

PARTIES AS FRANCHISE SYSTEMS

The Stratarchical Organizational Imperative

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ABSTRACT

The article begins by identifying a number of apparently dissonant characteristics of modern party organization, suggesting that they define patterns of internal organizational relationship that are more stratarchical than hierarchical. To provide a framework for analysing the structure and activities of stratarchical parties, the article develops a franchise model of party organization. After identifying the essential elements of the franchise party, and particularly the contract that defines it, the article points to how the model elucidates the distinctive character of factionalism, membership and leadership in modern political parties.

KEY WORDS ■ franchise system ■ party membership ■ party organization
■ stratarchy

How do modern parties organize? This simple question has become one of the important puzzles for students of democratic politics. Recent analyses point to a series of changes that appear to characterize the parties of the classic Western systems. The puzzle is that the most dramatic of these changes point in contradictory directions. Thus, most parties in developed systems are facing sharply declining memberships while individual party members are winning increased decision-making power, especially on crucial personnel choices. At the same time, party leaders, especially those of the party in public office, have enhanced their power and autonomy though only by increasing their dependence on outside professionals such as pollsters and media experts. Peter Mair (1994: 16) recognized the 'apparent paradox' in these developments when he asked 'How can parties democratize while at the same time affording more autonomy and power to the party in public office?'

Two other important patterns characterize the change syndrome, although they seem to be mutually reinforcing. Party identifications are in

decline and, with fewer people holding fixed partisan orientations, parties are increasingly resorting to opportunistic electoral appeals. The pressure to do so lies behind the growing autonomy of the party in public office with their appeals taking the parties a qualitative step beyond Kirchheimer's catch-all orientation as they abandon identifiable positions in response to the short-term temptations of the pollster. In Hirschman's (1970) terms, parties may be said to be increasing their members 'voice', but doing so in the face of decreasing 'loyalty' and increasing 'exit'.

This all adds up to a general portrait of political parties that are more leader-driven yet internally democratic, and which now have to compete in a more open electoral market but with a less defined or stable support base. As Katz (2001: 281) notes, these resulting contradictions come together in the real world for party organizations when they struggle to choose candidates (and leaders): politicians must now represent an empowered membership while having sufficient autonomy to conduct flexible enough campaigns to win electoral support. What kind of party organization allows them to do this?

Traditional models of political parties have defined them as essentially hierarchical organizations within which individuals compete for power. As Ignazi (2001: 12) writes: 'Party organization is an arena of conflicts whose basic stake is "power", that is, control over crucial resources that allows a group – a dominant coalition – to take authoritative legitimate decisions for all and affecting everybody.' There is, in this classic image, the conception of party as a single identifiable organization that some group can capture and command. In Duverger's (1964) cadre party, power was concentrated at the top and the leadership had little trouble directing its member/supporters. In his mass party, authority was formally vested at the bottom of the organization in a membership that controlled and directed its leadership, although Michels (1911) long ago argued that the reality of organizational life meant that power really rested in the hands of the professional leadership. In their respective accounts of catch-all and electoral-professional parties, Kirchheimer (1966) and Panebianco (1988) were concerned to show how the pursuit of electoral success in changing social and media environments transformed mass party organizations and left them dominated by their leaders. Implicit in all these models is the notion that the contest for organizational power is a zero-sum game in which power held by leaders or activists or members must come at the expense of the others.

In a penetrating analysis of contemporary Dutch parties, Ruud Koole (1994: 298–9) recognizes the tensions within them given that the 'pre-dominance of the professional leadership' is coupled to a 'high degree of accountability to the lower strata in the party'. He describes these parties as 'modern cadre parties', distinguished from old cadre organizations, catch-all or electoral-professional parties by their 'strong emphasis on (formal) internal democracy'. Rejecting the cartel (Katz and Mair, 1995) model, he claims that these new versions of essentially old-fashioned parties

are dependent upon neither interest groups nor the state as they seek to mobilize and hold electoral support. For Koole, the democratic tensions now built into these parties produce organizations that are vulnerable to membership decline, uncertain finances, a volatile electorate and critical anti-party sentiment, but which are able to contain their contradictory impulses. What is less clear in Koole's argument is just how this democratic balance between strong, autonomous leaders and empowered members is contained by the party organizations, because he appears to see the parties essentially in terms of a hierarchically structured set of forces in which Ignazi's zero-sum conflicts are played out.

