

Given political parties' crucial importance for modern democracy, for a long time there has been a striking lack of normative political theory on these institutions. Recent works have pointed out that the lack of a systematic understanding of the link between parties and the civil society constitutes thereby a particular pressing issue. This paper aims to contribute to narrowing this gap by incorporating an innovative conception of the civil sphere into a party theory frame that provides both: tools for empirical analysis and a benchmark for normative evaluation. Applying the developed approach within a case study of the shifting German perception of Eastern Europe during *Neue Ostpolitik* in the early 1970s, the paper examines the role of interparty conflict during the restructuration of the country's civil society. Conducting a critical discourse analysis, the paper shows

that parties indeed contributed to a certain extent to a more inclusive civil sphere. However, it also suggests that the party's abilities to do so were limited in a number of ways,

for instance when it comes to expanding civil relations beyond national borders. These insights might constitute a promising alternative starting point for further research, for example on parties' potential contribution to a shared European civil sphere.