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# A deliberative model of intra-party democracy\*

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## I. INTRODUCTION: PARTIES AND LINKAGE

Political parties serve a number of important functions in representative democracies.

Connecting citizens to government is perhaps the most important one. This is how parties were traditionally conceived, and it continues to be the main standard according to which their legitimacy as representative institutions is evaluated.<sup>1</sup>

Intra-party democracy is instrumental in establishing and sustaining this connection between society and government. Internally democratic parties empower the members on the ground, who have privileged access to the demands of the constituents, and provide them with opportunities to channel these demands into policy decisions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>As Sartori (1976, p. ix) put it more than a quarter century ago, “parties are *the* central intermediate and intermediary structure between society and government.” This understanding of parties continues to inform scholars’ normative judgments about parties. See, for example, Biezen and Saward (2008); Dalton et al. (2011); Mair (2013b).

<sup>2</sup>For a classic statement on this “linkage” function of parties, see Lawson (1988).

In this article, I begin by arguing that existing models of intra-party democracy—which focus on candidate selection and direct participation, respectively—are not adequate to the task of linking citizens to government. I suggest that these models run the risk of simply reinforcing the preferences of the party elite, thus weakening, instead of strengthening, the members on the ground. Missing from these models are fora of discussion and debate, in which the party base can critically question the status quo and devise alternative positions on specific policies as well as the party's more general direction. It is these fora parties need to establish and empower to make internal democracy meaningful.

With this in mind, I then outline a deliberative model of intra-party democracy.<sup>3</sup> At the centre of this model stand processes of preference-formation at the partisan base, in particular the deliberations of local party branches. I argue first that these traditional sites of partisan activism provide favourable circumstances for good quality deliberation, and go on to examine several ways in which their deliberations could be connected to decisions. Also I suggest a set of novel institutional designs practitioners can avail themselves of if conventional channels of preference transmission are defective. In closing, I run several objections the model faces and show that they are less weighty than might at first appear.

## **II. WHY A DELIBERATIVE MODEL OF INTRA-PARTY DEMOCRACY?**

### **A. Two models of intra-party democracy**

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<sup>3</sup>References to the possibility of such a model have surfaced on a few occasions in the relevant theoretical literature (see Cohen 1989; Teorell 1999; Biezen and Saward 2008; White and Ypi 2011), but a systematic treatment has not emerged yet.

To see the relative merits of a deliberative model of intra-party democracy, it is necessary first to audit the main alternatives to it: the *candidate selection model* and the *direct participation model*. These are the two standard models of intra-party democracy. In this section I show that these models are, by themselves, inadequate. They bracket out processes of preference-formation, which has adverse implications for the capacity of parties to link citizens to political decisions.

Consider first the candidate selection model. In recent times, this has become perhaps the most popular model of intra-party democracy. The basic idea underlying it is that the procedures of selecting who will gain a place on the party list should be preferably inclusive and provide a large number of members with an opportunity to voice their preferences.<sup>4</sup> Some add to this the rider that candidate selection procedures should also be reasonably competitive and designed in such a way as to ensure that women's descriptive representation on the final party lists is adequate.

This model is problematic for at least two reasons. First, for many active party members, it may simply not provide a meaningful enough channel of participation. Of course, party members will generally be favourably inclined towards taking part in candidate selection processes, especially if these processes are the only opportunity for them to exercise voice. But those members who want to engage on a more regular basis are likely to become disenchanted when internal participation involves only candidate selection. The obvious problem with this is that it is usually these active and committed party members that sustain the party's ties to the citizenry. They engage in door-to-door campaigning, organise events for the local community and meet regularly with other partisans to discuss the community's most

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<sup>4</sup>For a summary treatment, see Hazan and Rahat (2010).

pressing problems, thus having a heightened awareness of citizens' concerns. Thus to connect the party with the citizenry in large, a model of intra-party democracy must offer its active members more substantial participatory opportunities.

The second problem the candidate selection model holds is that it treats members' preferences as simply given. I want to set aside this problem for the time being and return to it after outlining the second standard model of intra-party democracy, since this problem affects the second model as well.

The second standard model of intra-party democracy focuses on *direct participation*. This model of intra-party democracy operates with a much "thicker" conception of participation than the candidate selection model. It holds that, rather than indirectly influencing the party's decision making through selecting candidates, party members should be able to translate their preferences directly into decisions.

The most common form of direct intra-party democracy are membership ballots, in which policy or personnel questions (which are usually pre-selected by the party leadership) are referred to the members for a direct decision. Since the mid-1990s, parties across the democratic world increasingly made use of such ballots.<sup>5</sup> Another well-known example of direct participation within parties are "rotation schemes" for MPs. In the 1980s, the German Greens have experimented with such schemes. The idea was to limit the term of office to two years (two years less than the full legislative term of four years) in order to "prevent the estrangement of MPs from their grass roots,"<sup>6</sup> and to give more people the opportunity to directly influence policy-making processes.

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<sup>5</sup>Scarrow 2014, pp. 181–5.

<sup>6</sup>Poguntke 1992, p. 244; also see Scarrow 1999.

Although the direct participation model grants party members more influence than the candidate selection model, it holds a number of problems that make it ill-suited as a self-standing model of intra-party democracy. If a party adopts rotation system for office holders, the lack of expertise of those who have just been propelled into office may place disproportionate power in the hands of experts who lack democratic authorisation. Thomas Poguntke has noted this problem in a study of the German Greens: “[A] high turnover of MPs means that the informal power of permanently employed parliamentary assistants, who can rely on accumulated knowledge of parliamentary procedures, is likely to rise. Hence, rotation may lead to the situation where functional oligarchies replace democratically legitimized power centres.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, this of course weakens, rather than empowers, party members.

Membership ballots, on the other hand, may cause a problem of disaffection similar to the one I have highlighted in the context of the candidate selection model. Here is why. In intra-party referenda, the agenda-setter and the initiator are often the same actor, namely the party elite.<sup>8</sup> So the party elite controls both the *question* that is referred to the members for a decision and the *timing* of the referendum. This lack of control over the terms on which the referendum is held may dishearten those members who want to have more substantial influence. Active and organised members might demand a right to initiate referenda themselves, for example. Where they already have such a right, they may want to be offered more channels to promote their cause.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Poguntke 1992, p. 243.

