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Using Qualitative Inquiries to Analyse the Dynamism of Factionalism

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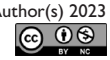

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Rebecca Kerr

Abstract

When exploring assessments of factionalism, there is the tendency to rely on quantitative assessments based upon an institutionalised and consciously organised group. However, to rely solely on the assessment of factionalism as such undermines and dismisses much of the intra-party dialogue which facilitates, encourages or could undermine party cohesion and unity. Quantitative analysis can rely on quite static understandings of the faction; however, this research understands factionalism as dynamic and changeable dependent on a range of internal and external variables. The fluidity of the faction is demonstrated in the ways in which the faction can adopt or drop ideological positions dependent on the appetite of intra-party groups and the electorate. Its dynamism is also reflected through the different typologies of factions that exist. The dynamic forms that the faction take are exemplified through the case study analysis of the Labour Party within the UK. The Labour Party also provides an interesting analysis in understanding the wide range of external factors that factions must negotiate. This includes, but is not limited to, the changing ways in which we understand party allegiance, identity and voting patterns. Factionalism is ultimately an interpersonal event, and to accurately capture this detail, qualitative assessments are necessary.

Keywords

factionalism, qualitative research, Labour Party, party politics

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Introduction

Many different forms of factions and ways of understanding factions and factionalism exist, but there is little consensus on one method of assessment, particularly in qualitative or comparative research. The role of factionalism in a political party is far-reaching. The way factions can negotiate, debate and concede directly impacts a government's ability to dictate issue attention (Bevan and Greene, 2018), the relative strength of the party and the

University College London, London, UK

Corresponding author:
Rebecca Kerr, University College London, London WC1E 6BT, UK.
Email: rebecca.kerr@ucl.ac.uk

ability of the party to consistently maintain a successful coalition of members and voters. However, 'Despite the relevance of this topic, the research on intraparty politics has remained underdeveloped for many years, mainly because assessing the preferences of politicians and party factions is a difficult task' (Ceron, 2017: 7). This is taken in tandem with connotations of factionalism purely as a negative phenomenon (Belloni and Beller, 1976, 1978; Poteete, 2012), largely leading to an empirical gap, both in the contemporary development of factionalism as a substantive issue and in its empirical evaluations.

This research seeks to shed light on the qualitative empirical evaluation of factionalism, due to the following reasons:

1. Empirical quantitative evaluations of factionalism alone can depend on quite static understandings of the faction and factionalism.
2. Factionalism is an interpersonal event, and thus, to overlook and to not assess factionalism as such does not adequately inform our evaluations.
3. The electoral environment can shape the internal processes of decision-making within a party, and how factions react to their external environment shapes the internal.

This informs a qualitative methodological approach to assessing factionalism. This article will make reference to the Labour Party in the UK as an exemplar case study. The notion of partisanship is strong within the party and is based on the idea of viewing others (particularly the Conservative party) as class enemies (Cyr, 1978). This provides a strong sense of cohesion but does not alleviate the party from splits. Traditionally, the Labour Party has dominated on the left of the political spectrum in British politics. This means that the party is made up of a range of political ideologies, ranging from Trotskyites, Marxists, the soft left through to the 'right' of the party, oftentimes making consensus difficult to achieve. The Labour Party has a wealth of previous factional assessments (e.g. Cowley, 2005; Jobson and Wickham-Jones, 2010; Minkin, 2014) which demonstrate the party's suitability for qualitative assessment. Factions have long-dominated Labour's concerns as they have sought to purge the party of extremists, such as Kinnock's position on Militant,[1] enact a compromisable uniting factional figurehead in Michael Foot (Kogan and Kogan, 1982) and utilise institutional features to minimise the opposition faction's influence on party agenda such as that accused of Blair (Tonge, 2010), Corbyn (Payne et al., 2019) and more recently of Starmer (Stewart et al., 2020). The broad church that is Labour always seems to be fighting with the congregation on the other side of the pew. While this can lead to measurable factionalism such as the number of those on the 'left' sitting on Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC), or within the frontbenches of parliament, Labour is a prime case of qualitative factionalism assessment through the nuanced rationale of decision-making processes dependent on the electoral environment, the state of factionalism within the party, the relative strength of the 'left' or 'right' of the party and what actually constitutes the 'left' and 'right' at one given point in time.

