The Politics of Party Policy

From Members to Legislators

ANIKA GAUJA

UNDERSTANDING GOVERNANCE

The Politics of Party Policy

From Members to Legislators

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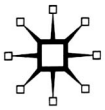

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACS	Australian Candidate Study
ALP	Australian Labor Party
BRS	British Representation Study
CLP	Constituency Labour Party (UK Labour)
EPO	Extra-parliamentary party organisation
FCC	Federal Conference Committee (Liberal Democrats)
FPC	Federal Policy Committee (Liberal Democrats)
GST	Goods and Services Tax
HoR	House of Representatives
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
JPS	Joint Policy Committee (UK Labour)
LEC	Local Electorate Council (NZ Labour)
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MMP	Mixed member proportional representation
MP	Member of Parliament
NEC	National Executive Committee (UK Labour)
NPF	National Policy Forum (UK Labour, Australian Labor Party)
NPC	National Policy Committee (Australian Labor Party)
NSW	New South Wales
NUS	National Union of Students
NZ	New Zealand
NZCS	New Zealand Candidate Study
PAC	Policy Action Caucuses (Australian Labor Party)
PCG	Policy Coordinating Group (Australian Greens)
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
PP	Parliamentary party
PRU	Policy Research Unit (Liberal Democrats)
SDP	Social Democratic Party (UK)
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States

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1
Introduction

In the last decade, the analysis of political parties as representative and participatory institutions where citizens can 'have their say' on policy issues has taken a decidedly pessimistic turn. Fuelled by widespread evidence of citizen disaffection and withdrawal from parties, political scientists have questioned the ability of these organisations to perform the function of linking citizens and the state. Recent comparative party literature suggests that political parties are no longer fulfilling their 'traditional' roles as vehicles for citizen participation and partisan representation, but rather are focusing their efforts on the goals of maintaining office and governance. This view prevails despite parties' recent attempts to democratise their decision-making processes and to open up policy development to increasing participation from the membership and the general public to achieve these two objectives: to make parties more participatory and to ensure their policies reflect the views of their supporters.

Although there is continuing normative debate over the exact role that political parties should play in linking citizens with those who govern them, the ideals of participation and representation are still held up to be the democratic benchmarks to which political organisations should aspire. Both are crucial to the concept of party government, and are held in high esteem by those who advocate for intra-party democracy – that the internal organisation of political parties should be democratic, responsive and accountable. They are also ideals that are still inherent in the formal organisation of many political parties, which claim to offer their members the opportunity to participate in intra-party decisions, including the formulation of party policy. In this model, policies and election manifestos formulated by the party (with the participation of its members) are approved by citizens in general elections and then applied by the party's elected representatives to legislative debates. The key assumption here is that what goes into the

party (policy input by members) corresponds to what goes out (policy output by legislators).

But is this the right way of thinking about intra-party policy development, particularly at a time when political parties are at the centre of much public criticism and seemingly inevitable decline? Naturally, the theory behind party government and policy linkage is not so straightforward when put into practice and numerous authors have argued that 'democratic' policy-making, based on the principles of participation and representation, is impossible to achieve in reality (not least Michels, 1962 and McKenzie, 1963). But the politics of policy development, and the intra-party contest, is always seen in relatively black-and-white terms: as a battle between conference and parliamentarians, or between activists and elites. I argue that this is too simplistic a conception, and call for a greater acknowledgement of the complexity of the policy-making process within political parties – who is involved, their motivations, patterns of engagement, and how these traits are in turn shaped by organisational, social and institutional pressures. Such a re-examination is crucial at a time when political parties in many established democracies are undertaking processes of reform and democratic renewal, patterns of citizen engagement in politics are changing, and societies re-evaluate how politics (both formal and informal) can best function.

As Mulé (1997, p. 497) has observed, 'discussions of party decline have prompted remarkably few re-examinations of the nature of political parties. Most predictions are based on the mass-party model and fail to differentiate notions of adaptation and change from notions of party decline'. Indeed, it is the premise of this book that it is unhelpful to argue that political parties are simply in decline; that their policy-making function (and particularly that of their memberships has eroded) – without undertaking a careful analysis of how policy-making occurs, how it has changed over time, and uncovering some of the normative assumptions that underlie how it should operate. Therefore, the book aims to provide an in-depth examination of the structures and processes that shape the development of party policy, the respective role of members and parliamentarians in the process, and the transferral of party policy to the legislative arena.

