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Relationships Between Activist Groups and Political Parties Shaping the Portuguese Climate Movement: Dynamics of Resistance and Collaboration

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Abstract: Aiming to better understand the relationship between youth activism and institutional politics, this article analyzes young climate activists' interactions with political parties and how they shape the dynamics of the School Strike for Climate. Through a multi-sited ethnography in Portugal's two major cities, we examined the participation experiences of young climate strikers from both chapters of the movement, revealing the contingent and complex development of their relationships with party politics, which ultimately influences the dynamics of Portuguese youth climate activism. The ethnographic data uncovered ambivalent and tensional relationship patterns with political parties in the two local groups. While closeness and collaboration with actors linked to institutional politics aimed at strengthening the climate movement's broader political representation, it also prompted resistance, leading to internal conflicts within the movement. Our findings highlight differing political strategies and ideological stands among local groups, as well as tensions and ambivalences in the interactions with political parties. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges of sustaining the School Strike for Climate movement over time and the ways in which activist movements negotiate political affiliations and internal cohesion.

Keywords: School Strike for Climate; collective action; political parties; youth activism; ethnography

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1. Introduction

Young people have been increasingly distancing themselves from formal political institutions and conventional modes of doing politics. This disengagement from traditional politics is part of a broader global phenomenon (e.g., Bowman et al. 2023; Howe 2017; Kwak et al. 2020), observed across Europe (e.g., Kyroglou and Henn 2017; Pickard et al. 2020), including in Portugal (Fernandes-Jesus et al. 2014; Malafaia et al. 2018). Rather than abandoning politics, young people are engaging in more expressive and unconventional forms of political participation, characterized by horizontal decision-making practices and cause-driven actions (e.g., climate, gender, etc.), including protests against established power structures (Amnå and Ekman 2015; Fernandes-Jesus et al. 2020; Kiess and Portos 2023; Malafaia et al. 2024; O'Brien et al. 2018; Pickard 2019a, 2022; Ribeiro et al. 2017). Furthermore, recent research in Portugal highlights that young people's activism tends

to coexist with both formal and informal connections with political parties (Martins and Campos 2024; Silva et al. 2022).

Considering this context, the recent powerful youth climate mobilizations present a unique opportunity to examine the complex and evolving dynamics between social movements and formal political structures. Previous research suggests that while young climate activists may often favor participatory and bottom-up forms of engagement with politics over individual partisan affiliations (Knops and De Vydt 2023; Pickard 2022; Polletta 2022), they also recognize the potential of collaborating with political parties to achieve common goals and influence democratic institutions. However, many protest movements express strong anti-partisan sentiments, which can lead to a rejection of traditional political affiliations. As argued by Gold and Mische (2024), this rejection is not limited to the parties in power but extends to non-parliamentary political parties, indicating a widespread disillusionment with established political structures. Although research on youth climate activism has been expanding (Neas et al. 2022), there is an overall lack of research considering the interactions between the youth climate movement and political institutions, particularly political parties. Given the prominence of youth climate activism worldwide, our article seeks to provide an in-depth examination of these dynamics and their implications for the movement. Through a multi-sited ethnographic study of the School Strike for Climate in Portugal, this article seeks to address the following research questions: (i) How do interactions between climate activism and political parties unfold?; (ii) How does the relationship between climate activists and political parties shape the dynamics of youth climate movements? We focus on activist groups based in Porto and Lisbon, as these are the two largest cities in the country, where climate activism assumes a significant prevalence (Carvalho et al. 2022). By addressing these research questions, we aim to comprehend on-the-ground interactions between climate activists and political parties, shedding light on how these relationships shape the youth climate movement. Ultimately, this article contributes to understanding how social movements collectively negotiate power (Yates 2014; Yates et al. 2024), an essential endeavor for grasping the current and future challenges of youth activism.

2. Youth (Dis)Engagement with Institutional and Party Politics

In recent years, representative democracies worldwide have witnessed a rising distrust towards political institutions, especially among younger generations. The post-2008 economic crisis, marked by strong antipartisan sentiments, has reshaped political landscapes globally and intensified the democratic crisis, especially in Europe (Della Porta 2020; Gold and Mische 2024; Luhtakallio 2012). Since then, party membership has declined significantly, creating a divide between activists and political parties (Lisi and Cancela 2019; Van Haute and Gauja 2015). The discontentment regarding traditional political structures is rooted in perceptions that they are ineffective in addressing people's real-life concerns (Kim 2012; Norris 2011). At the same time, the low voter turnout in elections and declining engagement with political parties among young generations (Wattenberg 2016) have raised concerns among both scholars and political leaders (Bowman et al. 2023; Percy-Smith et al. 2019; Ribeiro et al. 2017; Weiss 2020).