<sup>8</sup>Sussmann 2007.

<sup>9</sup>Notice that many parties have enacted statutory reforms to provide party members with the formal right to initiate an internal referendum. But whether such formal rights outweigh the power of the party elite to shape the internal agenda is far from clear. See, for example, Detterbeck’s (2013) study of membership ballots in German parties.

Furthermore, there is also a normative problem with the direct participation model, namely that it presumes that only the act of *expressing* one's preferences is normatively and practically relevant. Indeed, the direct participation model does not valorise the process of preference-formation prior to the decision. Instead, people's views and preferences are treated as simply "out there." As I have mentioned earlier, this problem affects also the candidate selection model. Both the candidate selection model and the direct participation model draw on concepts of participation which revolve around expressing preferences, but ignore the processes through which preferences come into being.<sup>10</sup>

Why exactly is this problematic? Primarily because it undermines the democratic potential of intra-party democracy. Democratic theorists widely criticise such "aggregative" conceptions of democracy, arguing that taking preferences as given risks cementing the existing state of affairs.<sup>11</sup> Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson put the classic worry in this way: "By taking existing or minimally corrected preferences as given, as the base line for collective decisions, the aggregative conception [of democracy] fundamentally accepts and may even reinforce existing distributions of power in society."<sup>12</sup> It's main shortcoming, they argue, is that it does "not provide any process by which citizens' views about those distributions might be changed."<sup>13</sup>

To understand this point, consider the potentially problematic effect of involving the whole party membership, rather than just the active party members, in candidate selection procedures. Evidence suggests that making candidate selection thus inclusive ultimately

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<sup>10</sup>Teorell 2006.

<sup>11</sup>Cohen 1989; Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Mansbridge et al. 2010.

<sup>12</sup>Gutmann and Thompson 2004, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

buttresses the party leaderships' power, since it strengthens those large groups of passive members who are "at once more docile and more likely to endorse the candidates proposed by the party leadership."<sup>14</sup> Contrary to the active members, who deliberate with their partisan peers, those passive members are not provided with an opportunity to jointly debate and question the leadership's candidate choices. As a result, they are usually more inclined to uncritically accept these choices.<sup>15</sup> (Notice, however, that the problem here is not the candidate selection procedure's inclusiveness *per se*, but the lack of opportunities for non-organised members to deliberate.)

If this is correct, it should give proponents of the standard models of intra-party democracy pause. Intra-party democracy becomes obsolete as a means of bringing citizens closer to government when it merely serves to legitimise the party leadership's position. This is the main deficiency of the two dominant models of intra-party democracy and the institutions they prescribe.

A closely related problem is that the methods of preference-expression we have auditioned so far—candidate selection and direct participation—hardly provide ways to challenge these methods themselves. In membership ballots, for example, it is not possible to express a preference for using a different method of decision-making to deal with the issue at stake.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps members think that a ballot is not the appropriate way to resolve the issue: they might think, for instance, that a yes/no referendum on a divisive issue could undermine

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<sup>14</sup>Mair 1997, p. 149. For an in-depth empirical study of these problems in parties in Great Britain and Spain, see Hopkin (2001).

<sup>15</sup>Katz and Mair 2009, p. 759.

<sup>16</sup>Gutmann and Thompson 2004, pp. 16–7.



party cohesion. But the ballot itself does not provide opportunities to raise these concerns and propose a different decision-making process.

Candidate selection methods equally fail to provide a process through which their own configurations can be challenged. *Who* is included in the selectorate, for example, is a decision that needs to be made prior to the actual selection process. In practice, this decision is usually made in top-down fashion by the party elite.<sup>17</sup> Members hardly have a say here, thus being effectively excluded from deciding on the terms of the decision-making process they are supposed to participate in at a later stage.

In sum, the candidate selection and direct participation models of intra-party democracy are concerned only with participation qua expressing views and preferences, but provide no room for participation qua *forming* views and preferences. This limits their democratic potential in important ways. What we need is a corrective to the limitations of these models.

## **B. Deliberation as corrective and complement**

A possible way forward is to shift the centre of gravity from processes in which preferences are expressed and aggregated to processes of preference-formation and clarification. Most important amongst these processes is *deliberation*. Deliberation is a practice that involves jointly engaging in discursive exchanges about specific issues. It is about finding agreements on, or getting clear about the nature and depth of disagreement over, these issues in conversation with others. All this presupposes that people's positions and perspectives are, at

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<sup>17</sup> For an in-depth case study of British parties, see Mikulska and Scarrow (2010).

least to some degree, open to reassessment and revision. In this sense, deliberation is transformative in its aspirations: a procedure to question, rather than reinforce, the status quo. This distinguishes it from the forms of “preference-expressing” participation we have considered thus far.

When we think about deliberation within political parties what naturally comes to mind are internal debates over ideology, policy, and personnel. We think perhaps also of party conferences, in which party elites give speeches and ordinary members respond. And possibly we think also of everyday discussions among partisans, informal encounters where they talk about politics with their peers. Taken together, these and other intra-party deliberations form a complex arrangement of discursive interactions, a “deliberative system” in which each component performs different roles.<sup>18</sup> Not all of the system’s components are connected to decision-making procedures, and the quality of deliberation they produce will be very different. But each component contributes to a larger deliberative whole.

The main aim of a *deliberative model of intra-party democracy* would be to coordinate the party’s internal discussions and debates in such a way that the members on the ground are more connected to policy decisions. It appears that three things must here be achieved:

- (a) First, that members on the ground deliberate about issues of common concern, and that they deliberate well;

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<sup>18</sup>On the systemic approach to deliberative democracy, see the programmatic statement by Mansbridge et al. (2012).