Key questions that are investigated are: How does the process operate? What factors facilitate or hinder participation? Do we really observe a correlation between the official policy programme of a party and the legislative actions of its parliamentarians? Rather than looking at the relative similarities and differences between the ideological positions and policy preferences of members, activists and party leaders (see

for example May, 1973; Norris, 1995), this book concentrates on the process that enables policy preferences to be articulated. The possible tensions that surround this process are empirical, theoretical and normative. Empirically, is there a practical way in which members' views can effectively and meaningfully be integrated into party policy? Theoretically, can policy ownership by the extra-parliamentary party be reconciled with the concept of independent representation that is central to parliamentary representation? Normatively, who should have a greater say over policy development – the public, party members, or parliamentarians, and what is the appropriate balance between them?

Given that policy-making is a fundamental role of political parties in representative democracies – twined with a party's functions as an articulator and aggregator of citizens' interests – it can also be used as a lens through which to examine some of the broader organisational changes that are taking place within political parties. These changes include the increasing power of the parliamentary party as the expense of the extra-parliamentary party organisation, a shift in the role and even the nature of the party membership and a corresponding 'hollowing out' of party structures. While the existing literature and original research presented in this book focuses specifically on the policy development process in political parties, it also addresses broader questions of party organisation and allows us to think about the implications of a potential policy-making shift for the operation of political parties in modern democratic societies.

One of the arguments put forward is that it is only vary rarely that we observe actual conflict between members and parliamentarians in terms of party policy. In this respect, the book confirms previous research that suggests this occurs because the policy development process of a given party is dominated by the leadership (centred within the parliamentary party). However, new insights are provided as to why this might be the case (including the nature of parliamentary politics and the representative role, the distribution of resources, and patterns of political participation – for example, the trend to establishing supporters' networks and consultative forms of engagement). In other instances, policy conflict is avoided because the body of policy developed by the membership bears little relevance to what is actually being debated in parliament. Yet to write intra-party policy development off because of its distance from national politics would be to discount layers of participation at local and regional levels, within smaller parties, and online, and to assume that policy participation has no real meaning, or efficacy, unless actual legislative changes ensue.

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Understanding policy development

The way in which this book conceptualises and examines the process of intra-party policy-making and the relationship between political parties, their members and parliamentarians is through a comparative analysis of the development and application of party policy across three party families (social democratic, liberal democratic and green) in three parliamentary democracies (Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom). A total of eight different political parties are used as case studies throughout (see below, Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Case Studies

	Party Family	**Parliamentary Representation from 1997 to 2012**
Australia		
Australian Labor Party	Social Democratic	Opposition (1997–2007); Government (2007–2010); Minority Government (2010–)
Australian Greens	Green	Minor Party with representation in the Australian Senate (1997–) and the House of Representatives (2002–2004, 2010–)
Australian Democrats	Liberal Democratic	Minor Party with representation in the Australian Senate (1997–2008)
New Zealand		
NZ Labour	Social Democratic	Opposition (1997–1999); Coalition Government (1999–2008); Opposition (2008–)
Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand	Green	Minor Party with representation in the NZ House of Representatives (1999–)
United Kingdom		
UK Labour Party	Social Democratic	Government (1997–2010); Opposition (2010–)
Liberal Democrats	Liberal Democratic	Third Party with representation in the House of Commons (1997–2010); Governing coalition partner with the Conservatives (2010–)
Green Party	Green	Minor party with representation in the Commons (2010–); No seats in the Commons (1997–2010)

The time period covered spans from 1997 (with the election of Blair's New Labour government in the UK and just after the defeat of the Australian Labor Party after 13 years in government) until 2012. This timeframe coincides with the start of a key period of modernisation within the social democratic parties, and allows an analysis of how variations in parliamentary representation might impact upon the nature of policy development (for example, the difference between being in government and opposition). Further details of the parties included and the dimensions of the comparative case studies are discussed in Chapter 2.