Researchers have explored various aspects of the relationship between youth groups and institutional politics. A recurring argument suggests that low youth engagement stems from a cycle of mutual neglect: as youngsters show less interest in traditional political processes, institutional political actors often fail to reach and engage them effectively (Wattenberg 2016). Condescending attitudes towards youth (Malafaia 2022), their political instrumentalization, and the failure to recognize their political agency further alienate them from political debates (Amnå and Ekman 2015). Malafaia et al. (2018) found that

many young people feel estranged from electoral politics, partly because political parties fail not only to represent their concerns (Oxford Analytica 2024) but to engage them as legitimate agents of change. This has contributed to a decline in party identification among young people. Unlike previous generations, characterized by more steadfast individual party affiliations, today's younger voters tend to prioritize specific concerns over party loyalty (Silva et al. 2022). They are increasingly drawn to causes, such as climate change (Diógenes-Lima et al. 2023), and are willing to shift political allegiances and voting direction if those issues are not adequately addressed (Kiess and Portos 2023).

The emergence of new forms of participation outside formal political institutions is particularly evident in DIO (Do-It-Ourselves) politics (Pickard 2019b, 2022). Many young people prefer to engage in diverse and horizontal arenas, often connected to their lifestyles and identities (Ribeiro and Menezes 2022). New modes of engagement have proven effective in mobilizing youth, either through protests, boycotts, disobedient performances, or digital forms of political expression (Malafaia et al. 2024; O'Brien et al. 2018; Weiss 2020). As Pickard (2022) notes, alternative spaces and modes of engagement provide young people with a sense of belonging and empowerment that they struggle to find in political parties or trade unions. Young people have historically been drawn to social movements advocating for justice and equality (Muxel 2020). However, many perceive the political sphere as an 'adult world' that feels disconnected from their own experiences (Malafaia et al. 2021). The disconnection drives them toward alternative forms of political engagement that resonate more with their identities and concerns. For many, institutional politics appears increasingly out of touch, particularly in addressing critical issues like climate change, social justice, and identity rights (Diógenes-Lima et al. 2023; Loncle-Moriceau and Pickard 2023). Simultaneously, the growing distrust of traditional political structures fuels, in some cases, more radical political expression (Muxel 2020).

Some scholars argue that the transformations in how young people engage with political issues could revitalize traditional politics by challenging entrenched, adult-centric structures (Bowman et al. 2023; Chironi et al. 2024; Mallan and Greenaway 2011; Sloam et al. 2022). At the same time, caution is advised against scholarly euphoria on the transformations in youth forms of participation, as "an overemphasis on positive features of new, exuberant participatory styles [. . .] risks disregarding the importance of involvement with institutional politics" (Malafaia et al. 2021, p. 438), which continues to be an important dimension in sustaining representative democracies.

While many young people are moving away from formal structures of political power, their activism is not entirely disconnected from institutional politics, as they frequently maintain both formal and informal ties with political parties (Marquardt 2020; Martins and Campos 2024). Activists still recognize the value of collaboration between parties and social movements to advance common goals and enhance their influence within democratic institutions (Martins and Campos 2024). Knops and De Vydt (2023) found that despite low trust in political institutions, climate activists believe in representative democracy but critique economic actors, blaming the capitalist system for the climate crisis. In fact, some activists see political institutions as platforms to amplify their voices, gain access to resources and networks, and influence policy-making processes. As Yates et al. (2024) argue, engaging with representative bodies can empower activists to envision and implement meaningful political alternatives, contributing to a more participatory and responsive political landscape. In their turn, political parties have been developing strategies to address declining participation in youth wings, often by recruiting activists as supporters and potential party members to counteract membership losses and mobilize voters (Montigny 2015). Young activists are viewed as valuable assets for campaigns

and initiatives, aiming at rejuvenating the party's image, expanding its support base and appealing to younger demographics.

Despite the limited research on the relationship between climate activists and political parties, existing studies highlight both collaboration and conflict. Hutter et al. (2019) discuss various theoretical approaches in social movement studies regarding movement-party interactions and their inherent unpredictability. Even when alliances are formed, as analyzed in the 'political process approach' (McAdam and Tarrow 2010), political parties may not only bring social movement issues into the parliamentary arena but also opportunistically appropriate their causes. The German case of Fridays for Future (see Marquardt 2020) illustrates how activists engage with parties on climate policy while also facing tensions related to co-optation, as parties adopt movement demands without fully supporting the activists' autonomy (Baer 2021; Blings 2020). Some strategies, such as 'mutually assured autonomy' (Holdo 2019, p. 452), allow parties to advance political agendas while respecting the movements' independence. Yet, these dynamics can be highly fluid.

When examining social movements in Italy and Germany, Della Porta and Rucht (1995) conceptualized movement-party relationships through alliance strategies (e.g., cooperation and competition) and conflict strategies (e.g., confrontation and bargaining), showing how alliances can be precarious throughout the course of movements' dynamics and political struggles. Building on Tarrow's (1994) work on protest cycles, Koopmans (2004) uses the metaphor of *waves* to describe peaks of contention, emphasizing the evolving relationship between social movements and "other contenders for power", which often "display shifts between conflictive and accommodating interactions, radical alterations in the balance of power between groups, and profound realignments of patterns of coalition and opposition among actors" (pp. 22–29), leading either to movements' institutionalization or radicalization. While no single factor determines the end of a wave of contention or the decline of a social movement, a combination of radicalization and institutionalization is key, while the tactical exhaustion cannot be seen as a cause, but rather as a symptom of a movement's decline (Koopmans 2004).