Moreover, social democracy shows a recovery around Europe on the back of the rather bleak outlook recently propositioned (Abou-Chadi and Gingrich, 2021; Benedetto et al., 2020). This bleak outlook has been generally put down to changing class cleavages (Inglehart, 1977), the weakening working-class vote (Evans and Tilley, 2017), leading to electoral trade-offs (Przeworski and Sprague, 1986), a supply of alternative niche parties (Meguid, 2005) and a mainstreaming of all parties towards a social democratic consensus (Dahrendorf, 1979). However, now with talk of a 'social-democratic decade' in reach

(Misik, 2022), the outlook for European social democracy may not be so bleak, albeit perhaps a little 'patchy' (Krouwel and Martin, 2022) and 'fragmented' (Abou-Chadi, 2022). Naturally, this leads to divergent viewpoints on the appeal and paths forward for the parties. Scholars have reflected on the policies that parties can take in order to appeal to the electorate (Polacko, 2022) but have failed to reflect on the internal mechanisms (both formal and informal) which could allow or prohibit these approaches. The Labour Party is no exception here as they grapple with the post-Covid, post-2019 landscape and one clear path through (Jones, 2022). If we are to understand the party's approach to party identity, qualitative assessments of factionalism are central to this discussion.

This article begins in reviewing the different forms that factions and factionalism can take. How we understand the faction is important in informing our empirical assessment of the faction. A review of scholarship demonstrates that the faction has been understood as a consciously organised entity within a political party, which is oftentimes institutionalised. This has enabled quantitative assessments of factionalism. However, this research argues that the faction should be understood in its dynamic format, which leads to qualitative assessments of factionalism as the most appropriate method of empirical investigation. A static interpretation of the faction is not always appropriate, demonstrated through the changing ideological underpinnings of the faction and the typologies of factions that exist within a party at one point in time. Furthermore, factionalism is an interpersonal event and, thus, should be analysed as such. This research paper will then discuss the external environment and the impact of external variables on internal dialogues. Finally, there will be a discussion on the limits of qualitative research on factionalism within political parties and ways we can mitigate against these limitations.

Factions Are Dynamic and Our Evaluations Should Not Depend on Static Understandings

Much of previous scholarship has engaged with the faction in a quantitative empirical format. This is based upon assessments of the faction as an organised and institutionalised entity within a political party. First, this article engages with leading factional scholars in understanding the basis of what a faction or factionalism is.

Looking at the seminal work of Richard Rose on factionalism, he identifies three different types of intra-party groupings, which are considered as factions, tendencies and non-aligned partisans. His primary position is that factions exist of formally consciously organised groups, and it is this very organisation which allows the faction to be considered as a 'form of discipline' which exists within the party. Rose (1974) then advanced the formal nature of the faction to be defined as a group of individuals based on representatives in parliament. Consciously organised groups are often understood as parliamentary groups and lend themselves to quantitative analysis. This method of factional assessment has been successful at demonstrating factional positions towards policy (Bernauer and Bräuninger, 2009), voting patterns (Cowley and Stuart, 2003), processes of party leader selections and change (Heppell et al., 2022), parliamentary speeches and motions (Ceron and Greene, 2019), analysis on documents released by groups (Ceron, 2019), coalition formations (Debus and Bräuninger, 2009) and textual analysis via social media (Ceron, 2017), to name a few. This method of analysis provides an interesting investigation into factionalism and can help the researcher understand intra-party democratic procedures and the strength of a faction within the party.

However, there are some limitations which can ignore many of the informal processes of factionalism. This research argues that it is preferable to assess the faction not only through a consciously organised format, but it should be examined using a holistic iterative process that takes into account its changeable nature. Examinations of factionalism can be undermined by a focus on the parliamentary grouping alone as a site of assessment, as factionalism permeates throughout the whole party. It may also be dependent on other unmeasured factors such as a desire to uphold party or factional unity in parliament and in outputs. This limitation is evident, again, through the work of Richard Rose. Rose (1974) argues that non-partisan alignments can be utilised by factions within the party to be mobilised to shift the balance between the intra-party factions. He explains that while factions are consciously organised groups, tendencies exist, and these tendencies can become factions. Therefore, to dismiss tendencies when we review factional behaviour within a party is to overlook a potentially large intra-party group, which can become increasingly energised and central to the party's factional negotiations. Despite tendencies not being formally organised within the party, they do exist as a stable set of attitudes and as a group consciousness. These sets of consciousness can become energised and mobilised at any point in time and can have a substantial impact on the political party and its direction. Rose (1974) too refers to the example of the Labour Party and offers an interpretation of the 'left' as highly schismatic. However, in doing so, he offers the use of extra-parliamentary groups to provide an institutionalised focus for activity.