I focus specifically on the social democratic, liberal democratic and green party families as they claim to foster participation in policy development while generally demanding party discipline and adherence to policy amongst their parliamentarians, thus presenting the most accurate example of parties operating, at least in a formal sense, according to the model of representation and linkage outlined above. The concept of the party family is employed within the overall framework as it is a useful analytical tool through which to group political parties that share similar origins and ideological characteristics (Mair and Mudde, 1998, pp. 223–5), and allows for an examination of the relationship between a party's broad ethos and its decision-making processes (see further Chapter 3). However, while we might expect parties belonging to the same family to share similar organisational characteristics, part of this project is to explore variations that might occur both across and within party families, providing a more nuanced and critical application of the concept. The three Westminster democracies provide a good basis for comparison given the similarity of their parliamentary traditions, shared constitutional and cultural heritage, yet the interesting variations in their electoral and party systems. Each of these democracies has also experienced an interesting shift from majoritarian to coalition style politics, starting with New Zealand's electoral reform in the mid-1990s, and more recently in both the UK and Australia with the hung parliaments produced by the 2010 general elections.

The approach taken in this book comprises two distinct, yet interrelated, lines of inquiry. The first part examines whether political parties actually fulfil their roles as venues for participation through an analysis of the operation of the policy processes (formally and in practice) within each party family. I pose several questions: what types of participation do political parties prefer their members to engage in (for example, direct ballots or attending party conferences)? What

mechanisms are available for policy development? Who participates in the process? What is the relationship between the party's leaders, its members, its supporters and the general public in formulating policy? An analysis of who participates, the extent of this participation and the quality and meaningfulness of the participatory opportunities on offer is necessary in order to determine whether policy can be regarded as having been determined by a party's members or supporters or whether it is in fact dominated by the party leadership.

The second part shifts the analysis to the legislative arena – to the interpretation and application of party policy by members of parliament (MPs). The transformation of party policy to legislation is often overlooked in studies of party organisation, but this is a crucial link in many models of democratic representation (see Katz, 2006; Lawson, 1988) and it is here that a potential tension between constituency and party representation may arise. In the British context, McKenzie (1963) has argued that the constitutional design of government (features such as cabinet government, collective responsibility and parliamentary sovereignty) means that party members have little scope to influence their parliamentarians in policy decisions. This book builds on McKenzie's basic premise and updates it for the twenty-first century, examining just how the various forces of party and parliament interact, and the implications for intra-party politics, particularly at a time when we are witnessing greater calls for the accountability, transparency and efficacy of parliament as a policy-making institution (see for example Hansard Society, 2010). This part of the study examines whether legislative decisions of the parliamentary party reflect party policy and the extent to which party parliamentarians are responsive to the views of the membership through an analysis of attitudes to representation, the influences upon parliamentary decision-making processes and the maintenance of links to and consultation with the party membership. Can political parties (and their members) hold party parliamentarians to account in following policy? Do parliamentarians of different party families view their responsibility to the party and its policies differently? Do certain features of parliamentary democracy (for example, cabinet government and coalition politics) aid or hinder the transmission of members' views to the legislature?

By analysing policy decisions both within the parliamentary party (PP), the extra-parliamentary party organisation (EPO) and assessing the link (or disjoint) between them, I aim to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the policy-making process, the relationship between party members and legislators, and more broadly, the extent

to which political parties function as representative and participatory institutions. In this sense, it is important to note that I am conducting this analysis of the link between participation and representation in policy development as a *process*, identifying and evaluating key structures and practices rather than tracking the development of individual policies.

Investigating the link between members' policy preferences and legislative outcomes is not a straightforward task. With the exception of May's law of curvilinear disparity (May, 1973, pp. 148–9), which suggests that party members are more ideologically extreme than their legislative representatives, previous studies based on the respective ideological positions of members and elites (see for example Kitschelt, 1989a and Norris, 1995) have been unable to agree on a clear causal relationship, owing to its complexity and the myriad of intervening factors that might shape it. This book endeavours to build on these investigations by analysing the individual structures, processes, actors and interdependencies that form the links of the chain of policy development – rather than trying to establish or disprove one over-arching relationship. In this sense, I focus on the power exchanges between various actors within the party and the structures and processes that shapes these interactions, rather than on ideology and ideological difference (see also Mulé, 1997, p. 503 for a similar approach).

