



ESSAYS ON POLITICAL PARTIES

INTRA-PARTY DEMOCRACY: A PATHWAY TO POLITICAL RENEWAL



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Introduction:

There is a grim assessment, shared among many in democracy assistance community, that in recent years democracy has been put on the defensive by continuous backsliding of its past achievements. The cooling of the global economy, migration crisis in Europe, rising inequality levels, limited economic sovereignty of nation states, anti-democratic propaganda, have all contributed heavily to the relative erosion of democratic standards globally. Many voters have a strong sense of disillusionment in representative democracy and this disappointment is clearly reflected by the decline of trust in political parties and parliaments, steady decreases in party memberships and their climbing average ages, electoral gains of extremist-populist parties and the weakening, and in some democracies, the collapse of many mainstream liberal and democratic parties altogether.

The resilience of democratic systems, however, lies in their ability to accommodate the healthy debate within the legitimate institutions and democratic processes and to come up with new strategies for political revival. One strategy that has a potential to inject a new vitality in struggling democracies is the enhancement of internal party democracy. To assume that the level of party democracy can by itself ascertain an electoral victory will be misleading. A talented political leader, economic shock or political crisis can all contribute to the electoral success of a political party, independent of the level of democracy or transparency of its internal affairs. Anti-democratic, tightly controlled, extremely hierarchical political organizations can also achieve impressive electoral gains, given that right circumstances are in place.

Still, for those who are also interested in democratic development and perhaps to put it on a more pragmatic footing, who think more strategically or have suffered severe electoral blows or membership

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and funding cuts to their parties, internal democracy offers an array of potential benefits. More vibrant democratic processes within political parties can strengthen trust of members in their organization, thereby strengthening their political stability and resilience; the ability to navigate the crises more successfully comes with more adaptable and nimble organizations, where not everything is controlled or contained within small units of leadership and innovation is rewarded; stronger financial accountability and more transparent political career management can result in the better capacity of political parties to draw resources and be more successful at grassroots campaigns and fundraising. In that, the deepening of and, at times, reinventing intra-party democracy is the way to open a new possibility for revitalizing political life, re-engaging disillusioned voters, making sound policies and ultimately, steering a political culture and political life towards a new and better direction.

This essay, written for those who may be thinking about the new approaches to organizing political parties and movements, outlines some of the potential reform paths in internal party democracy. While some of the ideas presented below may find their applications elsewhere, they are primarily written with an eye on relatively young democracies or partially free countries, that have made some tangible achievements in democratization (such as for example, generally free and fair elections) but retain some of the basic features of the authoritarian systems from which they have graduated not very long time ago (weakly institutionalized, personality based political parties and dominant party systems for example).

A List of Alternatives

To push forward with a next generation of internal political party reforms, one needs to look at some of the fundamental functions and processes of political parties and think through the options of enhancing both the level of democracy and their performance. What can be done in practice to make political parties more democratic and at the same time more effective? Some suggestions that follow may seem less realistic at first sight, but amidst the extremely low levels of political participation and high degree of political apathy, political parties shall think ahead by taking bold steps and planning them strategically.

Party Membership

Joining the party shall be made into an easy and relatively seamless process, without complicated system of leadership recommendations or superfluous restrictions. Technology has the potential to further accelerate and make the process easier and more accessible for citizens. The minimal requirements to

join the party might be the agreement with the party manifesto and the enrollment into the party list of supporters or members (online, easily and quickly). Currently, some parties employ the principle of recommendations and multi-layered procedures of granting the membership. However, this comes with the price tag: the formation of dominant groups within the party that can manipulate the membership flows to their personal political advantage.

Forming Party Organizations

Party organizations could be formed independently and locally, without the excessive interference of party leaders or at least without the need of their formal authorization, again to allow for a more decentralized membership management, freedom to join and freedom to organize on the local level, in line with party manifesto and in the spirit of its declarations. Such units can be formed on the basis of geography, theme, age, gender, etc. As with all forms of political devolution, the risks should be gauged, and safeguards put in place. Decentralization of the creation of the party cells may elevate the risk of the infiltration of the 'agent provocateurs' of competing actors or governments in a deliberate effort to undermine or discredit political party in question. As a mitigation, granting of the veto power to one of the higher-level governing bodies based on clearly articulated criteria can be applied. In any case, the initiative of forming a party organization and the institutionalization of this initiative must be guided by the principle that the formation shall take place wherever the will and capabilities are present and in accordance with relevant party principles.

Candidate Recruitment; Elections and Political Participation

Candidate selection is an issue of critical importance for political movements. The concentration of this function into the hands of a few leaders, often perceived as self-serving elite representatives, is yet another cause of reduced trust in political parties. This frustration is further fueled by decision making on this vital political matter "high up" and "far away" from the rank and file, causing an increased separation between the leaders and the members or supporters. The latter then often rightfully assume that the key decisions are made without a due consideration of their interests. Therefore, it is essential to introduce more direct forms of internal democracy into the party life. A real task here is to reduce the monopoly of the top-level governing bodies (political or executive councils) on the formation of electoral lists and to make this process more participatory than it currently is.

Several alternative means of electoral list formation can be considered or combined and of course there are many more options available than those listed below:

Empowering local branches: for the local elections and in consideration of the electoral systems, local or regional organizations may be granted more power to form an electoral list via internal elections or decision making;

Participatory deliberation: be it the national or local elections, the elaboration of a preliminary electoral list (nomination of the candidates) could be carried out by the local, regional and other types of organizations, which will be subject to an approval by the general assemblies (or similar broadly representative decision-making fora). Moreover, such fora shall be empowered to amend the order of the candidates in the list as opposed to either rejecting, or what is most often the case, simply rubber-stamping leadership proposed electoral lists.

