming in the back of everyone's mind, the second part of the annual meeting commenced. However, before launching into the official agenda, a board member took the stage and asked everyone (myself included) to pick one of the six espoused values and reflect on how we intended to bring that particular value to life during the meeting. Having done so, we were then asked to share these reflections with our neighbor. I was quickly paired with an elderly man, and I told him that I had chosen courage, because I thought that contemporary politics needed some bravery and determination on the part of politicians and voters alike. The elderly man smiled sympathetically, then paused and said: 'I have chosen humor, because without humor we're never gonna get anywhere' (Observation 2014a).

The Alternative's six core values are espoused in multiple ways. For instance, like in the incident described above, they almost always figure during meetings, workshops, and public events. Similarly, at the end of board meetings, board members often spend some time contemplating which values characterized the meeting and how some of the less represented values might be better represented at forthcoming meetings (e.g., Observation 2014b). A third way in which the core values are espoused is through merchandise. At public events such as televised speeches or demonstrations, leading members of The Alternative are often seen wearing t-shirts or jumpers with one of the six core values printed on them. Particularly Uffe Elbæk, the party's founder and leader, has made it his trademark to wear such shirts, which often provides him with an opportunity to highlight the importance of value-based politics. Furthermore, through the party's official webshop, members of The Alternative are able to purchase these shirts alongside other merchandise that likewise display the values such as clothing badges and fridge magnets (The Alternative 2016b).

Aside from the short description that follows each of the values, it is not detailed anywhere what the values actually signify. As one respondent noted: 'It might be that we have 8000 different definitions of courage, but at least we reflect on our praxis, and then that can be our point of departure' (Respondent #6). The weakly defined nature of the values and their ability to attract people with remarkably different backgrounds is illustrated by members describing the values – rather than actual policies – as their primary point of attraction. Throughout the interviews conducted for this study, several respondents described how they felt that The Alternative, and the party's values in particular,

represented them in a way they had never experienced before. Some respondents even characterized themselves as being one with the values:

What tie us together are our values. I've never experienced that anywhere else – and I've worked with values *a lot*. But I must say that in all those workplaces I've been, even though values are taken seriously and people are involved in selecting the values, it's always difficult to work according to a set of values. But in The Alternative, we *are* our values. We've all got the values under our skin. That is what's most extraordinary, I think.
(Respondent #13)

One heavily espoused value is *courage*. Members of The Alternative are frequently seen wearing shirts with 'courage' printed on them, and during various events, people will often remind each other to be courageous when debating politics. Courage also figures prominently in the party's manifesto, where it is explicitly stated that the 'The Alternative *is* courage' (The Alternative 2013d, italics added). Furthermore, in a recently published Facebook video, Uffe Elbæk proclaims that 2017 should be 'the year of courage'. In a remarkable attempt to lead the way, the video is recorded in one of the most terrifying rides in the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen. Elevated some 60 meters above the ground, Elbæk, who allegedly suffers from acrophobia, explains:

I believe we need to be much more courageous in general, as citizens and as a society. We should be courageous when we face our problems, and we should be courageous in terms of our curiosity towards each other; courageous in relation to creativity; courageous in terms of stating what we really believe in. (The Alternative 2016c)

According to Elbæk, courage is thus a matter of believing in oneself, being explicit about one's preferences, and facing the problems that one encounters. Particularly the notion of 'facing problems' or 'looking problems in the eye' is a recurrent theme that appears in several of The Alternative's texts, and it is often used to highlight the pressing need for action in relation to climate change in particular. In a newspaper article published in connection with the Facebook video, Elbæk elaborates on the need to be 'fucking courageous'. The article begins with a reference to Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous quote about fearing fear itself, which allows Elbæk to invoke a dichotomy between courage and fear. Throughout the article, this distinction is continuously repeated, especially in relation to the issue of terrorism. While fear is associated with passivity and retreat, courage is linked to initiative

and progress. More importantly, however, courage is associated with the practice of realizing oneself instead of being subdued by those who terrorize:

I feel like giving a damn about terror. I feel like giving a damn about those idiots who spoil it for everyone else. I feel like giving a damn about all that and all those who tear things down instead building them up. I feel like we should give each other the opportunity to realize the best version of ourselves instead of denigrating others. And the best version of me is when I'm courageous. (The Alternative 2016d)

Even though Elbæk and other official representatives often speak of courage in more general terms, ordinary members of The Alternative are quick to translate the value into practice. For instance, one respondent explained how he used courage as a value to remind himself to overcome his fears in a variety of situations. In particular, when hosting workshops for The Alternative, he regularly plays the guitar and sings songs to create a nice atmosphere. But playing the guitar often makes him nervous to the point where he will consider not doing it. Upon remembering to be courageous, however, he always overcomes. As he puts it: 'Damnit, we've got a value called courage!' (Respondent #4). In this sense, courage connotes self-confidence and willpower, which my own line of reasoning during the annual meeting at Bornholm also testifies to. But as Elbæk's video presentation shows, courage is likewise associated with curiosity, collaboration, and creativity.

This brings us to the second vision value, namely *curiosity*. Unlike courage, curiosity is an attributed value that does not figure explicitly in the official value statement. Nonetheless, it appears in several other texts such as the founding document, the manifesto, and in the political program, where an entire section is dedicated to policy proposals concerning 'education and life-long curiosity' (The Alternative 2014, 34). Furthermore, curiosity is incorporated into the party's so-called 'debate principles', which are six almost Habermasian rules of engagement that are meant to guide members of The Alternative when debating politics internally as well as with political opponents. One principle reads: 'We will emphasize the core set of values that guide our arguments', while another proclaims: 'We will be curious about each and every person with whom we are debating' (The Alternative 2013e). Understood in this way, the notion of curiosity is associated with open-mindedness and inclusivity. Accordingly, one might argue that curiosity is best understood as a humanity value that promotes courtesy and cooperation, rather than a vision value that encourages ideation and initiative. However, at least within The Alternative, the notion of curiosity is not only associated with keeping

an open mind and attending to other people's views, but also with the notion of progress. As one respondent argued:

This [curiosity] is what moves us forward. It's only by being curious about how things can be done differently that we progress. So perhaps it's more like a founding principle. It doesn't have to be an official value. (Respondent #21)

The understanding of curiosity as something that allows people to progress is perhaps best captured by the very first line in the party's manifesto, which simply states: 'There is always an alternative' (The Alternative 2013d). Aside from the obvious reference to Margaret Thatcher's influential TINA doctrine, the statement is frequently used to remind members of The Alternative to continuously explore alternatives to the current state of affairs and to take initiative in realizing these alternatives. For instance, during meetings and workshops, the statement is regularly displayed on posters and incorporated into speeches. In this context, as well as in the quote above, curiosity is conceived as the fuel that sparks initiative and encourages people to pursue their own ideas. This is furthermore illustrated by an unwritten rule within The Alternative that one should 'take initiative instead of asking for permission' (Observation 2014b). As expressed by a central figure within the party:

Well, there is free play (...). Everyone's free to do as they please, also in terms of projects. For instance, in Northern Jutland [a part of Denmark], they're suddenly working on a webshop. And they're free to do that. (Respondent #8)

Today, the webshop has been realized and is now an integral part of the party's online presence, which testifies to the importance of personal initiative within The Alternative. As previously mentioned, through the webshop, members are able to purchase a selection of merchandise, including various items that display the six espoused values. One very popular value, not only in terms of merchandise but also more broadly speaking, is humor. Like curiosity, humor could easily have been categorized as a humanity value, but as several official accounts illustrate, humor is more often connected to notions of creativity and initiative. In the official value statement, for instance, humor is framed as the main driver of creativity and good solutions:

Without humour there can be no creativity. Without creativity there can be no good ideas.
Without good ideas there can be no creative power. Without creative power there can be
no results. (The Alternative 2013b)

