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## Intra-Party Democracy: Patterns of Change

**Abstract:** The paper presents the main trends in the evolution of intra-party democracy (IPD) since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when parties criticized for becoming elitist and distant from their members and voters, started to introduce reforms in their internal organization. The changes, aimed at more inclusive solutions, were referred to as ‘democratization’. In this paper, the development of the patterns of IPD is discussed not in terms of ‘democratization’ in the sense of ameliorating the democratic performance but as a search for more effective models of democracy, beyond the representative one. The latest cases of development of IPD based on the Internet and online platforms and the possibilities they offer are also included. Apart from changes introduced by parties, the results and consequences of those reforms are also discussed.

**Keywords:** political parties, intra-party democracy, intra-party democracy change, IPD

### Introduction

Political parties are considered indispensable elements of the democratic political systems (Scarrow, 2005). Their role and functioning have been studied for a long time, and a great amount of scholarly literature has been gathered, where many important questions are asked. Among them, one can find a problem of intra-party democracy (IPD) concerning the way parties organize their internal structures and procedures. The internal party functions most frequently mentioned in connection with IPD are the leadership and candidate selection, sometimes also the construction of the party program.

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The expression “intra-party democracy” implies that this internal organization is, or at least should be democratic. However, even if this idea is accepted, there remain some problems to be solved, beginning with the question of what it exactly means that a party is internally democratic. To answer this question first of all precise definition of IPD would be required. Another question that may also be asked is whether IPD has been changing over time or is it just parties being more or less democratic while the definitional requirements remain stable.

The main focus of this paper is this second problem i.e., the changes of the IPD over time. Actually, significant changes in the parties’ internal rules and procedures were started in the late 60s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and have been continued since then, even gaining momentum with Internet. Those changes were referred to as the “democratization” of parties (Bille, 2001) and also the parties using new solutions, particularly those based on Internet, present themselves as more democratic and more fitted for contemporary society (Gerbaudo, 2019, p. 4). This might suggest that the change means progress in democracy and perhaps that the parties previously were less democratic. The important aspect of those changes was that they were introduced in difficult times for parties, when they were losing members and voters, were criticized for being elitist, for weakening their ties with social groups they were supposed to represent, and generally for not performing their functions properly (Daalder, 2002; Linz, 2002; Poguntke, 2004; van Biezen, Saward, 2008). So, the term “democratization” in the sense of improving the relationships with members and voters might seem right. However, the parties were not the only political actors that were subject to criticism. After the very optimistic decade of the 90s, when democracy seemed to be „the only game in town”, recently there has been growing concern with the conditions of democratic institutions and regimes. There is the ongoing discussion both about problems as well as possible solutions (Dalton, Scarrow, Cain, 2003; Krastev, 2011; Della Porta, 2013; Mounk, 2018). One of the important motives in those discussions is the emphasis on the dissatisfaction with the representative function of various political actors, including parties, and the proposed solutions tend to go toward more participation in politics. (Kaldor, Selchow, 2015; Della Porta et al., 2017; Bucur, Field, 2018).

The basic idea of this paper is to consider reforms introduced by parties in their internal organization not in terms of “democratization” in the sense of ameliorating the democratic performance but as a search for more effective variants of democracy beyond the representative one, which was dominant in the first decades in parties’ activity. Introducing those changes parties seem to be following the trend observed on a bigger scale in social and political life and the demands coming from the citizens of democratic states. The questions which may be asked in this context concern the potential of new solutions for bringing back the members and voters and the possibility for parties to become an additional channel of participation not only for members and sympathizers but for

wider circles of active citizens. The paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, the basic approaches towards defining IPD are briefly presented. The second section is devoted to the changes introduced by parties which were widely called “democratization” of internal party procedures. In this section, the causes of those changes are discussed along with different variants of IPD that were realized under the common term “democratization”. The third section is focused on the results, or as they may also be called, consequences of the “democratization” of political parties.

## Defining IPD: Some conceptualizations

Cross and Katz (2013, p. 2) point out that taking into account the variety of ways political parties are organized and operate, there is no universal definition of IPD. They show and discuss a rich variety of conceptualizations, however detailed presentation of them is beyond the scope of this paper. Here only a few approaches are mentioned, chosen from the point of view of the solutions parties introduce in their practice of internal organization.