Qualitative assessments of factionalism enable the researcher to understand in greater detail the state of factionalism within a political party at one point in time, which does not only rely upon the faction as an organised and institutionalised entity. Quantitative evaluations of factionalism alone can depend on quite static understandings of the faction; however, factionalism should be viewed in its dynamic form in that it is changeable and can alter depending on both internal and external factors. This engages with Richard Rose's idea that tendencies can become factions at any one point in time while eliminating the formal structures placed on their assessments. This idea has been further advanced by faction scholars Belloni and Beller (1978) and Boucek (2009).

While Belloni and Beller (1978) also offer different methods of operationalising factions such as viewing them as veto groups and modelling conflicts as strategic games, they ultimately argue that attention should be redirected away from the organisational forms of factions towards faction dynamics. This is evident in their definition of the faction as 'any relatively organised group that exists within the context of some other group and which (as a political faction) competes with rivals for power advantages within the larger group of which it is a part' (Belloni and Beller, 1978: 419). This also alludes to the vertical presence of the faction, that is, in leadership, within the party as an indication of its dominance. This is notable as other scholars such as Panebianco (1988: 74) discuss the faction as '. . . a highly cohesive group that cuts the party vertically'. Belloni and Beller (1978) go on to discuss the faction's ability to change their nature and thus their classification.

This is a position also taken by Boucek (2009) who argues that there should be a focus on factionalism as a process rather than as organisational units. It is a multifaceted phenomenon that should be conceptualised in unrestrictive terms. Her approach asserts that an analytical approach to empirically assessing factionalism is not useful as this implies a static understanding of the faction, to which the faction is not. This simply serves to suggest that factionalism cannot be observed as a formalised process of identifications but must be kept dynamic as factions are likely to change or abide by contrasting

structures, evident within the Labour Party alone. This is because the factions within a party need consistent re-evaluation to best reflect the pragmatisms, ideology and organisational capacity that underscore their existence. This can be a complex and messy process best explained with thick descriptions (Crewe, 2018). Furthermore, Boucek (2009: 468) also offers a useful definition of factionalism and the faction whereby it is 'the partitioning of a political party (or other organisation and group) into subunits which are more or less institutionalised and who engage in collective action in order to achieve their members' particular objectives'. Boucek's definition allows a greater deal of flexibility and iterative reflection on our assessment of the faction.

However, there may be some confusion on the phrase 'more or less institutionalised', particularly as groups may form outside of an institutionalised process and it may be difficult to assess what constitutes institutionalisation in this circumstance. Institutionalisation may imply regular meetings, group membership, campaigning, online groups or otherwise, beyond the typically understood institutionalisation through parliamentary groupings. Wager (2021) also demonstrates the use of Whatsapp groups in a bid to gain consensus. In addition, institutionalisation may not be necessary to exert an influence on party politics. It may also dismiss important and emerging factional trends within the party that can dictate key party positions, particularly within a political party with relatively high levels of intra-party democratic procedures.

The researcher may also learn more about tendencies which are becoming increasingly energised and hence important to the future of the party. To focus exclusively on those factions that are 'more or less institutionalised' can dismiss many tendencies broadly. For example, there may be lower levels of institutionalisation within grassroots party members but there may be a relatively high level of consciousness among those members who pursue common goals. Their ability to exert pressure on the political party, the party's direction and policy orientations is a legitimate source of factional analysis. Wager et al. (2022) argue that in contrast to May's Law (1973), the Labour Party now has a divide whereby the elected parliamentarians are more socially liberal in contrast to (some of) their target voters and their grassroots. This can lead to a situation where parliamentarians may not be truly reflective of the larger dialogue occurring within the Labour Party. This again demonstrates the necessity of going beyond formal organised structures within the Labour Party to understand the competing arguments on party position. Qualitative assessment should not only rely on voting records or parliamentary speeches but can include the voices of those who are oftentimes excluded from research. This may include ordinary grassroots members of the party but can also include those members who, due to factionalism and their belonging to the non-dominant faction, may be unrepresented within party dialogue.