(b) second, that the preferences and opinions these deliberations generate are transmitted to the party elite, either face-to-face or (more likely so) through democratically elected delegates;

(c) and third, that party elites and ordinary members engage in regular discussions where they explain to each other the reasons for why they think as they do, actualising what one may call “deliberative accountability.”<sup>19</sup>

Before looking at the model’s different components, several clarifications about the nature of this model are in order. First, the deliberative model would not wholly replace candidate selection processes or occasional direct-democratic initiatives, for these practices serve important functions in parties that deliberation by itself cannot serve. (It is, for example, a practical necessity in representative democracies that parties compose lists of candidates for election; and membership ballots can be useful in helping parties to increase the formal legitimacy of their decisions.) The point of the deliberative model is that it (a) *corrects* for the tendency of these practices to cement the status quo, and (b) *complements* these practices with participatory venues that emphasise discussion and debate. By offering new opportunities to exercise voice, it can also counteract members’ disaffection with the meagre opportunities for participation that the candidate selection and direct participation models provide.

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<sup>19</sup>It might be objected here that some of the just-sketched discursive interactions are already implied in existing conceptions of intra-party democracy. For example, in practice candidate selection processes are likely to involve deliberations among members concerning the strengths and weaknesses of different candidates and their agendas. However, none of these interactions are recognised as normatively desirable or practically relevant in existing articulations of these models. It is the distinctive feature of a deliberative model of intra-party democracy that it is sensitive to the broader significance of these discursive interactions.

The second issue that needs to be clarified concerns the main protagonists in the model. Why does the deliberative model of intra-party democracy centre on the deliberations of the “party on the ground”? Recall in this connection the linkage function of intra-party democracy that was mentioned in the introduction to this article. To connect citizens and government, parties ought to empower first and foremost ordinary members and activists, who are directly in touch with the rest of the society.<sup>20</sup> This means essentially that members at the partisan base need be given adequate power to influence the party leadership. Although this does not preclude two-way communication between the party elite and the wider membership, it does involve placing limits on the discretion of party elites. Institutional designs must aim at neutralising power asymmetries. (I return to this point in section IV.)

Notice, however, that a deliberative model of intra-party democracy naturally engages a more agentic conception of linkage than is conventionally deployed. The traditional idea underlying linkage is, to repeat, that grassroots activists and ordinary members have privileged access to the demands and concerns of the party’s constituents, and should be empowered so as to channel these demands and concerns into decisions over policy or the party’s more general direction.<sup>21</sup> Party members are meant to serve as *messengers* or *delegates* of the constituents in this view. In the deliberative model, by contrast, the emphasis is not only on channelling the inputs of citizens into the party, but also, and more strongly so, on processing these inputs discursively by pooling relevant arguments and specifying interpretations in discussions and debates. Thus party members are not merely messengers,

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<sup>20</sup>Lawson 1988; Michels [1911] 1989. Note that many party scholars working with neo-Schumpeterian concepts of democracy like Dalton et al. (2011) often bracket out this function of parties. Justifying these moves is the assumption that the party equals party elite. Party members only come into play in candidate selection procedures (and perhaps in pre-election mobilising efforts) in this perspective.

<sup>21</sup>Lawson 1988.

but *deliberative agents* who jointly subject the information provided by citizens to critical scrutiny.

In the next section, I look more closely at deliberation at the party base. In a later section, I discuss how these deliberations can be connected to decision-making authority, and how decision makers can be held accountable. Before proceeding though, it should be mentioned that less than a decade ago the idea that parties should be treated as sites of deliberation would have sounded somewhat controversial to democratic theorists. For a long time, advocates of deliberative democracy regarded deliberation as incompatible with partisanship, the worry being that partisans are incapable of changing their minds because of their strong cognitive bias—or because they are in any case more interested in promoting their own sectarian interests than in engaging in reasoned discussion about common ends.<sup>22</sup> However, as deliberative theorists increasingly shifted the focus of their theories “from an ideal conception of the political to the phenomenological,”<sup>23</sup> an opening for partisanship was created.

There are several ways of looking at partisanship that see it as compatible with democratic deliberation, two of which are directly relevant for the argument put forth here. One stresses that partisanship is deliberative to the extent that it is “ethical.” Ethical partisans, writes Nancy Rosenblum, reject the “uncompromising extremism” that glorifies “intransigence as an avowed good.”<sup>24</sup> They are aware that their own perspective is partial and

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<sup>22</sup>For an excellent synthetic discussion, see Muirhead (2010). For contributions that address the (limited) compatibility of partisanship and democratic deliberation, see Gundersen (2000); Williams (2000); Hendriks et al. (2007).

<sup>23</sup>Bächtiger et al. 2010, p. 42. Key theoretical statements include Young (2002); Mansbridge et al. (2010) and Azmanova (2012).

<sup>24</sup>Rosenblum 2008, p. 402; Muirhead 2006.

acknowledge that others, even within their own party, might reasonably disagree with them. Despite their strong attachment to particular ideas, they defend their views with great respect for the other side and exhibit a disposition to listen and compromise (which presupposes that they relax the intensity with which they hold their views). This makes respectful and constructive debates possible, and facilitates reaching prudential and widely accepted outcomes—goals on which most deliberative democrats place high value.<sup>25</sup>

Another argument holds that even if partisans do not always meet the standards of good quality deliberation, this is no reason for concern. For once we accept that a party forms a self-standing deliberative system, we also need to acknowledge that the failures of one of its parts to produce good deliberation can be compensated for by another part if the individual parts are “concatenated in the right way.”<sup>26</sup> If, for example, a group of members at the party base polarises over an issue, this is likely to be the result of bad quality deliberation, where views are reinforced without weighing alternative arguments. But polarisation may help put the demands of this group on the agenda of other party groups and party elites, and these can critically re-examine those demands in their own deliberations. So, the interaction between different deliberative agents within the party can raise the overall systemic deliberative quality.

### **III. DELIBERATION AND THE PARTY ON THE GROUND**

With this preliminary outline of a deliberative model of intra-party democracy in place, we are now in a position to look more closely at its individual components. Most important

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<sup>25</sup>Gutmann and Thompson 2010, on ethical partisanship see esp. pp. 1134–7.

<sup>26</sup>Goodin 2008, p. 186.

amongst these are, as I have argued, the deliberations of the party base. But what precisely is the “party base”? Which of the numerous organisations and participatory venues one typically finds at the bottom of the party hierarchy should be included in a deliberative model of intra-party democracy? This is the first question I want to address in this section.