Another critical dimension to consider is factionalism, which occurs when "members begin to develop a distinct collective identity that is at least partially at odds with other members" (Kretschmer 2013, p. 13). Studies in psychology and sociology fields (e.g., Balser 1997; Hart and Van Vugt 2006; Lau and Murnighan 1998) indicate that internal divisions and factions within movements often reflect broader social cleavages. These "social fault lines" can include class and race differences among members or can be triggered by external events, such as shifts in political opportunity structures or tensions over relationships with other organizations and groups (Kretschmer 2013), including political parties, which can become a source of contention within movements. While activist collective identities are often built in opposition to an external 'Other', particularly political institutions, alliances with institutional actors can also serve as important relational arenas where activists negotiate identities and strategies, shaping the formation of political communities (Abizadeh 2005; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Mouffe 2000). It should be noted that people are drawn together not solely by opposition to an 'Other', but also through their shared social identities. Indeed, it is well established in the literature that identification with a group (e.g., activists; women) is a key driver of collective action (Haugestad et al. 2021; van Zomeren et al. 2018). Factionalism within movements can be further intensified by broader ideological divides. In Portugal, for instance, political polarization between the left and right has hindered the growth of social movements that do not align with established parties (Espírito-Santo et al. 2018). However, Koopmans (2004) cautions that what appears to be a movement's decline

may instead be a process of restabilization, with movements adapting to shifting political dynamics rather than fading away.

Together, these perspectives suggest that declines of social movements are far from simple and unidimensional processes but rather are influenced by a range and combination of factors—e.g., shifts in political regimes, changes within party systems, new electoral power configurations, foreign intervention, co-optation, transformation of conflict and alliance structures, internal organizational challenges. Despite these studies, and while young activists have been shown to influence climate governance and policy-making (Zamponi et al. 2022), a significant research gap remains in understanding the relationships between youth climate activists and political parties, and how these interactions shape the dynamics of the youth-led movement. Understanding how these relationships unfold in practice, particularly within the context of youth climate activism, requires examining internal negotiations, power dynamics, decision-making processes, and organizational strategies (Yates 2014). Our article analyzes how these micro-level political processes, both within the movement and in its engagements with political parties, influence the movement's internal cohesion.

3. Context

In the last decade, Portugal has witnessed an expansion of the environment and climate movement, along with the emergence of new local and national groups (Carvalho et al. 2022; Fernandes-Jesus and Gomes 2020). Since 2018, following the rise of the international School Strike for Climate movement, several youth-led groups have been created, granting the Portuguese movement global visibility and political momentum. In 2022, there were approximately 275 climate groups in Portugal, 68 of which focused specifically on climate change and were primarily based in Lisbon and Porto, the country's two largest cities and epicenters of climate activism (Carvalho et al. 2022). The School Climate Strike stood out as one of the most nationally representative youth-led activist movements, employing diverse action repertoires that included digital activism, awareness-raising and training initiatives, artistic and performative actions, protests, and demonstrations (Carvalho et al. 2022). Amid a political context marked by the growing influence of right-wing and far-right parties (Carbonaro 2023), the movement was able to gain political and mediatic visibility (Santos et al. 2023), with a recent example being the coordinated wave of school and university occupations in 2023, demanding an end to fossil fuels and a societal ecological transition (Flor 2023).

While the Portuguese School Strike for Climate emerged during a period when the Socialist Party (center-left party) led the government, the current composition of the 230-member Portuguese parliament includes three parties with the largest representation: the right-wing party (78 seats), the center-left party (78 seats), and the far-right party (50 seats). Since 2024, right-wing parties have led the Portuguese government, while opposition groups, such as left-wing parties, continue to push for progressive social change and economic justice. The political parties discussed in the empirical part of this article belong to the opposition, and their names have been changed for anonymity and confidentiality reasons. In addition to the "Core Party"—a left-wing party advocating for socialist, feminist, and environmental ideologies –, other parliamentary groups that have significantly engaged with the School Strike for Climate in Portugal include the "Bold Party", a progressive left-wing party focused on green policies, and the "Nonconformist Party", a far-left organization formed by a dissident faction of the "Core Party", which advocates for socialism, workers' rights, and environmental justice through grassroots activism and systemic change. At certain points, there were also interactions with the "Orthodox Party", which holds eight parliamentary seats, and advocates for individual freedom, economic

liberalism, and limited government intervention in the economy, emphasizing free-market policies and personal liberties. All political parties that interacted with climate activists throughout the ethnography belong to the government opposition.

As previous research has suggested (Fernandes-Jesus and Gomes 2020; Malafaia and Fernandes-Jesus 2024), interactions between different types of groups often occur in the climate movement. In the context of our research, the School Strike for Climate also significantly engaged with an adult-led group, which we named "Eco-Alliance". One of its founders is publicly known to be a member of the "Core Party".