Therefore, this research defines the faction as a dynamic common group consciousness with similar objectives, which energises dependent on internal and/or external stimuli. The relative successful nature of the faction can be observed vertically within a party. This understanding of factionalism there facilitates a more holistic analysis of the faction.

While a definition of factionalism can be provided rooted in dynamism, further qualitative inquiries may clarify at what point factionalism becomes so degenerative within parties that it can lead to major party splits, purges, and so on. Boucek (2009) offers three faces of factionalism, being the co-operative, competitive and degenerative faces. While co-operative factionalism can lead to more successful instances of internal democracy and representation, competitive factionalism can also result in more

positive factional outcomes as factions compete for their vision of the party. Degenerative forms of factionalism can undermine and limit the party's ability to function, but it is difficult to discern at what point factionalism may transform from a competitive form to one that is degenerative. This may prove particularly true in the example of the Labour Party as identification of the party can act as glue (Crewe, 2021), especially with consistencies around core party goals such as public ownership (Pike, 2019), in spite of other policy/ideological disagreements. Arguably, the external environment in the presence of Labour within a two-party political system can limit the range of defections as Labour, irrespective of whether the dominant faction is divergent to that of the individual's own ideological identification, is likely to remain the most viable option for voting preference and group objectives. Previous studies point to the rate of voting abstention as a tactic used by voters disengaged with the politics of the Labour Party during Blair's neoliberal era as his pursuits were deemed too far removed from the core concerns of the traditional Labour voter (Evans and Tilley, 2017). Qualitative inquiries into the interpersonal nature of defections and abstentions and at what points these occur would be beneficial in further studies.

The Changing Ideological Pendulum

Factions in social democratic parties tend to adopt a binary nature between the parties' left and right (Brittan, 1968; Cyr, 1978; Seyd, 1986) bred into the distinctive ideological position between the parties' pragmatic wing and one more ideologically motivated (Panebianco, 1988). Typically, there is a separation between those concerned with ideological purity and those concerned with comprising doctrine to gain electoral victories. However, dynamism also extends into the bifactional relationship usually present within social democratic parties. While factionalism may be assessed between the 'right' and 'left' of the party, taking the Labour Party as our example case study, we can see that there is a disparity in how the party has previously understood and used the terms of left and right wing. The understanding of what constitutes left and right is dependent on a range of factors, which includes the strength of opposing factions at one point in time, the electoral environment and the ideological strength of factions. In addition, what constitutes left or right within the party can alter depending on how policies are perceived by the political party, their parliamentarians, their members and voters at large. This is an issue also addressed by Seyd (1986) who claims that our understanding as to what constitutes 'left' or 'right' is changeable, thus further undermining a static interpretation of the faction.

Hine (1982) discusses how factions 'display an unapologetic disregard for the niceties of policy consistency'. This impacts factional identification considering 'politicians' positions on many issues seem to bear less and less relation to where they might appear on a spectrum diagram' (Brittan, 1968: 26). While at times Labour's left has been confined to the 'hard left', other times the left may adopt comparatively moderate positions dependent on the time and issue. Our understanding of what is considered left or right can change over time and therefore also impacts support for specific policies (Seyd, 1986). For example, while both Clement Attlee and Tony Blair sought to appeal to the middle class, Labour 'moderates' of 1945–1951 can be considered to the left of the policies pursued by Corbyn, who is certainly considered left today (Brown, 2015). Moreover, this is also the case for parliamentary groupings. The Tribune Group is a parliamentary Labour

party grouping. Although having origins on the left of the party, the group has come to foster more moderate leaning politicians, including former leader Neil Kinnock.

Politicians may have alternative rationale for policy consistency and voting behaviour beyond that of an ideological or parliamentary group, which again can disrupt our ideological positionality of a politician or faction. Contemporarily, Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party has thrown up many factional problems around identity, ideology and issues of high salience. The party walked a tightrope in trying to appeal to voters, but also in trying to preserve factional unity. The party suffered a substantial defeat at the 2019 general election, their worst since 1935. Labour was marred by defections, accusations of anti-Semitism, a less-than-lukewarm preference for Jeremy Corbyn and an unclear position on Brexit (Goes, 2020). Despite Labour's 'left' having historical reservations to the UK's membership of the European Union (EU), Jeremy Corbyn, a figure of the left, who has been vocal on his dissatisfaction with the EU in the past, remained neutral on the issue. This ideological frustration was apparent among both those on the Leave and the Remain divide. Upon Corbyn's resignation from leadership, Starmer quickly stood on a platform of unity and the need to end internal warring (Savage, 2020). However, he too adopts some of the ideological policy inconsistencies of his predecessor.