The answer to this question will depend first on the extent to which a given party grassroots organisation is connected to the wider citizenry and second on its capacity to produce good quality deliberation. If it satisfies these two desiderata—*connectedness to the citizenry* and *deliberative capacity*—then it may be integrated into the deliberative model. My contention is that it is only *local party branches* which, in virtue of their design as inclusive participatory institutions and their members’ commitment to discussion with like-minded partisans, satisfy these desiderata. Alternative grassroots fora may satisfy one of the two, but not both, desiderata.

We can proceed by a process of elimination here. *Milieu organisations*, such as party academies or partisan sports clubs, traditionally played a crucial role in connecting parties with their supporters. They offered opportunities for partisans to socialise with like-minded people, thereby functioning as sites of political identity formation. The problem with these organisations is that they exist only in very limited form today. As a result of falling levels of party identification, milieu organisations have diminished to the point of insignificance in most Western democracies.<sup>27</sup> So regardless of whether they satisfy the desiderata—where they still exist, they almost certainly satisfy the connectedness desideratum—including them in a deliberative model of intra-party democracy is hardly a fruitful direction. We need to look for more vibrant sites of partisan engagement.

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<sup>27</sup>Scarrow 2014, p. 162.

Might the various *online platforms* through which parties involve their membership base be a good place to look for ordinary party members who are willing to debate? In recent times, parties have increasingly tried to offer members opportunities for online participation.<sup>28</sup> The target of these initiatives are partisans who want to interact with a political party but commit as little as possible to it—partisans, that is, who do not want to regularly meet on a face-to-face basis with other partisans, and thus look for “ad hoc engagement” with few costs and obligations.<sup>29</sup> To cite just one example of such a partisan online platform, the British Labour party’s consultative forum *Your Britain.org.uk* allows members (as well as non-members) to communicate their ideas on how Labour policy should look in the future. The format of communication are online posts, which are collected and thematically organised by the website’s administrators.

Insofar as online platforms of this kind give citizens easy access to political parties, they in principle have the potential to link parties and society. Thus they are likely to satisfy the connectedness desideratum. Their deliberative credentials are, however, questionable. This is principally because they work on a no-commitment basis: people can vent their ideas and log off. There is no requirement to justify one’s statements and claims, nor will participants be inclined to respond to others’ concerns. Coleman has observed this in Labour’s 2003 *Big Conversation* online consultation exercise, the predecessor to *Your Britain*: “[N]obody responds to what anyone else has said, rather like a phone-in programme

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<sup>28</sup>Recent empirical studies reveal a considerable change of party structures. Scarrow (2014) speaks in this context of “multi-speed memberships parties,” in which a range of different membership options are offered.

<sup>29</sup>Gauja 2015, p. 94.



in which caller after caller makes a short speech and then disappears into the ether.”<sup>30</sup> Online fora of this kind, he concluded, “lack any scope for interactivity.”<sup>31</sup>

Thus, partisan online platforms seem ill-suited as basic building blocks of a deliberative model of intra-party democracy.<sup>32</sup> For like any conversation, deliberation presupposes a level of interactivity. It requires people to give and hear reasons in a way that makes plain the respect citizens ought to have and express for one another even when they disagree. In this sense, deliberation is not a “no-commitment” activity. People must be willing to invest time and intellectual resources in formulating arguments and engaging with others’ viewpoints. While this might be a lot to ask from many ordinary citizens, for some party members it is part and parcel of their political engagement. The party members I have in mind are those who regularly engage on a face-to-face basis with other partisans, discussing politics and devising political proposals. It is those members that the deliberative model of intra-party democracy revolves around.

Where might those members be found? Typically they are organised in *local party branches*. In most parties (that is, in most developed democracies other than the U.S., where parties are quite differently organised)<sup>33</sup> local branches are the smallest cells of party

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<sup>30</sup>Coleman 2004, p. 117.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Research on party blogs shows that committed online discussion can certainly occur in a partisan context (Gibson et al. 2012). The problem is that participants in these discussions are almost exclusively partisans of the same stripe; non-partisans rarely join the debate. Thus these discussions probably don’t satisfy the connectedness desideratum.

<sup>33</sup>Note that I do not mean to suggest that US parties could not draw on internal deliberative institutions. Although US parties have no direct equivalent to party branches, their “county committees” serve similar local-level functions as party branches. Thus they might exhibit similar deliberative characteristics as party branches. This issue must, of course, be settled empirically and cannot be discussed more here.

organisation.<sup>34</sup> They consist of groups of members who meet in regular intervals to discuss politics and coordinate party activities in their local community, including door-to-door campaigning, organising party events, and providing political information to citizens.<sup>35</sup> The members who attend these meetings usually hold a strong commitment to the party, and voluntarily spend considerable amounts of time engaging in grassroots politics.

Party branches, as I said, satisfy our desiderata of connectedness and deliberative capacity. First, party branches are closely linked to the local communities in which their members are based. They are directly in touch with the local constituency, and have the authority to delegate representatives to hierarchically higher party bodies to make these concerns heard.<sup>36</sup> (I will say more about delegation in section IV.) For many aspiring party members, moreover, branches provide the starting gate for their politically active life. Where they exist, they are the primary contact point for those who want to engage in the party. They allow citizens to get to know other like-minded partisans and participate in a range of activities with them. Thus, although their vibrancy has decreased as party membership figures fell over the previous decades, they are still crucial for sustaining the party's roots in society.<sup>37</sup>

Second, local party branches are, as it were, “natural” deliberative fora. Deliberation typically occurs at the branches' regular meetings, where activists, ordinary party members,

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<sup>34</sup>For a classic treatment of party branches, see Duverger 1954, pp. 17–39.

<sup>35</sup>Consider how the Austrian Social Democrats (SPÖ) define the functions of their local party branches: “We inform the people in our area about political changes of all kinds. Above all, the branch (*Sektion*) is a place where people who live in the surrounding neighbourhood meet, talk to each other and help shape their environment.” Available at <[http://www.sektion.at/index.php?article\\_id=105](http://www.sektion.at/index.php?article_id=105)>.

<sup>36</sup>As Clark (2004, p. 40) notes, “articulating interests to a local party can therefore be a way of getting an issue into the forefront of debate.”