For a long time, the point of reference for the internal party organization has been Maurice Duverger’s mass model (Ignazi, 2020). The democratic rules in this model of party organization require that the important decisions (including the leadership and candidate selection) should be carried out by collective party bodies, either consisting of all members in case of smaller units or lower party levels, or elected representatives in case of bigger parties and higher levels of organization. To emphasize the role played by collective bodies Susan E. Scarrow, Paul D. Webb, and Thomas Poguntke (2017) called this model of IPD assembly-based (AIPD) also pointing out to its logic of representative democracy. Despite democratic assumptions of this model, it was not free of elitist and oligarchic tendencies, and they were often mentioned among the most serious deficiencies of this way of party organization (Ignazi, 2020). The negative perceptions of IPD in the mass model caused by its drawbacks were strengthened by the societal changes which brought more generalized disappointment with political parties, sometimes diagnosed as a crisis in their political role, as already mentioned above.

The changes in IPD ignited by this crisis were visible both in theory and in practice. In their approaches to conceptualize contemporary requirements of IPD researchers above all emphasize inclusiveness (Bille, 2001; von dem Berge et al., 2013; Bernardi, Sandri, Seddone, 2017; Scarrow, Webb, Poguntke, 2017; Ignazi, 2020). Ignazi (2020) apart from inclusiveness, which for him is equivalent to direct democracy, mentions three other dimensions of IPD for it to be fully fledged: pluralism, deliberation, and diffusion. Bille (2001) argues that apart

from inclusiveness decentralization is also important for IPD, allowing the inclusion of more members into the decision-making process. Similarly, Benjamin von dem Berge et al. (2013, p. 5) conceptualize IPD with two criteria: inclusiveness and decentralization. Scarrow, Webb, and Poguntke (2017, p. 139) emphasize inclusiveness (“IPD equals inclusiveness”), accepting decentralization as an important aspect of IPD but not a defining one. In their approach to IPD, they differentiate between two variants of IPD – Assembly-based IPD (AIPD) and Plebiscitary IPD (PIPD) both may be more or less inclusive but following a different logic, with AIPD being representative and PIPD direct variant of democracy (Scarrow, Webb, Poguntke, 2017, p. 138).

In political practice, inclusiveness was manifested by reforms introduced by parties aimed at giving more opportunities for grassroots members to participate directly in some internal party procedures, particularly leadership and candidate selection. Speaking in terms of models of democracy, the representative logic was supposed to be supplemented with elements of direct democracy. Recently, particularly after the broadening of Internet use, the elements of deliberative democracy also began to be considered.

## Reforming IPD: “Democratization” of political parties

To start the more detailed consideration of reforms in parties’ internal organization it might be helpful to introduce the term „primaries” as a method used by parties to fill various political positions (Kenig, Pruyssers, 2018, p. 26). Primaries are those methods in which a selectorate includes at least all party members, or even in some cases, a wider circle of party supporters, who are not formally party members (Sandri, Seddone, 2015, p. 11; Kenig, Pruyssers, 2018, p. 28). Moving from the most inclusive to the least inclusive party selectorate, primaries, including members and/or supporters are the most inclusive, then there are organs based on delegates, then Party Parliamentary Group, party elites, and the least inclusive is the sole party leader (Kenig, Pruyssers, 2018, p. 28; Pilet, van Heute, 2012, p. 48). Bille (2001) creating the ranking of the democratic ways of selecting candidates, also regards the membership ballot as the most inclusive. However, in his ranking he also includes the dimension of decentralization, arguing that the less centralized the process, the more people have the chance to participate in the selection of candidates. Therefore, in his ranking, he includes also the role played by the subnational party organs and the various possibilities they might have. The less control of the sub-national party organs, the less democratic is the process (Bille, 2001, p. 367).

The reforms described as democratization within parties started with the election of party leaders. Before the wider introduction of the primaries, party leaders were elected either by party Congress or Party Parliamentary Group.