Starmer has had a coloured path to leadership, at times adopting positions rather 'left' in nature, however facing critics that he is only pretending to be left-wing. His constructive ambiguity (Fielding, 2021) facilitates an intersectional use of factional identities to appeal to many within and outside the party broadly. Certainly, Starmer will need to make clear his policy position and therefore his ideological underpinnings particularly if he wishes to contest for premiership (Beckett, 2020). More recently, Starmer has come under fire for dismissing those on the 'left' from the party, most notable in the suspension of Jeremy Corbyn (Stewart et al., 2020). While there are arguments that the right of the party was ostracised during the Corbyn era (Cowburn and Kerr, 2023), there are similar arguments present when we look to present-day Labour Party under Starmer (Diver, 2022), despite running a leadership campaign on disallowing factionalism to break up the party (Savage, 2020). However, there does appear to be signs of a more definitive understanding of what platform Starmer will stand on moving forward. There is evidence that Starmer's Labour may in fact be more 'radical' compared to that of Corbyn's. Policy positions include fiscal discipline and a substantial investment into action for climate change this decade. Labour has promised £28 billion per year for climate action, a substantially larger proportion than that of Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell's previous pledge. In addition to making a pledge towards climate change, and arguably to appeal to those voters who are more socially liberal, Labour is also proposing a new industrial strategy to focus on sectors such as retail and transport (Jacobs, 2023). Labour is also set to put forward plans for greater devolution and constitutional reforms to further devolve power away from Westminster under the Gordon Brown commission (Sargeant et al., 2022). Therefore, despite a rather conservative persona, or at least the perception of a conservative persona, it appears that the widely considered 'right' of the party under Keir Starmer is putting forward rather traditionally left-leaning agendas. However, even still, only one in three (34%) of the UK population think that Labour is ready for government (YouGov, 2023). This inconsistency of ideological positionality demonstrates the necessity of engaging with the faction in its dynamic form, as it can change and adapt to its environment as needs be.

Typologies of Factions

Moreover, the inconsistencies in how we understand ideology within a political party is also complicated by the variations in the forms of factionalism. Janda (1983, 1980)[2] demonstrates that factions can be interlinked, such as that of overlap between ideological and leadership factions. For example, we note that Starmerism exists as a leadership faction and the ideological grounds on which it sits on are still unclear to most. In contrast, Corbynism is associated with left-wing Labour and Blairism with the right, where there is an intersection of ideological and leadership factions. Leadership factions are just one type of factional typologies. Others such as ideational factions (see Watts and Bale, 2019) or factions of interest (Boucek, 2009) also exist. Where Hine (1982) develops an empirical assessment of factions through organisation, coverage and ideology/policy, he too admits that there is overlap. Therefore, 'a given party membership can belong to different factions for different purposes' (Zariski, 1960: 36). The intersectionality of factions and divergent rationale for supporting Starmer from competing factions is also an interesting point of analysis as likely, the rationale and contextual factors will be quite different. This can undermine the validity of empirically assessing factionalism within a party solely through voting patterns. The right may have voted for Starmer given that he was the most acceptable candidate believed to bring the party electoral success (Gilbert, 2020). Strategic voting may also take place to disallow other candidates whose factional identifications are too divergent from their own to gain leadership.

Therefore, again we see the need for qualitative assessments when reviewing factionalism. The variations in the forms of factionalism can be confusing and should not be dependent on the empirical assessment of voting patterns or parliamentary outputs alone. Where we see the different types of typologies the factions can take and the intersectionality of these typologies of factionalism, we also see this further complicated by the previous discussion on changing assumptions of ideological underpinnings. Taking the example of Starmer alone, we engaged with ideational factions which can be composed of those who may perceive Starmer as a conservative persona and those who also perceive Starmer as a member of the left of the Labour Party. We also see evidence of factions of interest coming to play here and this is evident in the voting patterns of those within the party in his leadership selection. Similar to the previous discussion where we see that tendencies can become factions, different typologies of factions may also become energised dependent on the range of internal and external variables at that point in time. There is also the possibility that an individual may belong to more than one faction depending on the typology of faction they refer to.