<sup>37</sup>Scarrow 2014.

and some party officials convene to discuss local issues and current politics. These meetings are likely to exhibit characteristics that are typically thought to promote good deliberation, namely (1) a relative equality of opportunities to influence the deliberative process and (2) a relative diversity of viewpoints which ensures that issues are considered from multiple angles.<sup>38</sup>

Let me explain why I think party branches can be expected to display these features. First, participants in party branch meetings may enjoy relative equality because social status differences are typically diluted in a partisan context. Membership in parties can equalise status inequalities by giving people of less advantaged social backgrounds the opportunity to engage in politics as equals.<sup>39</sup> This means not only that membership in a party gives underprivileged people an equal standing with their political adversaries (that too, worker's parties being the obvious example here). Party membership is also a source of equality *among allies*. More particularly, it is the *partisanship*—the identification as part of a collective promoting shared political and social goals—in party membership from which a sense of equality and solidarity with fellow party members flows. Nancy Rosenblum endorses this view of partisanship. Partisanship, she argues, is a distinctive form of collective identity characterised by an “avowed connection to what ‘people like me’ value, think, and do politically.”<sup>40</sup> It is about recognition for those one stands together with in the political struggle, and about a sense of being at home with those people. In party branches, this sense of “being at home” is further reinforced by the fact that members know each other well. A result of their regular meetings and their joint engagement in the local community, they will

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<sup>38</sup>On these criteria, see Mansbridge et al. (2010, pp. 65–9).

<sup>39</sup>Cohen 1989, p. 31.

<sup>40</sup>Rosenblum 2008, p. 344.

be familiar with each other's backgrounds and personal histories, and friendships will have germinated over time.

If all this is correct, then deliberations in party branches are deliberations among “people like us”—equal, open, and empathetic. Even if there are some social and economic status inequalities among participants, mutual recognition and acknowledgement ensures that their voices have equal weight. Elements of the “ethical partisanship” I have mentioned in the prior section may well be palpable in the party branches' deliberations.

Moving now to the second feature, to what extent do participants in local party branch meetings exhibit a diversity of viewpoints? Is it not more likely that they hold rather similar views? After all, they are members of the same political party and based in the same local context. But still, this might not dramatically limit opinion diversity. On the one hand, most party branch members are not professional politicians, but politically committed lay citizens who pursue different kinds of professions; and their individual occupational backgrounds and corresponding everyday experiences are likely to result in a plurality of perspectives.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, opinion diversity may also be a consequence of age differences between the members. For example, young partisans who have just started their work in the party in the local district might enthusiastically promote new ideas, whilst older members may be more concerned with protecting what has been accomplished. These kinds of conflict are particularly likely to occur in large and established parties where the average age of party members tends to be higher than the average age of the population in large. Empirical studies reveal that, especially in traditional parties on the left, older members often hold more

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<sup>41</sup>Compare also empirical evidence showing that party members generally become more and more like members of the wider citizenry (Scarow and Gezgor 2010).

traditional (that is, more leftist) views than younger members. Some of these older members even see themselves as ideologically at odds with the rest of their party.<sup>42</sup>

To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that *all* local party branches one finds across Western democracies will exhibit the just-described characteristics. Party branches are diverse and some of them may indeed have serious deliberative defects—they may, for example, be colonised by strongly polarised party members who deliberately ignore facts that support alternative positions. All I am claiming is that, given the tendency of these groups to be socio-economically diverse, and given the integrative force of partisanship, party branches are overall likely to be promising sites of intra-party deliberation.

Someone might still object that the meetings of local party branches are more likely to produce loose everyday talk than serious political discussion. People attend these meetings to socialise with like-minded people, “talking about sports or having a summer picnic,” rather than to debate politics.<sup>43</sup> But though I do not want to deny that some of the activities of party branches are non-deliberative (party branches, for example, often organise events for the local community, in which political debate often plays a minor role), that their members generally eschew political discussion is unlikely. Even if some members are less politicised than others, their shared political commitment will prompt regular political discussions, since it brings with it a heightened sensitivity to particular grievances in society as well as a sense of responsibility for resolving them.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Haute and Carty 2012.

<sup>43</sup>Katz 2013, pp. 52–3.

<sup>44</sup>Another point is that even if some of their exchanges do look like the reasoned deliberation theorists would like to see flourishing, this might not imply that they do not contribute to deliberation in a wider, more systemic, sense. Evidence from empirical studies of deliberation suggests that even loose everyday talk can serve deliberative functions. As Conover and Searing (2005, p. 281) argue, it provides people with an opportunity to explore different arguments, try out justifications for their views and “develop confidence about performing in the public arena.”

#### IV. THE SYSTEMIC UPTAKE OF DELIBERATION AT THE PARTY BASE

Having established the deliberative credentials of local party branches, the next question is how the deliberations of these groups can be connected to substantive decisions. This section addresses this question, looking at mechanisms of delegation and accountability which normally should ensure the transmission of members' deliberated preferences to the party elite. The section also canvasses novel institutional designs to make parties more deliberative if these mechanisms are defective. So we now shift the focus from the party base as a site of deliberation to the ways in which it interacts with the other components of the partisan deliberative system.

##### A. Preference transmission, delegation, and accountability

In most political parties, the party base is *indirectly* linked to decision-making authority. Typically grassroots members delegate to representatives at higher hierarchical levels of the party, just like voters delegate to MPs in elections. There are, essentially, two modes of intra-party delegation. The first and more direct one is, indeed, *candidate selection*. How does candidate selection allow party branches to bring their deliberated views to bear on decisions? Mainly through selectorates. Those who select the candidates can influence later decisions by choosing candidates with whom they share views and values.<sup>45</sup> If selectorate member *A* is also a member of a party branch—and this quite often the case, especially if the

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<sup>45</sup>Empirical studies show that selectors tend to choose candidates according to this logic. As Gallagher (1988, p. 2) notes in a classic study of candidate selection practices, “the values of the selectorate ... frequently have more impact than those of the voters.”

method of candidate selection is decentralised<sup>46</sup>—then her selection is likely to be influenced by the deliberations of her branch. In a pre-selection meeting, for instance, the branch’s members may reach a reasoned agreement regarding which candidate to support, and commit *A* to select accordingly.