As such, all three vision values are in some way connected to notions of creativity, ideation, initiative, and progress. The value of humor is particularly telling in this regard. As illustrated by my own experience during the annual meeting at Bornholm, humor promotes a different kind of progress than courage. At the meeting, I chose to focus on courage because I believed in the need for determination and willpower, while my neighbor (the elderly man) preferred humor as a means of progression. Of course, one can only speculate about incentives and motivations, but in hindsight, it struck me that the elderly man's propensity for humor might have been motivated by his experience in Aarhus where conflicting interests prolonged the meeting and created an atmosphere that many members associated with 'old politics' – that is, an atmosphere characterized by confrontation, combativeness, and dogmatism. Hence, the difference between courage and humor, at least within The Alternative, seems to be that the latter promotes an approach to politics that is more concerned with creating a multiplicity of new ideas rather than clinging dogmatically to one set of ideas.

This can be observed, not only in the case of The Alternative, but also in many other contemporary organizations. For instance, in his well-known study of a high-tech company, Kunda (1992) argues that the notion of 'fun' constitutes an important part of the company's corporate culture, where virtues of entrepreneurship and creativity are highly valued. Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011) extend this argumentation by associating the notion of organizational fun with a culture of differentiation and individualization, which ultimately prevents employees from engaging in collective modes of resistance. The authors refer to this type of management as 'neo-normative control'. The common theme in these works is that humor is associated with an increasing demand for authenticity and uniqueness instead of the kind of cultural conformity traditionally associated with normative control (Etzioni 1961). In the case of The Alternative, the 'obligation' to be humorous tends to promote an approach to politics where creativity is prioritized. Instead of conforming to other people's views, humor encourages members to be unique and to allow themselves the freedom to explore their own ideas. As one respondent put it: 'When we have a value called humor, I dare more' (Respondent #4).

Summing up, The Alternative's three vision values seem to serve relatively similar purposes. While *courage* stimulates self-confidence and willpower, *curiosity* promotes open-mindedness and personal initiative, and *humor* encourages creativity and uniqueness. The common denominators that connect all three vision values are the notions of ideation and progress based on the power of personal initiative and creative thinking (e.g., 'take initiative instead of asking for permission'). Through these three values, members of The Alternative are thus encouraged to pursue their own ideas and to take initiative in realizing these. But what happens when mutually opposing ideas emerge within the party? In other words, what happens when antagonistic views collide? These are moments when The Alternative's humanity values set in.

Humanity values: Empathy, humility, generosity, and trust

Right from the start, The Alternative attracted members with remarkably different backgrounds. Some had previously been engaged in leftist parties such as the now-defunct Left Socialists, while others came from more liberal environments. A handful of people even told me that they used to vote for far-right parties, but that they now regarded this as part of a distant past. However, the majority of members had never been engaged in party politics prior to enlisting, which made The Alternative an even motlier crowd. Despite this extreme political diversity, it nonetheless came as a shock for most members when a man called Klaus Riskær Pedersen applied for membership. Pedersen was known to one part of the general public as a skillful entrepreneur. The other part considered him a criminal. Convicted several times of fraud both in Denmark and abroad, Pedersen had served jail time for a number of years. Adding to this, he had previously been a member of the European Parliament for the biggest center-right party in Denmark. In many ways, Pedersen thus seemed to represent all that The Alternative was not: corporate greed and old politics. Nonetheless, due to the inclusive nature of the party, Pedersen was initially accepted. Immediately after enlisting, however, Pedersen began talking to the press. Here, he proclaimed that he believed in The Alternative, but that some of the worst 'fantasies' and 'illusions' had to be rooted out. His job, Pedersen argued, was to get things 'back on track'. After a few days of media frenzy, the central board decided to expel Pedersen from the party on the grounds that he had 'worked against The Alternative's main idea and basic values' (The Alternative, 2015b). This was the first time someone had been expelled from The Alternative. Later, an ordinary member told me her private opinion on the matter: 'He was probably courageous and had a sense of humor, but he was definitely not humble, he was not transparent, he was not generous, and he wasn't particularly empathetic either' (Respondent #12).