4. Methodology

Ethnography offers the tools for in-depth analyses of social contexts, which is particularly useful for examining interactions within specific settings, including social movements and political parties (Cunha and Lima 2010; Malafaia et al. 2018; Malafaia 2022). Participant observation, a key ethnographic technique, allows researchers to immerse themselves in communities and to follow and document social dynamics and meaning-making processes (Shah 2017). The ethnographic method has been proved particularly fruitful in providing comprehensive and nuanced observations of internal processes and their effects on how young climate activists build their collective identity (Abajo-Sanchez 2022) and adopt intersectional approaches in their relationships with other movements and groups (Garcia et al. 2025). For instance, Malafaia's (2022) ethnography of the climate movement in Portugal shows how small-scale activist interactions evolve and how politicization processes encompass the reconversion of the collective identity vacuum linked to the climate crisis into practices of collective resistance and confrontation of manifold adultist power structures. This is exemplified by youth-led movements, including the School Strike for Climate, which, despite experiencing a decline in activity during the COVID-19 pandemic, has recently reasserted its presence and attracted renewed public attention, particularly in the capital city (Campos and Martins 2024).

This article is grounded in a multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork (Falzon 2009) conducted with the School Strike for Climate in Porto and Lisbon, from February to October 2023, involving young activists aged 17 to 25. Most participants were university students from middle-class backgrounds, many of whom were involved in other activist groups and in political parties—both mainstream (with parliamentary representation) and alternative (without parliamentary representation). The ethnographers, both women in their forties, had prior research experience with young people. Even though the researchers were not involved in climate activism, they shared environmental and climate concerns and supported the climate movement, which facilitated immersion in the field and the development of relationships with the young participants. Their presence was negotiated with the young activists, who were fully aware of the participant observation process. Before the fieldwork began, participants were asked to sign a consent form agreeing to participate in the study. Participants were also informed that fieldnotes were being taken and that anonymized quotes could be used in publications. Participant observations in Lisbon and Porto covered both internal (e.g., group meetings) and public (e.g., protests, debates) actions and events, although the fieldnotes from Lisbon mainly focus on public activities. The fieldnotes from Porto and Lisbon provided accounts of the activists' interactions with political parties and adult-led groups with affinity to political parties in various contexts and situations. These interactions most prevalently took place during large public events, such as protests and school occupations, where diverse activist collectives converged and engaged with political parties. In contrast, reactions to those interactions were primarily observed during internal meetings and informal conversations among activists, hinting at the complex and differing responses from activists in each city.

Part of a broader research project, this multi-sited ethnography sought a close observation of climate activist groups, including their relationships with one another and with other (climate and non-climate) groups. Throughout the research, diverse findings emerged, including dynamics involving political parties, which is the focus of this article. After receiving Ethics Committee approval (reference: 2023/04-04), researchers contacted the activist groups to explain the study's aim of observing young climate activists' activities. Two researchers conducted participant observations in Porto and Lisbon, producing systematic fieldnotes. Study design, analysis, and reflection around the fieldnotes produced by the ethnographers were part of a collective endeavor, involving all members of the project team. Fieldnotes were collaboratively analyzed following Emerson et al. (1995)'s recommendations: (i) an initial coding process where the researchers critically questioned specific parts of the data; (ii) a subsequent 'memo' process involving a line-by-line analysis to identify recurring and contrasting ideas and explore underlying meanings. This article focuses on the ethnographic findings around the interactions between climate activists and political parties and will be presented next.

5. Findings and Discussion

This section is organized around three key topics identified in our analysis. The first, "Resistance to Political Parties: Striving for Independence", focuses on practices of resistance in different moments of activism. It discusses how and under which conditions the two local School Strike for Climate chapters resisted collaboration with political parties. The second topic, "Collaboration with Political Parties: Mediated and Paradoxical Relationships", examines both direct and indirect experiences of collaboration. In addition to direct interactions with political parties, we also analyze indirect relationships, particularly through activists' engagements with other adult-led activist groups closely linked to political parties. While these dynamics involve paradoxes, they also have significant consequences for the movement itself. This is the focus of the third topic, "At the Crossroads of Resistance and Collaboration: Factions and Conflicts in the Movement".

5.1. Resistance to Political Parties: Striving for Independence

Our data reveal that, particularly in Porto, interactions with parliamentary political parties are generally viewed negatively. Porto activists resist mainstream parties to avoid co-optation, emphasizing their commitment to independence. In a meeting of the climate activist group in Porto, one of the points on the agenda was a recent contact from a political party. This was deemed important to bring to a collective internal discussion, with the activists emphasizing the movement's independence from party politics and affirming their commitment to remain separate from institutional politics, despite offers of tangible support, as illustrated by the next fieldnote's excerpt:

> *Amélia mentioned that the Bold Party had approached them, expressing willingness to support the School Strike for Climate Porto. They offered financial and material assistance; however, the group remained clear and consistent in stating that they intended to maintain impartiality and a non-partisan stance. They emphasized that preserving this integrity is a fundamental principle of the collective. Therefore, in the meeting, they reiterated that they do not wish to accept financial aid from any party*. (Fieldnote, Porto, 8 February 2023)

Of the three parties—all on the left of the political spectrum—most frequently referenced in the observation notes in Lisbon and Porto, two of them hold parliamentary seats, one of them with greater representation: the Bold Party holds four seats in the Parliament, the Core Party has five, and the Nonconformist Party does not currently have parliamentary representation. School Strike for Climate activists from Porto explicitly distanced them-

selves from parties and party-affiliated entities, as observed throughout the ethnographic study. Their stance against party politics contrasts with research in other contexts, showing that many environmental movements often collaborate with political parties, such as the Australian Green Party (Baer 2021).