Factionalism Is an Interpersonal Event

Party strategy choices are made by internal decisions, which are a result of intra-party dialogue (Harmel and Janda, 1994). This research upholds that factionalism itself is an interpersonal event and so is best studied through a qualitative approach. The rationale as to why a decision is taken is equally important as the decision itself. If we assess only on the decision, this undermines our understanding of the route to the decision. Labour has many decisions to make, particularly as they exist in an environment where factionalism is particularly energised through electoral competition, electoral decline, changing class cleavages and issues of high salience. Factionalism is a multi-faceted event, which is reliant on the context variables that provide simulation for high periods of factionalism

within a party. This aligns with qualitative research which 'takes into account that viewpoints and practices in the field are different because of the different subjective perspectives and social backgrounds related to them' (Flick, 2006: 16). Furthermore, when reviewing factionalism within any political party, it is best to become immersed within the dialogue of the party, which qualitative research facilitates. A core strength of the qualitative approach allows the researcher access to the internal workings of the party. Within Labour, this is beneficial in understanding how terms are used, for example, how 'left' and 'right' within the party has altered overtime. Through qualitative assessment, there is a greater ability for the researcher to understand how these terms are used in the period of analysis. Upholding the language of the party is preferable as it best reflects the internal understanding of intra-party divisions. This again complements our understanding of the faction as a dynamic form in that it is changeable and this change can be demonstrated through the use of intra-party dialogue which helps to shape it.

The External Environment

The external environment is also very important in shaping intra-party dialogue and should be taken into account when considering the intra-party tensions which may arise. Although an expansive engagement is beyond the scope of this article, there are a number of external factors to review when qualitatively assessing factionalism within a political party. This is particularly true when reviewing the periods when factionalism is heightened within a party. Harmel and Tan (2003) demonstrate the intersectionality of internal party change with external variables. These external variables include but are not limited to the diverse range of party members, voters, alternative parties, divisive issues of high salience and changing social cleavages and voting patterns. These external variables all compete for Labour's strategic reorientation at a point in time but often leads to conflict over the image or even the identity of the party, particularly as 'British parties are built around a compelling consensus and sense of identity' (Boucek, 2002: 475). It is common knowledge that parties must adjust their position to remain viable; however, seldom considered is the factional adjustments that accompany this. Adopting a qualitative holistic assessment of factionalism enables the researcher to better understand the factional state of each intra-party group in relation to their period of analysis.

Demonstrated above was the role of issues of high salience in factionalism within a political party. This was evidenced through Brexit in the Labour party as a divisive issue which cuts across factions within the party. While Jeremy Corbyn sought to address Brexit through neutrality, his neutrality on the matter was particularly a source of frustration for the 65% of 2015 Labour voters who voted to Remain (Moore, 2016) *and* for the significant minority who voted to leave. Furthermore, this exemplified the emerging social cleavages in British society that Labour now contends with, leading to a tricky juxtaposition between Corbyn's brand of politics, of left-wing progressivism (Whiteley et al., 2019) and the 'traditional' Labour voter. Of course, this is not the first time Labour has had to contend with changing voter composition and the party has previously adjusted to its electoral environment. This is complicated by perceptions of class in society today, what this means and how we understand and assess class membership. Social structural variables still have the largest explanatory power on party choice in the most advanced industrial societies (Knutsen, 2018) however, *alongside* value orientations, which are a significant explanatory power of voting intentions. There is a challenge within Labour and other social democratic parties for the 'soul of the left' (Berman, 2011: 45).

Changing class cleavages and voting patterns also impacts other parties within the electoral system and their internal responses to external change. Arguably, this is evident within the Conservative party who too are adjusting to their electoral environment (Meyer, 2022). Electoral competition is important when considering a party response, particularly when traditional Labour voters have been haemorrhaging towards the right. However, the decision to respond to competing parties rests along multiple factors, including policy adjustments, party appeal and whether Labour should directly compete with the Conservatives for voters or try to galvanise those who the Conservatives do not attract. This example alone demonstrates the detail missed when we adopt a quantitative empirical account of factionalism that does not capture the nuance of competing intra-party positions. This is not to say that quantitative assessments cannot do so; however, qualitative research has the ability to retain flexibility and capture the understanding behind, for example, speeches in parliament or voting patterns that may otherwise demonstrate inaccurate representations of what is happening within the party.