Material for this book has been gathered from a variety of different sources. First and foremost, I have aimed to bring together the existing bodies of work on both party organisation and parliamentary politics, which have not tended to speak to one another, to better illustrate the complex relationship between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary parties in party policy development. This material is both supplemented and expanded upon by some of the findings of my own qualitative research, consisting of an extensive documentary analysis of party rules and constitutions, internal documents, policy materials, websites, financial statements, conference and party meeting observations, media reports and a series of over 50 interviews with party members, office holders and parliamentary representatives conducted between 2003 and 2008. Details of the interviews appear in the Reference section of the book. Some names have been removed to protect participant confidentiality agreements. Interviewees were targeted for the positions they held within the party, and their role or particular interest in the policy development process. This evidence is further complemented by quantitative data obtained from previously conducted studies of membership participation and legislative behaviour.

Researching the internal politics of political parties is notoriously difficult, and the researcher/reader must be careful not to place too much reliance on any one particular account given the inevitable hurdles of representativeness and bias (see Gauja, 2009). It is with this caveat that the interview evidence presented in this book is intended to only be illustrative of a range of opinions rather than establishing a clear trend. However, interviews form a fundamental part of this project as they bridge the theory of politics with the reality, and provide a more engaging and grounded perspective on organisational dilemmas that otherwise might be obscured in documentary and statistical analysis alone. Taken together, the range of documentary, interview and survey evidence assembled is intended to underpin a robust, mixed-methods approach to the study of intra-party and legislative institutions, policy processes and decision-making.

Structure of the book

An introduction to the themes concerning intra-party policy development and the role of members and legislators is provided in Chapter 2. The chapter situates the book within the current literature on the decline of political parties in contemporary democracies, and some of the key theoretical ideas surrounding party organisation, participation and representation. I argue that the democratic performance of parties needs to be evaluated according to the role they play in linking citizen participation in politics with the representative function performed by political elites, and this necessitates looking at both the internal processes and the organisation of parties, and at the actions of legislators in the parliamentary arena. Reflecting one of the key themes of the research – the ideals of, and connection between, participation and representation – the remainder of the book is structured in two main parts. Chapters 3 to 6 assess the opportunities for, and patterns of, participation in these parties; whereas Chapters 8 to 10 examine policy transferral to the parliament and the operation of the parties as vehicles for representation.

Chapter 3 compares the way in which the parties belonging to the three different party families present themselves as participatory institutions and the importance they ascribe to facilitating membership involvement in policy development. Based on this rhetoric, I identify several types of participation: direct, delegate, representative and consultative. What is particularly interesting about parties' rhetoric is how it differs from academic accounts of how party organisations actually

work: parties say they are internally democratic and encourage participation, but most political scientists strongly doubt this. I attempt to reconcile these views by arguing that parties' rhetoric is largely the product of social expectations and the need for democratic legitimacy and thus is difficult to alter, and evaluate the reasons why political parties might want to give their members a say in the development of party policy.

This typology of participation developed in Chapter 3 is employed in Chapter 4 to analyse how parties put this democratic rhetoric into practice, evaluating the operation of a number of key forums for membership participation: local meetings, policy working groups, conferences, ballots and consultation exercises. The analysis draws on internal party reports, media commentary and interviews, and relays members' and activists' own perceptions of participation within their parties. I argue that party size is a key factor that determines the formal opportunities for participation that are on offer to members, but that there is an emerging trend amongst all parties to place greater emphasis on representative committees and consultation exercises as a means by which to ascertain members' views rather than more direct and 'traditional' forms of participation such as local meetings and party conferences.

A comparative assessment of the actual levels of membership engagement in these processes is presented in Chapter 5, along with an analysis of the locus of this participation. Data is drawn from previous surveys of membership participation in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, none of which has actually been systematically compared across democracies or party types. Membership inactivity is a common problem amongst all parties, despite the participatory opportunities that are on offer, which suggests that the internal organisational structure of political parties is not solely to blame for this trend. In response to declining levels of membership participation and engagement, Chapter 6 examines the emerging trend amongst parties to 'outsource' or to 'open up' policy development – to look beyond their own memberships for policy ideas and to expand participation to the general public. The chapter evaluates the consequences of this trend for the future of parties as membership organisations, and some of the strategies that party activists have employed to regain influence in this process.

Chapter 7 marks the analytical transition from membership participation to elite representation, and explores the role and influence of party elites (office holders, parliamentarians) and paid staff in the formal process of formulating 'official' party policy. I ask whether this

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