In this case, School Strike for Climate Porto's resistance to political parties is a defining feature of its identity, which is even reflected in the choices of physical spaces where the group hosts its events. One such space is the AZUL collective, a community hub in Porto that supports social movements and grassroots activism by hosting events, workshops, and gatherings focused on social justice, environmental issues, and cultural expression. During a meeting with AZUL to organize a debate, the resistance to party involvement was apparent:

> *Alexandra, from the AZUL Collective, where the School Strike for Climate Porto was to hold a debate, stressed that it would be important for any invited groups for the debate not to be affiliated with any political party, as they do not want to associate themselves with partisan politics nor contribute to the dissemination of political and social ideologies that do not align with the views of the members of the AZUL collective.* (Fieldnote, Porto, 15 February 2023)

The decision by young climate activists in Porto to organize their events in spaces staunchly defined as non-partisan inherently carries a political stance. Rejecting political parties is a strategic choice, strengthened by collaborations with non-partisan spaces in the city. Resistance towards political parties is further reinforced by other youth activist collectives—advocating for LGBTQIA+ and antifascist causes—with whom the School Strike for Climate Porto often articulates in organizing shared events:

> *"The communists [party] are not very supportive of the LGBTQIA+ community; I've heard very bad stories about it, including discrimination. . ." said Sofia (associated with the anti-fascist and trans visibility movement). (..) Didi (from the School Strike for Climate), who had been silent for much of the time, said that "the communists step aside when these issues come up, forget it!" (..) "Don't have any hopes for the Communist Parties", commented Amélia (from the School Strike for Climate).* (Fieldnote, Porto, 29 March 2023)

The excerpt above underlines young people's views on the disconnection between certain political parties and the priorities of younger generations, which can help to explain the persistent challenges political parties face in attracting young members to their organizations (Malafaia et al. 2018; Norris 2011). At one of the shared public events co-organized by the School Strike for Climate and another activist collective to prepare a demonstration to celebrate April 25 (also known as the Carnation Revolution)—which commemorates the end of the fascist military dictatorship in Portugal—it became evident that there was apprehension about how close political parties could get to the activist group, and the subsequent risks of co-optation (or, in the activists' words, "appropriation"):

> *The tension was not limited to just the young people from Orthodox Party. They sought to maintain a distance not only from the liberals but also from other political parties present at the March, even those that might be ideologically closer. According to Didi and Amélia, this stance is based on a pursuit of political and ideological autonomy, rejecting the influence and appropriation of the collective by political parties.* (Fieldnote, Porto, 25 April 2023)

As made clear in this subsection, young activists in Porto strongly commit to maintaining autonomy and independence by explicitly resisting the influence of political parties, embedding this resistance into their activist ethos and identity. However, far from crystalized relational patterns, the ethnography shows that interactions with political parties both

in Porto and Lisbon encompass paradoxical nuances that include collaborations, as will be discussed next.

5.2. Collaboration with Political Parties: Mediated and Paradoxical Relationships

Interactions between the student climate strike movement and political parties in Lisbon, though subtle, appear significant. Evidence of this proximity emerged, for example, in the organization of a fundraising event as part of the Arraial dos Cravos—which is a festival for commemorating the Carnation Revolution. This event was co-organized by several activist collectives, including the School Strike for Climate, and it was widely attended by members of left-wing parliamentary political parties:

> *In the fundraising event, there is the Core Party "in full force", including Hugo Mosc6*[1]*, Pedro Santos*[2]*, and António Dionísio*[3] *from the Eco-Alliance Group. They seem to occupy a place of "honor" at the event, possibly because they are part of the organization.* (Fieldnote, Lisbon, 24 April 2023)

As suggested in the fieldnote presented above, the Core Party assumed a "place of honor" at the Arraial dos Cravos event and did so in close interaction with the Eco-Alliance Group, an adult-led climate group focused on fighting climate change through direct action, with ties to the Core party (e.g., a party member is also one of the founders of the Eco-Alliance Group) and the School Strike for Climate Lisbon. During our observations, we did not capture any public or private expressions of discomfort from the School Strike for Climate activists in Lisbon in relation to the presence of members of political parties. Additionally, young climate activists did not deliver any speeches or publicly voice their perspectives during the Arraial dos Cravos, despite their active involvement in organizing the event. It seemed that the voices of adult-led groups, including political parties, were prioritized, sidelining the young activists from School Strike for Climate. During our fieldwork in Lisbon, we also observed some signs of proximity and influence of political parties in the direct actions co-organized by young activists, such as during the wave of school occupations for climate justice in 2023. Core members of the School Strike for Climate Lisbon were close to the Eco-Alliance Group. For example, in May 2023, a direct action was carried out at the liquefied natural gas terminal in Sines, which was an act of civil disobedience organized by the "Parar o Gás" [Stop the Gas] platform and led by the Eco-Alliance Group and the School Strike for Climate. This direct action involved the activists that were, at the time, very engaged in the school's occupations that were taking place, particularly in Lisbon:

> *It became much clearer to me the strong influence of key members of the School Strike for Climate (who are also activists of the Eco-Alliance Group) in managing the people involved in the occupations. Throughout the day, I noticed how Patrícia and Paula use terms like "recruitment" to describe how they approached young people to participate in the occupations and with School Strike for Climate. Conversations with the teacher from Baleia School [a public high school] also revealed that most of the young people from the Baleia occupation do not identify with the approach taken by these two activists, who they feel "pressured them too much". For instance, this latest occupation took place at a time that was particularly inconvenient for the 12th-grade students at School, given their end-of-term artistic exams, for which they needed good grades, according to the teacher.* (Fieldnote, Lisbon, 13 May 2023)

The recruitment strategies employed by the core members of the School Strike for Climate not only displeased other members of the activist group but also strained relations with other young people connected to the group—students from the schools where the occupations were taking place. It is worth noting that, as shown in the fieldnote above, key

members of the School Strike for Climate were "also activists of the Eco-Alliance Group", which includes publicly recognizable members with historical ties to the Core Party—a connection that holds potential for conflicts of interest and risks of instrumentalization, as seen in the excerpt below:

> *On my way home, I saw that there were a few emails on the Occupy WhatsApp group about the evaluation that would take place on Saturday, May 20. Each 'occupy group' was supposed to do their evaluation with their nucleus, and then all come together for a general evaluation meeting [. . .] I observed that there was an invitation to "new occupiers" to participate in "reading sessions", as stated in the same WhatsApp message. These sessions were to be held at the home of an activist from the Eco-Alliance Group and included readings of Marx, Gramsci, and "Theory of Change". Each activist was expected to participate in at least 4 of the 6 scheduled readings and to sign up in advance with Paula and Patrícia (who selected the texts to be read before each session). I couldn't help but reflect that this activity is a clear strategy for politicization in the style of Core Party, and a method of "recruitment" that, while not explicit in School Strike for Climate/Eco-Alliance Group, is undoubtedly implicit. In an intimate setting, such as an activist's home, it is easier to build trust and increase engagement*. (Fieldnote, Lisbon, 13 May 2023)

Although, due to the lack of observations of those internal moments, we cannot draw definitive conclusions, these reading sessions appeared to serve both ideological and recruitment purposes, not only for the School Strike for Climate, but also for the Eco-Alliance Group. These interactions between student climate activists and other groups—including but not limited to political parties, though predominantly adult-led organizations—challenge Holdo's (2019) argument that political elites foster an autonomous sphere of activism by supporting its independence rather than undermining it. This dynamic, instead, suggests that alliances with institutionalized and adult political groups risk compromising the autonomy of grassroots movements, particularly when strategic agendas overlap or intersect.

Activists from the School Strike for Climate in Porto, while distancing themselves from mainstream parliamentary parties such as the Bold Party, Core Party, and Orthodox Party, simultaneously engaged with less mainstream groups that lack parliamentary representation, like the Nonconformist Party. Interestingly, this engagement occurred in discreet ways, as resistance to political parties sharply contrasts with their subtle involvement with the Nonconformist Party, captured during the ethnography:

> *After a meeting, Kiko mentioned that he and Amélia would be going to Lisbon to participate in the demonstration and would therefore not be in Porto. (Later, I realized they went to join the 'Houses to Live' demonstration organized by Nonconformist Party)*. (Fieldnote, Porto, 31 March 2023)

The activists in Porto seem to adopt a paradoxical strategy of distancing themselves from political parties while simultaneously aligning with a radical left-wing party that is not mainstream and holds no parliamentary seats. This approach seems to reflect an attempt to express themselves politically in a more radical manner (Muxel 2020). At the same time, this openness to the Nonconformist Party highlights a selective engagement with political groups within the School Strike for Climate movement and reveals nuanced, seemingly contradictory positions.

5.3. At the Crossroads of Resistance and Collaboration: Factions and Conflicts in the Movement

The centralization of power within the Lisbon group and the exclusion of dissenting voices from Porto have direct consequences for the movement. The differing approaches to

collaboration with political parties have significant consequences for the movement. While activists in Lisbon appeared to be more open to close interactions with political parties, the resistances to institutional involvement observed in Porto exposes tensions within the movement, revealing the School Strike for Climate's struggle to balance divergent perspectives. These internal conflicts, rooted in differing approaches to political collaboration, have contributed to factionalism (Kretschmer 2013), progressively weakening cohesion and playing a role in the movement's decline over time.