Limitations of Qualitative Research

One of the core benefits of qualitative research often places the voice of the unheard to the fore of the research. It enables the researcher to understand the otherwise overlooked experiences of many participants (see Davies et al., 2021). For example, the unheard voices when considering factionalism may be those who are not present throughout the organised and institutionalised forms that factions take. However, this research argues factionalism must be held as a dynamic entity, and therefore, including those participants in the assessments of factionalism beyond that of the institutionalised faction is necessary. Qualitative research is also beneficial in capturing rich data reflections from their participants. Participants who are present at a particular point in time and their memory on event provide a richer data source compared to that of an empirical outcome of an event (Fraser, 2012). Of course, assessing factionalism through qualitative methods alone may also provide some issues.

While there are many benefits to conducting qualitative research, there are some adjustments that the researcher must be aware of. One such is collecting data from the field and from participants. This includes but is not limited to any type of interview, focus groups or even observations; the researcher must take precautions in ensuring the validity of the data being presented to the researcher. Contemporary scholars point to Alice Goffman (2015) in the necessity to check and source the information that is being presented to the researcher. This is also particularly true when we are considering factionalism as a point of analysis. When interviewing a member of a faction, it may be the natural disposition of that individual to present the strengths of their own factional identification. However, the researcher must and should analyse the information that is being presented to them to ensure validity of argument. For example, when interviewing a member of a non-dominant faction, the interviewee may discuss their discomfort at local meetings or the ostracisation of members of their factional identification. However, validating and/or also contextualising this experience is important for the qualitative researcher to ensure that accurate information is collected. Quantitative analysis and findings may also prove beneficial here in corroborating and validating data gained from qualitative methods. For example, if a member of the non-dominant faction speaks of ostracisation within the party, we can observe whether this is also the case within the backbenches of a party or by the candidates who are put forward for election.

Researchers of factionalism may also benefit from being present in more formalised processes such as that of annual party meetings or even constituency meetings. This would allow the researcher to become more immersed within the topic while also providing a form of validity checking on the information that is being collected and developing greater rigour. This is an approach advocated by Emma Crewe who discusses the benefits of ethnographic research to uncover 'the partially hidden processes' (Crewe, 2018: 18) that anthropologists find. When considering factionalism, there may also be additional barriers of access here and Crewe discusses the delicate balance of obtaining trust to appear 'on their side'. The researcher must be aware of impartiality when collecting and analysing data. However, beyond the researcher's own impartiality, their identity may also play a role in the data that are being presented to them by their participants. For instance, participants may be more willing to have a discussion with an individual who they believe have similar ideological underpinnings. Where the interviewer withholds their own political identification, this may inhibit the participant in sharing their total beliefs if they do not feel at ease. This also extends into other aspects of the interviewer's identity such as their age, gender and race. Crewe (2018) also discusses the need to position the researcher and the researcher's identity to the fore. This can provide the researcher with additional sources of analysis on who they themselves are perceived by the participants and the impact this may have on any information obtained or otherwise.

The participant may also be aware that they are representing the political party, and this may also inhibit their ability to provide a total account of their factional persuasion and experiences of factionalism. This is particularly true if the interviewee wishes to save face of the party when the participant is encouraged to have a discussion on any negative forms of factionalism which exist within the political party. Wager (2021) notes the problem whereby politicians interviewed on-the-record may have politically motivated rationale in their construction of narrative shared with the researcher. Of course, there are some precautions that we can take to counteract this. Cowley (2022) discusses the need to stress confidentiality and purpose of the research with the participant. There is an importance in developing a rapport with interviewees, to garner valuable information from participants but also to foster further recruitment and interest within the research project. This is also advocated by Walsh (2012) who discusses the need to engage repeatedly with participants in order to develop a trustful relationship. Cowley (2022) also provides other guides to accessing and developing a rapport with political elites, which include remaining flexible and turning up knowledgeable and prepared – points also emphasised by Harvey (2011: 434–436).