Party Congress is a democratically elected, collective party organ, from the IPD perspective described as close to the party base (von dem Berge et al., 2013), so the election by Congress was not undemocratic. However, because it is mostly based on delegates, it is considered less inclusive than primaries, therefore the introduction of primaries for the leader's election was interpreted in terms of democratization. The first primaries for party leaders started in the decade of 70s (Pilet, van Heute, 2012, pp. 50–51), and gradually expanded, gaining speed in the decade of the 90s (Kenig, Pruyssers, 2018, p. 30).

The democratization reforms within parties didn't stop with the election of leader which is the intra-party office and went further to include also national public office i.e., candidates for legislative elections and sometimes such executive posts as president, in the case of France or prime minister in Italy. What might be worth emphasizing here is that in some of those cases the primaries apart from party members included also wider circles of voters in so-called "open" primaries (Kenig, Rahat, Hazan, 2015, p. 22; Bucur, Field, 2018, p. 61).

Discussing the process of democratization in those elections it is worth differentiating between the selectorate and the pool of candidates. The most democratic i.e., inclusive selectorate remains the group of party members and in some, still rather rare cases of open primaries, sympathizers. However, the democratization of candidate selection involves not only the selectorate, but also those who are being selected i.e., the pool of candidates. This particularly concerns the groups of variously defined minorities i.e., women, ethnic and racial minorities. Writing about the British Parliament Rhys Williams and Akash Paun (2011) remarked that in 1983 there were no non-white representatives, and this has changed due to the efforts of parties that MPs coming from the group referred to as BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) appeared. However, the most widely discussed in the context of democratization the pool of candidates are women. This is well illustrated by the quotation once more coming from British politics when David Cameron spoke about the necessity to introduce more female candidates on the lists: "The conversation we have in the Conservative party must reflect the conversation in the country, and the sound of modern Britain is a complex harmony, not a male voice choir" (Williams, Paun, 2011, p. 9). Including minorities in the elections for intra-party offices is also perceived as conducive to IPD (von dem Berge et al., 2013). The requirement to include women's quota in some countries exceeds the boundaries of political parties and is introduced also in electoral systems.

The discussion about the IPD has been expanded and enriched with the wider use of the Internet. It has changed the technological possibilities, making the inclusion of really big groups in the voting procedures easier than ever. However, the change did not only involve the technology of voting, it has also brought qualitative changes in the way people could be included in party procedures. The biggest organizational change seems to be the introduction of online

participatory platforms, functioning similarly to social media, which are used in political parties for exercising various party functions: from voting for intra-party offices or electoral lists to consulting policy proposals or drafting party programs (Deseriis, Vittori, 2019). From the point of view of IPD those technological innovations were supposed to allow for participation on a much bigger scale than was previously possible or to remove the barriers between the voter and representative (Gerbaudo, 2021b, p. 180). Some of the newly created parties, such as Spanish Podemos, Italian Five Stars Movements, Romanian party Demos or Pirate Parties, made the use of Internet platforms a part of their organizational identity and thus they came to be described as a new party model: digital party or connective parties (Gerbaudo, 2019; Gherghina, Stoiciu, 2020, p. 172). Definitions of this model include the connection of technological solutions with the efforts to maximize the inclusion of the members in almost all major decisions made by political parties (Gherghina, Stoiciu, 2020, p. 172). Those parties also radically changed the nature of party membership, opening up to almost everyone interested without many formal requirements, which made the inclusionary effort even more pronounced (Gerbaudo, 2021b, p. 181). What also seems to be an important aspect of the activity of digital parties, particularly in comparison with the earlier discussed ways to empower members, is broadening the possibility of deliberation. As it was discussed previously, parties making efforts to avert the crisis, enabled members on a bigger scale to vote in the leadership election or to decide, also in a manner of voting, to take part in selecting candidates for national office elections. Using the terms of Scarrow, Webb and Poguntke (2017) it was the development of IPD in its plebiscitary form (PIPD), while Assembly IPD, where decisions are made based on discussion and deliberation, was still limited to the representative party organs. Online platforms are supposed to enable rank-and-file members to take part in the decision-making process not only by voting but also by discussions and exchange of opinions, both among themselves and with the representatives, thus contributing to the change in the nature of involvement. Rosa Borge Bravo and Eduardo Santamarina Sáez (2016) examine the potential of deliberation of the online platforms in two Spanish parties, Podemos and Barcelona En Comú. Wolkenstein (2016) is skeptical about the real deliberative possibilities of such platforms, and he proposes parties' branches instead. Nevertheless, as van Biezen and Saward (2008) postulate, parties are starting to be considered as deliberative spaces both in theory and in practice.