While the School Strike for Climate groups in Porto and Lisbon had previously considered each other allies, tensions arose over whether to remain open to groups tied to formal politics. Internal disagreements regarding organizational structure have exacerbated the division, with Porto activists emphasizing horizontality and direct democracy within the movement:

> *I took the opportunity to ask Kiko about how coordination with the collectives and climate movement based in Lisbon has been. He responded: "It's not happening because there is no coordination". I sought to explore this issue further and understand the interaction between the collectives. Kiko said he stopped attending the "national" meetings precisely because he felt everything was already decided, and there was no discussion: "We'd get there, meet up, and like, things were already decided, so they would just inform us and tell us what to do, and that's not how it should be; things should be discussed and decided together". The lack of discussion and collective negotiation is one of the reasons that has led School Strike for Climate Porto to distance itself from the so-called "national" group, which is actually reduced to the School Strike for Climate Lisbon. On this topic, Kiko also emphasized the "contamination" by other groups, particularly political parties, that have "imposed their agendas and ways of acting within School Strike for Climate Lisbon". This situation is seen as unacceptable to the Porto collective, as Kiko confirms: "The Eco-Alliance Group and the Core Party are always part of the national group (..); we ended up not participating in the meetings anymore for those reasons. . . there's no possibility for discussion like this. . .". Within the School Strike for Climate Porto, and despite the core group being composed of fewer young people, there is a clear willingness for a more democratic and open debate where those involved can and should be part of the decision-making processes of the movement. Indeed, this attitude has been observed throughout the group's meetings at Porto, where activists strive to organize themselves based on counter-hierarchical practices and structures*. (Fieldnote, Porto, 25 March 2023)

As regional divisions emerge, the disagreements have crystallized into structural conflicts within the movement, marked by opposing perspectives on the role of institutional politics in climate activism. Activists in Porto view political parties as external forces representing the system and the political establishment. Thus, they believe youth climate activists should reject them as potential collaborators, as made clear in the previous subsection. Political parties were, therefore, constructed as "the others", against which collective activist identities are often forged (Abizadeh 2005). This process has deepened the divide between Porto and Lisbon, undermining the movement's unity as a collective. As the fieldnote excerpt presented above illustrates, Porto-based activists emphatically criticized what they perceived as centralized and "contaminated" approaches within the Lisbon group, attributing these changes to excessive external political influences, particularly from political parties.

Holdo (2019) notes that subtle, indirect approaches by political parties reveal a strategy of alignment with, rather than outright co-optation of, social movements such as the School Strike for Climate. This gradual alignment reflects dynamics noted in Portuguese youth climate activism by Martins and Campos (2024), showing how values and critiques of

political structures influence collective identity. These tensions within the School Strike for Climate not only influence the movement's internal operations (Yates 2014) but also shape its public perception and effectiveness as a collective. In fact, the climate movement in Portugal is currently in a phase of decline, driven at least partially by disagreements between the Lisbon and Porto groups regarding collaboration with adult-led groups and political parties. These internal conflicts were particularly evident in the previous fieldnote, where the 'national' group is equated solely to the Lisbon region, and in the assessment that the School Strike for Climate, as a movement, "is dead", as reported in the next fieldnote:

> *Fábio asked the group if they knew the current status of the 'Occupy' movement in schools. I felt expectant to hear what they would say about it. Kiko said he wasn't very up-to-date, but he knew that some schools were organizing to carry out actions starting in April. Fábio said he had read that the National Group (Lisbon) was meeting with students in schools and universities to prepare for that moment, providing training to young people. He asked if the same was going to happen in the northern region. At that point, Kiko commented: "The National Group of School Strike for Climate is dead"*. (Fieldnote, Porto, 22 March 2023)

The collaboration between the School Strike for Climate and political parties has had significant implications for the movement's cohesion. The factionalism of the movement seems to stem not only from organizational challenges but also from ideological and strategic ones (Kretschmer 2013), reflecting deeper divides between the most significant regional groups—Porto and Lisbon, the largest cities in Portugal. These divisions were exacerbated by differing approaches to political collaboration, ultimately contributing to the decline of the School Strike for Climate movement in Portugal, which, it is important to remember, was once the most nationally representative youth activist movement in Portugal. A national mapping of the climate movement conducted three years ago (Carvalho et al. 2022) shows that the School Strike for Climate was represented by 44 local chapters across Portugal. Today, however, many social media pages of the student climate movements in Portugal are inactive. For example, the School Strike for Climate in Porto last posted on Instagram on 19 April 2023. The movement, which once had broader national representation than any other activist movement in recent memories is now mostly limited to Lisbon. This contraction suggests that the movement's demands are no longer widely represented, and the regional branches—once crucial in reflecting the distinct sociopolitical realities of various regions—no longer have a platform. In light of the data discussed throughout this article, it appears that the growing conflicts within the School Strike for Climate in Portugal—now primarily constituted by the group in the capital city—are tied to its engagement with political parties.