Whereas the general role of The Alternative's vision values is to promote ideation and initiative, the role of the humanity values is to ensure that members remain morally inclusive towards people with different views. The most influential value in this regard seems to be *empathy*. In fact, the political leadership regularly frames The Alternative as a response to a 'crisis of empathy' in contemporary society, which allegedly has made people incapable of listening to one another without prejudice (e.g., The Alternative 2015c). In the official value statement, empathy is described as the act of 'putting yourself in other people's shoes' and 'creating win-win situations for everyone' (The Alternative 2013b). Being empathetic within The Alternative is thus a matter of being courteous and paying attention to other people's ideas instead of just trying to win an argument or to push one's own agenda. As one respondent explained:

Empathy can make us listen to each other (...) it can make us listen to each other on a deeper level. We're supposed to listen to one another where the other's coming from... or, I can't really remember how we put it exactly, but, you know, we need to pay attention to where the others are coming from. (Respondent #4)

The interesting thing about this quote is that it not only illustrates how members of The Alternative translate empathy into action, but that it also reveals the espoused nature of the six core values. The last part of the quote is particularly telling: 'We're supposed to listen to one another', followed by, 'I can't really remember how we put it exactly'. Such utterances tie in with much literature on the use of values in organizations, especially the literature that attempts to answer the question: where do values come from? Here, the most common answer seems to be that values (at least the espoused ones) are those parts of an organizational ideology that are displayed to the public through, for instance, websites or mission statements (Jaakson 2010). As such, espoused values are those values that leaders find useful, which means that they often end up constituting informal and indirect tools of organizational control (Schein 1985). As Hofstede (1998, 483) puts it: 'Leaders' values become followers' practice'. Thus, a value such as empathy, while probably shared by most members, likewise serves as a guiding principle that, in the absence of direct supervision or explicit rules, encourages ordinary members to manage themselves according to the idea of listening to one another:

I'm full of empathy. I'm always the one who helps others, always the one who makes sure people are all right. You know, it's not that I don't do stupid things, but I'm just like... All those values, they are just so much me. (Respondent #3)

Two other humanity values – *generosity* and *humility* – serve similar purposes. Not only do they inspire people to listen to one another, they likewise discourage members of The Alternative from engaging in marginalizing behavior. At least, it becomes extremely difficult to marginalize other people's ideas while maintaining a generous and humble stance. As one respondent explained, with a reference to what is commonly known within The Alternative as 'a new political culture', which is a term constructed as the negative image of the established political culture:

Part of what I really like about the new political culture is that we express ourselves in positive terms – that we don't spend our time attacking each other. It's actually something that I've practiced for many years, but I've become even better at it since I joined The Alternative. Because sometimes, when I happen to post [at Facebook] something just a little bit critical of something, someone will say: "Is that really new political culture?" And I'm actually happy to be reminded in that way... I'm used to being the most progressive in that area, but it's nice not to be the only one anymore. (Respondent #4)

As the quote above implies, the values of empathy, humility, and generosity are generally translated into an obligation to be morally inclusive towards others and to abstain from unproductive criticism ('attacking each other'). Crucially, this also goes for people with opposing views. An illustrative example of how this kind of self-management works in practice was observed at a spontaneously organized Political Laboratory in June 2015, held at a bridge in central Copenhagen. Here, the workshop facilitator approached passerby with a simple question: 'What is the most important political question for you?' When people answered, the facilitator would always nod his head approvingly and write their answer on a whiteboard. When I asked him how he managed to be so approving of everyone's answers, he showed me the back of his hand where he had written the words 'yes, and...' with a black marker. This, he explained, was to remind himself not to engage in the usual 'yes, but...' type of argumentation, which, according to him, was a far less productive way of deliberating (Observation 2015a). When asked about why antagonistic views do not clash within The Alternative, another respondent elaborated on the link between the humanity values and the focus on inclusiveness in the following way:

I don't think there's a need for it [clashing]. (...) Maybe things are carried by some of those beautiful values about generosity and humility (...) Some of these values intentionally dismantle all those traditional mechanisms of fear. Or, how should I put it, they dismantle the traditional impulse to manifest oneself and to puff one's feathers. (Respondent #30)