## Changing the IPD rules: Some consequences

There is a growing literature concerned with empirical evidence about the results of the reforms connected with IPD, particularly those aimed at empowering rank-and-file party members. The development of IPD was supposed to attract more members to the parties and, in a broader context, to reconstruct the bond between the party and civil society, by giving citizens more possibilities to participate. The outcome seems to be ambiguous. While some parties experienced a rise in membership ranks (Whitley et al., 2019) the general trend of decline in membership was not stopped (Kenig et al., 2015, p. 34). Also, the attraction of more people does not seem entirely positive for the party. Newcomers, using the possibilities created by the new solutions, such as primaries, are sometimes called “instant members” (Kenig et al., 2015). These are people, who join the party only for a short time, just to take part in a particular election and their commitment to the party might be significantly lower than in the case of older members. When the rights of older active members and the new, often short-time ones, are equalized, it affects the structure of selective incentives, provided by parties. This observation corresponds with the results obtained by Luca Bernardi, Giulia Sandri, Antonella Sedone (2017) in their research on the Italian Democratic Party. The authors differentiated between old-style members, used to the mass party style of organizational functioning, and the new-style ones, familiar with the party more open even to supporters. It turned out, that while primaries were generally well perceived by both groups, the new-style members were more satisfied while old-style members valued the primaries less positively.

Giving the rank-and-file members the right to participate in primaries brings also consequences for the power relations within the party. In their concept of a cartel party Katz and Mair (1995) pointed out that empowering the members in leadership primaries, results in fact in more autonomy for party elites at the expense of middle-level activists. This observation was empirically confirmed for the Belgian parties by Bram Wauters (2013). Cristina Bucur and Bonnie N. Field (2018, p. 63) point out that party elites still maintain control over the selection of presidential candidates in French parties, even if the process is the most inclusive, in the form of open primaries. Also, in the case of online platforms, elites strongly control the online consultations and as a result, their position is strengthened at the expense of the activist base (Deseriis, Vittori, 2019, p. 5699). The last example turns the attention toward the most recent efforts to develop IPD, which took the form of digital parties. They were supposed to change the entire nature of party activism and involvement, by introducing multifunctional online platforms, enabling members and supporters to participate in internal party decision-making processes in various forms: voting, consultations, and deliberations. The empirical evidence shows that those expectations were not fully met, as the position of leaders and elites is still strong, they control quite

effectively the voting procedures while deliberation is rather weak and limited (Cordero, Coller, 2018, p. 12; Gerbaudo, 2019). Borge Bravo and Santamarina Sáez (2016), although considering parties' online platforms as possible deliberative spaces, didn't confirm their full accordance with the requirements of proper deliberation. In other words, the promise of the development of AIPD in online platforms was not really fulfilled. Assessing such dimensions of IPD as inclusiveness and decentralization in digital parties, Gerbaudo (2021a, p. 739) establishes a medium degree of inclusiveness and strong centralization on two ends: leaders and all members assembly at the expense of local branches. From the point of view of changing power relations within the party, the interesting case is presented by the British Labour Party, which experienced an exceptional scale of 12 reforms of leadership elections between 1980 and 2020 (Niendorf, 2022). In his research, Tim Niendorf (2022) shows that the democratization of those elections proved less substantial than it was initially assumed, and the reforms were motivated mostly by power struggles between various factions of the increasingly divided party. The internal divisions and the effort to overcome them were also behind the introduction of primaries in French parties (Bucur, Field, 2018, pp. 61–62).