Furthermore, selected candidates may themselves be members of a party branch, and correspondingly ground their decisions in their branch’s deliberative judgments.

Undoubtedly, this is the most direct way for party branches to influence policy decisions. It allows local deliberations to directly feed into the legislature. This is certainly not an unfamiliar scenario: in many parties the road to candidacy in legislative elections necessarily involves engagement at the local level, since the support of the local base is an important requirement to gain a place on the party list, and so some elected MPs will inevitably engage in a local branch. In this scenario, the members of the party branch can also hold their parliamentary delegate accountable by demanding explanations and justifications for her decisions in the group’s regular meetings, thus actualising a form of deliberative accountability.<sup>47</sup>

The second and more indirect mode of delegation is what I call *multi-level delegation*. By this I mean that elected delegates of the party branches carry the branches’ deliberative judgments to various assemblies at different levels of the party hierarchy, where they are either channelled into decisions or, alternatively, delegation proceeds to higher organisational levels. Multi-level delegation is a hallmark of parties that adopt a territorial organisational structure comprising several hierarchical organisational levels. Typically this form of

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<sup>46</sup>Hazan and Rahat 2010, pp. 55–3.

<sup>47</sup>Note that a potential shortcoming in this scenario is that a single party branch would gain disproportionate influence on policy decisions compared with those party branches, which have no elected representatives among their members.

organisation implies that the membership is represented at all organisational levels by a members' or delegates' assembly, which is composed of or elected by the party membership, with the local and regional assemblies as well as the national party congress constituting "the supreme decision-making organs of the party at the respective organizational echelons."<sup>48</sup> In these assemblies, and in the party congress, the branches' judgments are again made the subject of deliberative reappraisal.<sup>49</sup> In addition, delegates can be held accountable by the branch members when they return from the assemblies. Similarly to cases where members of party branches hold a seat in the legislature, they can respond to their questions and explain them why decisions played out as they did.

## **B. Empirical challenges to preference transmission**

These are the two standard ways for party branches to link their deliberations to decision-making authority. To the extent that they permit communication flows between the party base and the decision-makers in the party, they can in principle provide the kind of linkage I have earlier singled out as desirable.

Once we consult the empirical literature on political parties, however, doubts arise as to whether these modes of delegation work sufficiently well to perform their linkage function. First, if multi-level delegation is to successfully connect the party branches' deliberations to policy decisions across several hierarchical levels of the party, it needs to proceed largely bottom-up. (As I have said earlier, on my understanding this does not preclude leaving room

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<sup>48</sup>Biezen and Piccio 2013, p. 43.

<sup>49</sup>See Pettitt's (2007) account of internal dissent at the party congresses of the British Labour Party and the Danish Socialist People's Party.



for two-way communication between party elites and ordinary members, for instance, in party conferences.<sup>50</sup> But certain institutional checks are necessary to restrict the discretion of the party elite, notably formal rules that require party elites to consider and take seriously the members' judgments.) Otherwise the party branches' deliberations are likely to be bypassed by more powerful actors in the party. In reality, however, parties seldom work in this way.<sup>51</sup> Even if party laws prescribe a bottom-up organisational structure (as is the case in many European countries), and even if the parties *formally* adopt such a structure, they are usually organised from the top down, or indeed stratarchically, as in Katz and Mair's much-discussed cartel party model.<sup>52</sup> On the latter model, the relationship between party members and the party leadership is in fact characterised by "mutual autonomy," which is to say that the party's different hierarchical levels are effectively decoupled from one another. At best, real existing parties "*combine* bottom-up and top-down government," as a recent study of Norwegian parties shows.<sup>53</sup> But even in those cases the deliberative judgments of the party base are often overruled by party elites.

Second, parties across Western democracies increasingly adopt candidate selection methods that shift power away from the party branches and activists to the passive and uninvolved membership (and sometimes even to non-members).<sup>54</sup> I have alluded to this tendency in section II. According to one prominent commentator, this is "one of the most

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<sup>50</sup>Pettitt 2007.

<sup>51</sup>Houten 2009.

<sup>52</sup>Katz and Mair 1995 and 2009.

<sup>53</sup>Allern and Saglie 2012, p. 966.

<sup>54</sup>Hazan and Rahat 2010, pp. 39–44.

commonly distinct trends we see today”:<sup>55</sup> parties tend to make selectorates more inclusive, which carries the aura of greater internal democratisation but often diminishes the influence of party branches and their activists on the selection of the candidates. For example, party primaries in several parties in Germany, New Zealand, and Finland formally incorporate *all* party members in the selectorate and thus concentrate the power over the party list in the hands of member cohorts who ordinarily engage little (or not at all) in the party, and in any case are more inclined to support the candidates nominated by the party leadership.<sup>56</sup> By implication, this decreases the extent to which the deliberative judgments of party branches impact election candidates. In sum, the standard pathways of linking the deliberations of the party base to substantive decisions appear defective in most parties today.

### **C. Making parties more deliberative**

More could be said on the adverse implications the current organisational reality of parties in developed democracies has on the channels of preference transmission connecting the grassroots with the legislature, but given space constraints I can only map a general trend here. This trend gives plenty of reason for scepticism concerning the capacity of real existing parties to make their branches’ deliberations consequential: organisational realities appear to undermine parties’ capacity for linkage. This raises the question of how linkage could be re-established. How could one bring the deliberations of party branches to bear on policy decisions, despite the unfavourable institutional environment most parties provide today?

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<sup>55</sup>Mair 1997, p. 149; see also Katz and Mair 2009, p. 759.

<sup>56</sup>Rahat 2013, p. 138.

One way that is consistent with the propositions laid out so far would be to make increased use of deliberative institutional designs within parties. Recent years have seen a proliferation of these kinds of institutions—examples include Deliberative Polls, citizens juries, and other types of deliberative consultative fora—and it seems worthwhile to consider integrating them into parties, too. Rather than merely trying to make candidate selection methods more democratic, practitioners could avail themselves of a vast array of deliberative innovations.

In the final part of this section, I want to point out some possible institutional designs. Although mainly indicative, the following three proposals highlight ways in which parties could draw on their internal deliberative resources to strengthen the link between the members on the ground and the party elite.