As illustrated by the quote above, a byproduct of the focus on moral inclusiveness seems to be a dismounting of personal egos (puffing feathers), which is a translation of the values likewise espoused by the political leadership (e.g., The Alternative 2015d). This brings us back to the story of Klaus Riskær Pedersen that opened this section of the analysis. While Pedersen seemed to share most of the vision values – he was courageous and had a sense humor, as one respondent noted – he never exhibited any of the humanity values. His worst offence, however, was his attempt to marginalize people with different views than his own. At least, this seems to be the case when judging from the official press release. Here, it is described how the expulsion of Pedersen was based on a series of utterances, in which he articulates a desire to 'root out the worst fantasies and illusions', to get 'things back on track', and to ensure that the project does not 'capsize' and fall down 'the abyss'. Furthermore, Pedersen specifically targeted the political leadership, arguing that they were not capable of delivering on important areas such as financial and monetary policy, which also contributed to his expulsion (The Alternative 2015b). Such utterances are simply not tolerated within The Alternative. In fact, marginalization seems to go directly against the very idea of the party. To say, 'I am alternative, you are not', is the antithesis of what it means to be alternative within The Alternative. As one respondent explained:

This is where I think we really have a job to do internally. We announce these six core values and claim that they permeate everything we say and do. It's probably kind of impossible, but if you do that, then it's really important to walk the talk internally (...) This means that we have to figure out how we talk to and about each other, and in that sense, I certainly do not believe that marginalizing anyone is appropriate. (Respondent #15)

This leads us to the fourth and final humanity value, namely trust. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of trust to The Alternative's political project. Just like curiosity, trust is an attributed value that does not appear in the official value statement, but it nonetheless figures prominently in several other core texts. For instance, in the political program, it is stated that The Alternative wants a society

that is ‘built on trust rather than social control’ (The Alternative 2014, 2). Furthermore, leading members frequently frame The Alternative as a response to a ‘crisis of trust’ between citizens and politicians. In fact, The Alternative’s success in the 2015 elections was interpreted by many pundits as a sign of widespread distrust in politicians. Accordingly, when asked about the party’s values, most respondents explicitly mentioned trust as one of the ‘forgotten values’. Unlike the other values, however, trust is often framed as a meta-value that unites all other values within the party (see quote by respondent #28 above). Without trust, so the argument goes, value-based politics is not even possible. As one respondent explained:

Well, it’s the only thing that binds us together. You cannot launch a project like this without unconditional trust in each other. It’s the belief that trust is what makes us better. Trust in each other (...). I’ve never been a place where there’s this much trust. (Respondent #11)

Trust is easily characterized as a humanity value, but not in the same way as the other values belonging to that category. This is because trust involves another level of vulnerability. While values like empathy and generosity are about ‘giving’ something to others – most notably recognition and attention – trust is about risking something. This was illustrated at a meeting in The Alternative’s executive body, where the participants were tasked with voting on the quality of a policy proposal about reducing the average workweek to 30 hours. During the preliminary discussion, however, it became clear that the proposal divided the participants in a way few proposals had done before, which created an atmosphere of tension and conflict in the room. To resolve this conflict, the vote was postponed on the grounds that it would be better to *trust* that the MPs would eventually make the right decision on whether to adopt the proposal as official policy (Observation 2015b). This incident is far from unique. In fact, it is quite telling of members’ general willingness to prioritize trust over control. One respondent explained it like this:

There’ve been times where I’ve opposed something, and where someone told me: “You need to show some trust”. And then I just realized: God, yes, you guys want this just as much as me, and I should probably trust you guys a little bit more, right. (Respondent #4)

As the quote above shows, trust not only encourages members to be less controlling and to embrace the vulnerability that follows from trusting relationships (see Rousseau et al. 1998), it also works to curb internal criticism. This adds another layer to the role played by values like generosity and

humility, which is to dismantle personal egos and encourage inclusiveness. Trust not only invites members to abstain from ‘attacking’ others (Respondent #4) and ‘puffing feathers’ (Respondent #30), it also questions the legitimacy of criticism as such. Obviously, this does not mean that criticism is absent within The Alternative (far from it), but it means that criticism can always be refuted by appealing to the importance of trust. In fact, trust is frequently invoked as a means of shutting down debates that threaten to expose the irreconcilable nature of the party’s membership base. This was exemplified by a member who posted the following in an attempt to restore harmony to one of The Alternative’s Facebook pages in the wake of a heated discussion:

Trust has to be the most central value in our new political culture: we must trust that all Alternativists spend their time, engagement, and heart’s blood working for the green transition (...) The old parties are plagued by machinations, gossip, and distrust. So much so that some parties have collapsed (...) We have to do better than that. The new political culture in The Alternative has to involve a fight against the culture of distrust. If you bestow trust on others, they grow. If you distrust fellow party members, you create dissension, you obstruct productive collaboration, you drain energy and spawn hopelessness. So, every time you feel distrustful, remember that the Alternativist next to you is working for the same vital and optimistic cause. Collaboration, energy, and engagement works much better on trust. (Observation 2017)

Summing up, like the vision values, The Alternative’s humanity values serve relatively similar purposes. While *empathy* encourages members to listen to one another and to create win-win situations for everyone, *generosity* and *humility* are generally translated into an obligation to remain morally inclusive towards different or even antagonistic views. Finally, as a meta-value, *trust* is about curbing criticism and minimizing control of other members, thus accepting vulnerability as a basic condition within the party. The most important role of the humanity values, however, seems to be to discourage members from engaging in marginalizing behavior. In fact, the act of marginalization seems to run counter to the very purpose of The Alternative, which, according to the manifesto, is to represent all those ‘who can feel that something new is starting to replace something old’ (The Alternative 2013d). Hence, the combination of vision values and humanity values is of utmost importance to The Alternative as a political organization. While the party’s vision values encourage members to pursue their own ideas and to take initiative in realizing these, the humanity values

discourage people from ‘puffing their feathers’ by stressing the importance of moral inclusiveness. This combination was neatly summarized by one respondent:

I usually say: “Everyone’s right but only partially”. Explore the two percent of truth that is in what you’re saying instead of rejecting things consistently (...). It’s far too definite to say: “This is how it should be!” (Respondent #5)

By encouraging people to explore their own ‘two percent of truth’ rather than ‘rejecting things consistently’, The Alternative allows antagonistic views to co-exist within the party. Since ‘everyone’s right but only partially’, The Alternative avoids losing support from members who would otherwise feel marginalized by the emergence of dominant ideas. Ultimately, this is what allows an irreconcilable crowd to endure despite fundamental differences.

[INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE]

Conclusion

The Alternative’s organizational values play different roles within the party. While the vision values encourage members to pursue their own ideas and to take the initiative in realizing these, the humanity values help prevent antagonistic ideas from clashing, which could potentially lead to marginalization and a loss of support. As a meta-value, trust serves the additional purpose of curbing internal criticism. Ultimately, the interplay between vision values and humanity values allows The Alternative to go through a process of particularization while simultaneously maintaining a universal appeal. In other words, the particularization that follows from the emergence of dominant ideas rarely results in marginalization of members, because it has no contaminating effect on the party’s universal appeal. Of course, this may not be the only explanation for how The Alternative manages to cope with ‘the problem of particularization’ (Husted and Hansen 2017), but it is a significant one if nothing else.

At least four contributions follow from this. First, the paper contributes to understanding the relationship between values and commitment. Whereas studies in organizational psychology have

shown that the combination of vision and humanity values constitutes a forceful driver of both affective and normative commitment, few studies have explored how this unfolds in practice. Through a qualitative investigation of value-based politics within The Alternative, the paper showed that the party is able to sustain commitment because (1) members are persistently encouraged to pursue their own ideas despite the emergence of dominant ideas, (2) because dominant ideas are never allowed to marginalize subordinate ideas, and (3) because trust acts as a buffer that curbs internal criticism. In this sense, it becomes clear that control and commitment are two sides of the same coin, which is an argument that indeed has been made before (e.g., Ouchi 1979; Salancik 1977; Weiner 1982), but rarely illustrated empirically (e.g., Kunda 1992; Fleming and Spicer 2004), and certainly not within political organizations (see Kanter 1972 for an important exception).