As it was mentioned above the democratization of candidate selection does not pertain only to the electorate but also to the pool of candidates. The most often discussed in this context are women and their chances to be included in the candidate lists. This problem exceeds the boundaries of intra-party regulations as it might encompass also legal regulations included in electoral codes or many other factors such as cultural norms, personal motivations, or availability of resources such as time or money (Stirbu, Larner, McAllister, 2018, p. 205). If only party rules concerning candidate selection are considered, it is worth emphasizing that they often take the form of positive action such as quotas, special lists or some other corrective solutions (Williams, Paun, 2011; Stirbu, Larner, McAllister, 2018). Without such special requirements, it is very difficult to obtain satisfactory numbers of women as candidates, and democratizing reforms such as empowering party members do not help. They may even be mutually contradictory as shown by the example of Mexican law introduced in 2002, requiring parties either to organize primaries or to introduce women's quota (Hazan, Rahat, 2010, p. 115). Moreover, research shows that political parties are not very keen to introduce reforms promoting women candidates without external stimuli (Stirbu, Larner, McAllister, 2018, p. 206).

Another question posed by the more inclusive methods of candidate selection is the degree of loyalty of candidates (and representatives) either to the party or to the other possible actors, which influences party cohesion. The logic of this relationship is based on the assumption that more exclusive methods of candidate selection will result in stronger control of the party over the candidates, thus enforcing their conformity with the party line, while the more inclusive



electorate will influence those relationships contrarily. Candidates selected by the more inclusive and thus more heterogeneous actors will experience pressure coming from various sources, not only the party apparatus, and therefore might feel less obliged to follow strictly party line, weakening the party cohesion. This problem was thoroughly investigated by Reuven Y. Hazan and Gideon Rahat (2010, pp. 146–157), with ambiguous results. They found some support for the argument that the rise in inclusiveness in the candidate selection will negatively influence party cohesion, however, they also pointed out some conditions which might work against such tendencies. An interesting example of empirical research on this question was provided by Antonella Seddone and Stefano Rombi (2018), who studied the case of inclusive candidate selection in the Italian election in 2013. One of the hypotheses set by the authors particularly referred to the problem of the relationship between the method of candidate selection and party unity. They expected that the more inclusive method of candidate selection would result in a lower level of party unity understood as unity in the voting behavior by the members of the Parliamentary Group. In the 2013 elections in Italy four political parties used either closed or open primaries to select candidates, but as the Authors emphasize, this tool has been quite widely used by parties before, so the voters were already familiar with it (Seddone, Rombi, 2018, p. 239). The results did not confirm the investigators' hypothesis which led them to the conclusion that the candidate selection method does not influence the party cohesion to the extent that was expected. However, in their research, they also pointed out several specific conditions that might play a role in the obtained results, so the question seems to be still open to further research.

## Conclusion

Political parties are dynamic organizations, constantly updating their functioning according to changing political and social conditions. Their role in democracy, despite drawbacks and reservations, is based on the relationship with voters and broadly speaking civil society, so they cannot be indifferent to the demands and expectations of the citizens. Taking all this into consideration, the quest for an adequate model of intra-party democracy can be seen in a broader context of changes in the accepted model of democracy within the political system itself. Duverger, quoted at the beginning of this paper, suggested that the party model based on representative democracy was in line with the dominant model of democracy in the political system at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nowadays there is a growing expectation for more inclusion in political decision-making, allowing citizens more direct involvement in the political process (Dalto, Scarrow, Cain, 2003, p. 2). Thus, parties in an effort to answer public demands are

taking inspiration from various models of democracy and introducing them in their internal organization. In this quest, parties are not only trying to include their own members or sympathizers but also reach out to citizens without precise ties with the parties. Paolo Gerbaudo mentions also very interesting aspect of inclusion, particularly the one brought with the use of Internet (Uzunoğlu, 2019, p. 550). He points out that in contemporary conditions of work, when people do not have time to spare for political face to face meetings, online participation might create the possibility to take part in politics, which otherwise could not be possible. The empirical research show mixed picture in terms of results of those efforts. Thus, the parties' success, positive or negative evaluations of those newly introduced IPD rules is still an open question, worth researching, so the picture of the evolution of political parties could be constantly enriched.

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