The most obvious deliberative institutional design is what one may call a *problem-oriented forum*.<sup>57</sup> This kind of forum is a specially established assembly for deliberation over one or multiple predetermined issues. Problem-oriented fora could, for instance, convene the members of several randomly selected party branches in a larger deliberative setting to devise a strategy for the party in a particular policy field. They could make tasks like drafting a party or election manifesto a more collaborative and interactive exercise, and its results are likely to enjoy more legitimacy than if such tasks are left to a small elite.

An innovative approach to using party branches as problem-oriented fora has been taken by the Australian Labour Party (ALP). In December 2011, the ALP's party conference has endorsed the establishment of issue-based branches, called *Policy Action Caucuses*

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<sup>57</sup>Note that this proposition differs starkly from the partisan deliberative fora Hendriks and her colleagues (2007) have examined. In contrast to these “stakeholder forums,” which include representatives of different businesses as well as advocacy groups, the type of fora I am proposing here convene only grassroots members of a single political party.

(PACs). PACs are established and run by party members; setting them up requires thirty members. Once established, they “receive financial support and resources from the party in the same way as a geographic local branch, and [they are] entitled to convene meetings, policy forums and put policy motions to conference.”<sup>58</sup> This provides party members with an opportunity to pool relevant knowledge relating to a particular issue and work out policy proposals. While the deliberative credentials of PACs have yet to be examined, it seems clear that issue-based fora of this kind are a vehicle of member empowerment that is much in line with the institutional recommendations put forward here.

Second, to handle bigger deliberative tasks, single fora could also be “networked.”<sup>59</sup> This design bears resemblance to the way in which internal sites of deliberation ideally interact in multi-level delegation. A *partisan deliberative network* would comprise a number of dispersed fora of deliberation within the party that are linked together. In such a network, local branches would form single nodes that address limited aspects of specific issues in their deliberations, perhaps with an eye to the demands of their local constituency. The information from each node would subsequently be channelled together so that their recommendations can guide decision-making in large. Upon concluding its deliberations, each branch could, for example, elect a delegate to a single national forum, which in its turn could pool all the deliberative judgments of the party branches across the country and work out a highly integrative decision.

Note that establishing partisan deliberative networks might not require much institutional effort. After all, according to much recent research, parties are in any case best conceived in terms of networks of partisans, that is, dispersed and decentralised systems of

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<sup>58</sup>Gauja 2015, p. 98.

<sup>59</sup>On the idea of deliberative networks, see Rummens (2012).

interconnected partisan groups.<sup>60</sup> If this is true, then making these networks more deliberative would involve simply improving the channels of communication that connect individual partisan groups, and coordinating their deliberations better. So, networked partisan deliberation might have plenty of pre-existing resources to build on.

The third and final institutional design I want to sketch here is a *partisan deliberative conference*. This type of deliberative assembly differs from the problem-oriented forum in that it brings grassroots members together with party elites rather than convening the members on their own. Its chief purpose is to strengthen accountability by promoting face-to-face encounters between members and elites, in which they “ask questions and give answers, exploring whether or not they remain mutually aligned and whether the grounds of their alignment might have changed.”<sup>61</sup> Moreover, partisan deliberative conferences need not result in immediate collective decisions. They could also only prepare the way for decisions that are taken at a later point in time, or be organised with a retrospective outlook to evaluate previously taken decisions.

One potential use of partisan deliberative conferences is to supplement direct democratic procedures. For example, the members’ conferences the German SPD organised in several federal states prior to its membership ballot on the coalition agreement with the CDU/CSU allowed large numbers of members and activists to debate the terms of the coalition pact face-to-face with the party leadership. In these conferences, the party leadership was compelled to explain the reasons for their support of the “grand coalition” and engage in two-way communication with the membership. While the party base in the end

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<sup>60</sup>This topic has recently received special attention in research on party politics in the U.S., see for example Desmarais et al. (2015). For a theoretical (and rather critical) statement on the “party as a network,” see Katz and Mair (2009, esp. pp. 761-762).

<sup>61</sup>Mansbridge 2009, p. 384, fn. 57.

supported the coalition agreement, the initial resistance by segments of the membership (notably the *JUSOS*, the party's youth organisation) which mobilised internal protest against the coalition, and the ensuing pressure on the leadership to more extensively justify the coalition agreement vis-à-vis the members, is indicative of the democratic potential of such conference-style fora.

A question that might be asked here is whether these institutional designs can be adopted by *any* party. Parties come, after all, in a variety of different forms, and it seems likely that different organisational features and programmatic commitments would affect the feasibility of internal deliberative democratisation. Absent in-depth empirical research on deliberation within parties, however, taking a definitive position regarding the compatibility of deliberative designs with different party types is difficult. But given the variegated contexts in which non-partisan deliberative designs proved to work, I think it should be possible to experiment with such institutional designs across different kinds of parties. A minimum condition would seem to be that their membership is organised to some degree.

Of course, some parties are generally much less deliberative than others, which naturally makes it more difficult for them to enact deliberative reforms. In authoritarian parties on the extreme fringes of the political system, for example, deliberation is likely to be of very low quality. Efforts to make these parties more internally deliberative are bound to fail. But in reality there in any case tends to be little demand for greater internal democratisation in parties of this kind. So, at least at the level of practical implementation, the question of whether or not the institutional designs proposed here are compatible with poorly deliberative parties might not be an issue we have to worry much about.

A final question that might be raised concerns the broader benefits of making parties more internally deliberative. What, apart from bringing citizens closer to government, might

parties gain from adopting deliberative institutional designs? There are at least three possible positive consequences, to which I want to briefly allude as this section draws to a close. First, and most importantly, revitalising the linkage function of political parties through deliberative designs might help counteract the decline of party that so many commentators complain about. Much has been written in recent times about the increasing disengagement from partisan politics, growing dissatisfaction with and distrust in parties, problems of accountability and responsiveness, and so on.<sup>62</sup> Reorienting parties towards their partisan base (and through their base towards the citizens) using the kind of institutions I have outlined in this article could work against these corrosive trends. Empowered deliberative participatory opportunities for party members could restore popular trust in the willingness of parties to take seriously the judgments of the citizens on the ground, and correspondingly provide an incentive to engage more in parties. Perhaps the decline of party could not be fully reversed with the help of deliberative designs: after all, the just-described trends are not only the result of organisational failure, but also have to do with the loosening of class identities and the changing structure of the capitalist economy.<sup>63</sup> But even if internal deliberative democratisation is no panacea, it could certainly strengthen citizens' belief in the worth of engaging with collective political agency.