Sample size has always marred qualitative research with questions of robustness and accuracy. This can be negotiated through conducting interviews, for example, with a representative sample of individuals from factions broadly. There needs to be engagement with individuals who are from a range of the political spectrum within a political party and there also needs to be an acknowledgement of the non-ideological factions which may be present within a party at a point in time. For example, while an individual may profess to rather left-leaning ideologies, they may also have competing ideas on the future of the party of which they are active within. This can be exemplified again within the Labour Party, where individuals on the left of the party believe that they should adopt a 'remain' position to attract more voters to the party and to ensure electoral longevity for Labour. This informs a purposive sampling method to obtain individuals from various factions and to ensure representativeness is secured. Cowley (2022) also mentions the need to be realistic in your sample net thrown as response rates can be low. However, as

Goldstein (2002) argues, elite interviewers are at an advantage with nonrespondents as they generally know more about their nonrespondents than other qualitative researchers know about their sample.

As argued, factionalism is dynamic and therefore needs continued engagement to understand the state of factionalism within a party at one point in time. This can make engagement with factionalism a rather tedious process as continued evaluation of the state of factionalism within a party is central to successful qualitative investigation. A reliance on parliamentary groupings is not sufficient to accurately assess factionalism within the party broadly. Qualitative investigations can also make difficult comparative assessments of factionalism. This need for continued engagement with contextual factors and with the tendencies within the party is a time-consuming process. Assessing comparative factionalism is appropriate and can be more readily carried out via quantitative measurements, such as parliamentary groupings on a particular policy matter. Qualitative comparative assessment requires the researcher to engage with the contextual factors in multiple case studies simultaneously to develop a framework of comparison.

Conclusion

This article shows the importance of engaging with different forms of assessments of factionalism. While previous discussions about factionalism primarily centred around quantitative assessments, this research article demonstrates the necessity of engaging with factionalism as a qualitative entity. First, this article discussed ways in which we as scholars can understand the faction. This primarily relied upon quite static understandings of the faction based upon consciously organised institutionalised groups. However, further research demonstrates that the faction can be analysed through several formats and arguably is most appropriately analysed through a dynamic form. This dynamic form requires its own empirical adjustments which arguably exist beyond that of only a quantitative assessment.

The dynamism of the faction has been demonstrated throughout this article via reference to the changing ideological underpinnings of factional identifications. The Labour Party provides an ample example of the dynamic form of factionalism and the ways in which we understand what constitutes left wing and right wing can be in flux. For example, when the party is faced with issues of high salience, this may disrupt ideological pursuits for that of electoral gain or appeasing the median voter. The ways in which we understand particular issues to have salience among the left and/or right of the party can also change depending on the context wherein they exist. This is also evident when we think about typologies of factions. Factions may be understood as ideological groupings with any political party and can be observed through parliamentary groups, which rest at different points along the ideological spectrum. This oftentimes can inform voting patterns and strategic adjustments for the faction. However, where there are alternative motivations and different types of factions, this can further distort our ability to understand ideological positioning. This is exemplified through the case of Starmer where there is an intersectionality between leadership factions, factions of interest and ideological factions.

Qualitative assessments are particularly important when analysing party politics at a given point in time due to the range of external variables that influence party decision. This research draws upon the electoral environment and discusses how it is a key external variable which can influence intra-party dialogue on party strategy. This is particularly

strong when referencing the Labour Party, as the party competes to gain electoral support following their dismal 2019 general election result. The party also exists in an era where there are competing theories on whether a social cleavage realignment process is taking place. This implies that the party needs to coherently and consistently engage with their electoral appeal moving forward, but how factions interact within the party and how they negotiate these decisions are integral parts of this puzzle.

While there are some limitations to performing qualitative analysis of factionalism, the disadvantages of its exclusion outweigh any additional adjustments which need to be made to mitigate against those challenges. To conclude, factionalism in its dynamic format should be assessed via a qualitative method. This is not to undermine or to replace quantitative assessments of factionalism; however, it should be taken into greater consideration when we conduct research on the faction and factionalism moving forward.

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ORCID iD

Rebecca Kerr https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7002-0005

Notes

1. Militant was a Trotskyite group designed to infiltrate the Labour Party. Kinnock proposed transferring the power to deselect MPs from largely left-wing constituency General Committees to ordinary party members. This proposal was opposed by most on the left and a sufficient number of unions to narrowly lose out at the 1984 conference (see Shaw, 1994: 158).
2. Janda (1983: 328) operationalised six variables, namely, legislative cohesion, ideological factionalism, issue factionalism, leadership factionalism, strategic or tactical factional and party purges in a cross-national survey.

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Author Biography

Rebecca Kerr is an Associate Lecturer in the Department of Public Policy / Political Science at University College London. Her research broadly focuses on comparative factionalism, party politics and qualitative research methods.