Second, by employing both interviews and observations, the paper contributes to expanding the field of inquiry for the study of organizational values, which is dominated by quantitative, survey-based studies (Stavru 2013). The strength of this methodological approach is connected to the above: by exploring the use of values qualitatively instead of quantitatively, the researcher is able to show the practical role that values play in the daily life of organizational members. In other words, instead of asking *if* or *why* values are important to organizations, the researcher is able to ask *how* values influence organizational life in practice. And this, naturally, leads to new and – hopefully – inspiring findings that may help move the study of organizational values forward (Agle and Caldwell 1999).

Third, by studying a political organization rather than a business organization, the relationship between values and commitment is more clearly exposed. This is the case because, in political organizations, members generally have fewer incentives to stay ‘on board’ and ‘in line’ than in business organizations, where wages and employment benefits often prevent members from leaving. Particularly in organizations that – like parties – charge membership fees, the barriers to exit are incredibly low (Whiteley 2011). One reason why so many members stay with The Alternative, despite its move towards particularization, is that the values keep the scope of representation wide-open. Liberals and socialists alike continue to see their personal preferences reflected in the party’s overall project, because the vision values encourages them to do so, and because the humanity values prevent ideological closure.

Finally, the present study likewise contributes to the literature on ‘alternative organization’, where balancing the tension between individual autonomy and collective solidarity is seen as a difficult but necessary path to success (Cheney et al. 2014; Dahlman 2017; Esper et al. 2017; Parker et al. 2014a; Parker and Parker 2017; Reedy et al. 2016; Zanoni et al. 2017). As Parker et al. (2014b, 37) notes: ‘How can we be both true to ourselves, and at the same time orient ourselves to the collective? How can we value freedom, but then give it up to the group?’ According to the authors, the answer is that alternative organizations must find ways of allowing members to be ‘different together’ – that is, to dissolve the otherwise clear distinction between ‘the demand for freedom and the embracing of a collectivity’ (ibid: 38). In a sense, this is precisely the role that values play within The Alternative. On the one hand, values like courage, humor, and curiosity incite members to realize their own individual autonomy instead being subdued by dominant ideas and powerful interests. On the other hand, values like empathy, humility, generosity, and trust remind members not to compromise other people’s autonomy. For organizations that look for unity in difference, this is the organizational value of organizational values.

In conclusion, a few words should be said about the role of organizational values in general. Throughout much of the literature, organizational values are seen as either very abstract (or universal) ideas that cannot be realized in practice or as very tangible (or particular) guidelines for organizational behavior.¹ The case of The Alternative illustrates that, at least within political organizations, they can be both. What matters is the context in which values are articulated (see Waistell 2007); or, to borrow a phrase from Staten (1986), what matters is the ‘constitutive outside’. Whenever values are counterpoised to the notion of ideology, they appear as universal ideas capable of crossing political boundaries and, hence, capable of mobilizing support from across the political spectrum. However, once they are brought to life within a specific organizational setting, they acquire a much more particular meaning, which helps install a certain kind of self-management in the individual member. This point is worth keeping in mind for researchers studying values more generally. The meaning of most organizational values is not fixed, but open to interpretation, contestation, and manipulation. This is arguable why so many organizations prefer to manage by values instead of by instructions or objectives (Dolan and Garcia 2001). Hence, rather than trying to distill the ‘substantive content of human values’ by viewing them as immutable beliefs capable of ‘transcending specific situations’

¹ For instance, see Argandoña’s (2003) distinction between ‘ultimate’ and ‘instrumental’ values or Rokeach’s (1973) distinction between ‘terminal’ and ‘instrumental’ values.

(Schwartz 1994, 20), it seems more productive to study how values influence organizational life in practice. At least, this may be one way to move this important field of research forward.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers and the editor for their very constructive feedback. Furthermore, thanks to the participants in the 2017 EGOS subtheme on *Trust-based organizing* for their valuable comments. Finally, thanks to Ursula Plesner, Susanne Ekman, Peter Fleming, Peter Dahler-Larsen, and Lene Hansen for useful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

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