Second, and relatedly, bringing the deliberated views of the party base to bear on the party agenda could over time sharpen a party's distinctive partisan profile. It is often lamented (especially in Europe) that parties have become virtually indistinguishable from one

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<sup>62</sup>See, paradigmatically, Mair (2013a).

<sup>63</sup>On the relationship between party decline and capitalism, see Streeck (2014).

another and, thus, fail to offer citizens real political choice.<sup>64</sup> An empowered membership could counteract this tendency. Especially in centre-left parties, where ordinary members often hold significantly more leftist views than the party elite,<sup>65</sup> increasing the members' impact on decisions might lead to a programmatic re-positioning that heralds a renewed capacity to offer voters a credible alternative.

Finally, some of the deliberative institutions I have outlined could powerfully aid the flourishing of transnational partisanship. Still a relatively under-theorised idea, transnational partisanship denotes cooperation of like-minded partisans across national borders. Its normative point is to connect what would otherwise remain separate political spheres in the pursuit of transnational political projects.<sup>66</sup> While this has often been an enterprise of party elites, partisan deliberative networks would seem well-equipped to transnationalise grassroots partisanship. Such networks could be created to pool knowledge from partisans of several countries. For example, *Europarties* could use them to draft a unified manifesto for European Parliament elections. In such a set-up, designated fora of the respective national parties would form the networks' single nodes; and these fora would in turn send delegates to a pan-European partisan forum.<sup>67</sup> It is innovations of this kind that deliberative institutional designs make thinkable. So there can be no doubt that parties, and indeed democracy more generally, could profit from the suggested deliberative reforms in a variety of ways.

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<sup>64</sup>The standard argument, here in the words of David Beetham (2011, p. 127), is this: "The disintegration of traditional social bases combined with the reduction of ideological differences under the pressure of economic neo-liberalism has made mainstream parties increasingly indistinguishable from each other, and less vote-worthy as a consequence."

<sup>65</sup>Haute and Carty 2012.

<sup>66</sup>White 2014, esp. pp. 390–3.

<sup>67</sup>Of course, language differences can complicate deliberation in a transnational partisan forum. Evidence from fora of this kind (like the European Social Forum) shows however that these barriers can be overcome using professional translators (Doerr 2012).



## V. DELIBERATIVE PARTIES IN THE AGE OF PARTY DECLINE

That concludes my discussion of a deliberative model of intra-party democracy. But although I have responded to a number of objections throughout the article, it might still be worried that some of the arguments I have laid out are ultimately too optimistic. Sceptics might argue, for example, that the near universal decline of party memberships across democratic countries puts the possibility of internally deliberative parties out of reach.<sup>68</sup> Absent active members, it may be said, turning parties into deliberative assemblies in which reasoned collective judgments emerge from the membership base is illusory. Too thinned out and fragmented is the membership at the local level to be meaningfully involved in the party.

But whether it is inferred from this that intra-party democracy is generally superfluous, or that parties should involve more non-members into their democratic procedures (for instance, through candidate selection methods that include unaffiliated supporters), arguments of this kind lack persuasive force. Empirically, one should be cautious with overstating the decline of party memberships. Of course, membership parties are not what they once were. But their decline is not absolute in the sense that there are no active members left in today's parties.<sup>69</sup> Normatively, and this is the more important point, bypassing existing active members on the grounds that they are fewer than in the past appears

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<sup>68</sup>Biezen et al. 2012; Mair 2013a.

<sup>69</sup>In fact, several recent studies of party members suggest that “traditional party membership is far from obsolete” (Scarow 2014, p. 216). Although party membership figures declined in the last two decades, the number of politically active partisans remained surprisingly consistent (Ponce and Scarow, forthcoming).

democratically suspect: indeed, providing them with inclusive channels to participate has a moral claim as a way of recognising their democratic political equality.

A second challenge arises from what Peter Mair has called the growing tension between the “demands of responsiveness” and the “demands of responsibility.”<sup>70</sup> Parties, so the argument goes, are subject to increasing pressure from lobbyist and special interests as well as supranational or international bodies that “have a right to be heard and, indeed, the authority to insist,” and this makes it more and more difficult for them to respond to the demands of their members.<sup>71</sup> In Europe, for example, the EU level has assumed responsibility in a large number of policy fields, which naturally limits the scope of policy goals parties can realistically pursue.<sup>72</sup> Thus one may say that irrespective of what the members decide in their deliberations, party leaders lack the discretion to translate these decisions into policies.

The problem here is similar to the problem facing parties with regard to their voters: institutional constraints reduce the range of policies that can be offered and pursued. But that does not tell against intra-party democracy. Always there are practical limitations that apply to realising political goals, without it following that seeking to attain these be fruitless. Indeed, even if party leaders are bound only to achieve partially integrative agreements in their policy negotiations, that they seek to represent the demands of the membership (as well as their constituents) would seem a minimal condition for citizens to exercise collective political agency. Such is, in fact, the very rationale and justification for intra-party democracy, as I have argued at the outset of the article.

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<sup>70</sup>Mair 2013b.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>72</sup>Rose 2014.

So to sum up, a deliberative model of intra-party democracy faces a number of challenges, though none which would fatally compromise the possibilities of it being realised. Doubts are warranted in light of the dire state of parties in Western democracies, but to see their gradual decline as a reason to give up on their potential to bring citizens closer to government amounts to questioning whether democracy as such is thinkable. Surely, when it comes to making parties more internally deliberative, still much depends on political will. Especially the implementation of deliberative institutional designs within parties would require party elites to renounce some of their authority, and one may reasonably doubt whether they would readily do so. But these are ultimately secondary points, none of which undermine the potential of the model suggested here. Making parties more internally democratic requires making them also more internally deliberative.

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