Leveraging external expertise: another, complementary alternative is the utilization of independent panels and commissions in the process of electoral list formation. "Special commissions" of this nature may consist of the party leader, of the representatives of key governing bodies, regional and other units as well as external but associated experts and professionals. Based on the background checks, performance appraisals, leadership capacity profiling and personal interviews, they would be able to compile and present a preliminary electoral list to the assembly for its approval and/or modifications.

The democratization of the electoral list formation is arduous and risky. It requires the necessary level of political culture of openness and the risk-taking ability of existing leaders within the party for they may be putting their own political control in eventual jeopardy. However, the absence of the absolute control of small groups of people on the composition of electoral lists shall be considered as a "new normal" in the era of dwindling party membership and increasing disillusionment with politics as usual.

Gender Equality and Participation of Minorities

Gender equality shall become a real political principle as opposed to thinly veiled symbolic changes that political parties undertake to present themselves as credible partners to their international friends or popular NGOs. Moreover, it is vital to create substantial intra-party incentives and instruments to ensure the representation of the national or religious minorities in the electoral lists. Across many multi-national and multi-cultural countries, their participation in political life is extremely low. The additional rationale

for doing more to engage minorities is to avoid the creation of security flashpoints. Political isolation of ethnic or religious groups makes them easily susceptible to extremist influence.

Voter Education, Interest Aggregation and Policy Creation

Political manifestos and electoral programs shall represent the interests of political party members, not the opinions of experts who have barely ever been at the village council meeting. To this end, political parties could use several alternatives:

Engaging in policy dialogue: In many political parties, there is surprisingly little consultation with the members about electoral programs that parties propose. Usually, this is a top-down process where the leadership articulates the policy and members approve – often without much deliberation. But by allowing for a wider space of democratic participation by different groups of members in the creation of electoral programs, political parties will be able to better engage the broad groups of citizens while also creating a process and the organizational culture in which the interests of the members are indeed translated into political actions and documents of the party.

Rewarding policy initiatives: Any party member/ group of members/organizations shall be able to initiate an incorporation of the issue/topic into the party manifesto or the program. The obligation to have discussions on the initiative shall arise if certain number of people interested in the issue are gathered. The decision on developing and eventually adopting the initiative into the official documents can be made on national, regional or assembly levels depending on the nature of the proposal and the type of the forthcoming elections. What matters most is that there exists a clear bottom-up pathway for policy initiatives to be channeled through the pipeline of political decision making in parties.

Money and Politics

Trust in political parties is to a large extent shaped by the origins of political funding and its internal allocation decisions. Bold decisions will need to be made if political parties decide to reform their fundraising practices and work towards stronger public trust. There are a range of possibilities that politicians could consider here.

Saying “No.” Setting a lower donations threshold for the financial contributions (especially when legislation allows for very high or unlimited contributions) will restrict the possibility of a small number of

big donors to capture the political decision-making of the party in question. Such measures will also force political parties to fundraise more locally, thereby growing closer to the electorate and becoming more financially accountable towards a broader group of stakeholders. Large business investments in politics often need to be redeemed by lucrative public procurement contracts, tax breaks or by easing of licensing requirements and these often run against the public interests.

Budgetary autonomies: different political structures within a party shall be granted higher levels of spending autonomy. Separate budget lines for youth, women or any other organizations shall be managed independently from the party leadership by the sub-organizations concerned in accordance with the general strategy and the action plans. This has a potential to result in better initiatives, more competition and ultimately, better performance within and by those sub-structures.

Better financial transparency: this can be ascertained by intra-party mechanisms with spending documentations being made accessible to all the members. A more radical approach to transparency would be making spending documentation accessible to the general public by placing the records in public domain.

Digitizing Political Parties

Internet and technology are often perceived as substitutes for direct connections and real actions, which is not entirely an accurate description of what they can achieve. Direct, personal relations are important for the political organization of people. There is no substitute for a good handshake after a meeting. However, technologies can fill in and improve the traditional political process and help alleviate costs. The internet penetration is fast increasing everywhere, and the application of modern technologies is attractive to the young people who may need a different spark to come to the rally or a fundraising lecture. The possibility of “digitizing” political parties is real, many political movements are already going down that road and those opportunities that are accessible and affordable need to be embraced more broadly and quickly.

The Risks of Democracy

Paradoxically, the expansion of internal democracy may also result in political parties veering off towards radical and eventually anti-democratic political positions. What if, the majority of the members suppress minorities or curtail women’s political positions? Democracy, as we are often warned, needs to be

safeguarded from the assault of majorities. To this end, political education and socialization programs will help alleviate this danger in part. But more practical mechanisms of organizational checks and balances must be present, to, in the case of the extreme necessity, safeguard democratic values. Enshrining major democratic principles and processes in the party charters is one option. Additionally, leadership structures or specially designed internal councils can exercise the power to protect democratic standards based on clear and broadly agreed upon criteria.

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The frustration towards politicians and political parties creates a vicious circle. The political organizations with little popular engagement and non-transparent, personalized decision-making easily become vulnerable to a takeover by a small number of wealthy donors. In some countries, oligarchies project their image onto the political landscape, as political parties become their electoral vehicles. In other dominant party contexts or semi-authoritarian regimes, major donors are providing support to the ruling parties only, fearing government retributions. These situations result in the weakening of political opposition, and, by the same token, of political competition. Resulting polarization and radicalization are then creating a fertile ground for the extra-constitutional and often violent political change and this is something that all responsible actors, whether in power or outside of it, should want to avoid.