Drawing from broader trends in the global youth climate movement, as discussed by Knops and De Vydt (2023), our findings suggest that a faction within the movement called for political parties to transcend traditional party lines and focus on environmental issues without the fear of losing voters. Activists in Porto, however, believed that mainstream parties lack the ability to genuinely engage with the climate movement's causes without succumbing to hegemonic party interests, whereas those in Lisbon appeared more comfortable embracing collaboration. On the one hand, while activists seek political representation, the process of Lisbon-based activists opening up to collaborations with traditional political structures increases the risk of co-optation, which may dilute their collective ability to challenge the system, as perceived by activists from Porto. Consequently, rather than amplifying youth voices, the movement risked reflecting party agendas and progressively losing its independence and autonomy. On the other hand, centralizing the movement's activities in Lisbon narrowed its engagement with diverse regional perspectives, fracturing the collective. This reconfiguration not only deepened internal divisions but also reduced

the movement's capacity to function cohesively. Ultimately, the movement's transformative potential seems to have been undermined by internal conflicts within the School Strike for Climate and what Porto activists described as its "contamination"—the increasing presence of political parties and other adult-led groups in its organizational processes.

6. Conclusions

This study has examined the relationship between youth climate activists and political parties in Portugal, focusing on how these interactions shaped the internal dynamics of the School Strike for Climate movement. Through a multi-sited ethnographic approach, we have explored the diverse facets of collaboration with political parties, ranging from explicit and public engagements to more tacit and paradoxical relationships. These include direct interactions with parliamentary political parties, indirect mediational links with adult-led political groups founded by publicly known members of parliamentary parties, and discreet support for extra-parliamentary political parties. Far from straightforward relationships, the connections between young climate activists and political parties take various forms and are fraught with tensions, particularly evident in the differences between the Porto and Lisbon chapters of the movement. While Porto activists have consistently resisted collaboration with parliamentary parties, viewing them as representatives of an establishment that fails to address their concerns (Kim 2012; Norris 2011), Lisbon activists have taken a more mainstream approach, engaging with left-wing parties and adult-led groups with known ties to political parties. This contrast aligns with Hutter et al. (2019) discussion on the unpredictability of movement-party interactions. It also reflects the tension between seeking political influence through alliances and resisting co-optation to preserve independence (Gold and Mische 2024).

The decline of the School Strike for Climate's national presence, now largely confined to Lisbon, underscores the risks of lacking a cohesive perspective on the role that institutional alliances may play in the movement's strategies. In line with Koopmans's (2004) analysis, this shift reflects broader patterns in social movements, where fluctuating dynamics of conflict and accommodation can lead to significant power shifts. As Koopmans suggests, such transformations can either institutionalize or radicalize movements, realigning coalition dynamics in profound ways. In this case, the climate movement's contraction may signal the onset of institutionalization, where alliances aimed at amplifying influence come at the expense of the movement's original grassroots identity and goals. Our findings further reveal that this decline stems from an inability to reconcile regional and local differences and maintain a cohesive national strategy. Thus, our study contributes to broader debates on factionalism processes in social movements (Kretschmer 2013; Balser 1997) and the role of political parties in shaping youth climate activism, where the pursuit of visibility and influence often clashes with the need to maintain independence (Gold and Mische 2024; Knops and De Vydt 2023).

Our study also highlights the significance of horizontal decision-making and direct democracy, as emphasized by the Porto activists, in sustaining the movement's integrity. However, the centralization of power in Lisbon—reinforced by the influence of adult-led groups and political parties—seems to have alienated regional chapters and weakened the movement's capacity to represent diverse sociopolitical realities. In line with Kretschmer (2013), our findings illustrate how factionalism processes can erode collective goals, mirroring broader social cleavages, as described by Balser (1997), who argues that such internal divisions are not merely organizational but reflect deeper social divides. The movement's ongoing struggle to balance collaboration with independence also resonates with Della Porta and Rucht's (1995) analysis of movement-party alliances, which can either strengthen grassroots activism or compromise its autonomy.

Future research should explore the experiences of former activists, including the activists who have withdrawn from the movement, as their perspectives could provide valuable insights into the impacts of internal conflicts and factionalism. Such insights would enhance the understanding of how these dynamics affect the long-term sustainability of movements. Additionally, comparative studies with other youth movements could shed light on how different political and cultural contexts influence the dynamics of resistance and collaboration (Koopmans 2004; Kretschmer 2013). It would also be valuable to investigate the role of digital activism and social media in sustaining youth engagement, particularly in the face of declining institutional support by young people, as these platforms may provide alternative spaces for activism and mobilization (van Zomeren et al. 2018).

In conclusion, the youth climate movement in Portugal exemplifies the complex interplay between political collaboration and the preservation of independence. This study demonstrates that while engagement with political parties offers opportunities for visibility and influence, it also poses significant risks to the movement's cohesion. The factionalism observed within the School Strike for Climate in Portugal serves as a cautionary tale for other movements navigating similar tensions, underscoring the need for strategies that balance institutional engagement with grassroots solidarity. Ultimately, as youth climate activist groups adapt to shifting political dynamics, their capacity to reconcile internal divisions and maintain a unified identity will be crucial for their long-term survival and impact.

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Notes

1 Hugo Mosca is a leading political figure in the Core Party.
2 Pedro Santos is one of the founders of the Core.
3 António Dionísio is a former member of parliament and current activist in the same party.

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