The cartel party theorists see this democratic organizational impulse and flexible electoral imperative as one of the major dilemmas of contemporary party organization. Mair (1994: 17) writes of the 'widespread consensus that the relevant relationships are now more *stratarchical* than hierarchical, and that each face of the party is now increasingly autonomous of the others'. The important insight here is that organizational units within parties can possess a significant degree of autonomy, and that simple hierarchical paradigms no longer represent the reality of party structures. Mair's point is not that stratarchies exist in absolute contrast to hierarchies, but that, to some degree (i.e. a more or less question), all parties must now incorporate a stratarchical dimension in their organization. However, he suggests that this development is rife with danger, warning that:

[I]t may also be the case that mutual autonomy will develop to a degree in which the local party will become essentially unconcerned about any real input into the national party (and vice versa), and will devote itself primarily to politics at the local level.

(Mair, 1994: ???)

Mair speculates that, in the extreme, this could lead to parties drifting into the wholly decentralized 'empty vessel' American model of political organization described by Katz and Kolodny (1994). But of course mutual autonomy does not necessarily imply either indifference or independence: the very idea of mutuality suggests interdependence. What is required is a framework for thinking about party structures that identifies the autonomy of their various parts as a defining feature while recognizing the integral character of the organization as a whole, and allows us to explore how individual parties operationalize and institutionalize the stratarchical imperative in form and practice.

Uncomfortable with the concept of stratarchy, Koole (1996: 518) wants to deny it exists and instead argue that 'it is, perhaps, better to speak about a "federalization" of political parties' in which 'local party branches have a certain autonomy in local affairs'. However, that position surely underestimates the real autonomy that constituent elements in federal systems enjoy as well as not recognizing that, in such systems, local units can operate quite independently in areas of activity that transcend the merely local.

However, the point does have the virtue of suggesting that party members, like citizens in federal polities, might operate simultaneously in the mutually autonomous organizational units, be they structured along geographic (local-national) or some other (perhaps sectoral or cultural) lines. By contrast, Heidar and Saglie (2003: 221) approach the stratchy problem by suggesting that parties are simply 'loosening their formal organizational structure . . . in the direction of less strict boundaries between internal and external processes'. They label the result of these developments the 'network party' – an organizational model that is defined by a set of (seven) formal and informal characteristics mixing the elements of cadre and mass parties in structuring the 'relationship between the parties and their members' (p. 222), but whose practices, they concede, closely resemble those of Koole's modern cadre organizations.

Cartel theorists' challenges to the models of party organization reflect changes that are reshaping the parties of Western Europe for which most of our existing models were developed. At the same time, the explosion of democracy in Eastern Europe has led to the emergence of a set of new competitive party systems. However, the parties emerging there have not gone through the same century-long evolutionary course that has characterized political party development in the West. Though the path of party formation in these new democracies has been *sui generis*, many of their parties' organizations now exhibit most of the same apparently contradictory tensions of those in the West (van Biezen, 2001: *passim*). Thus models of contemporary party types, focused on elucidating how they are structured and operate, need to be free of either simple traditional contagion (of either the Left or the Right) accounts, or the evolutionary dynamics that are at the heart of the cartel model analysis, if they are to incorporate the parties of these new democracies.

Similar arguments could be made for many of the parties outside the narrow frame of the European social cleavage-party system political world. The classic models of party types never easily fit the parties in non-European democratic countries. Parties such as the Australian Liberals, the Canadian Progressive Conservatives, Ireland's Fine Gael, Japan's Liberal Democrats or New Zealand's National have always looked rather more like one of Koole's modern cadre organizations than any of the types that dominated the party literature, and even those with mass forms (the Canadian New Democrats or Australian Labor) clearly have distinctive stratchy features. No doubt, the party organizations in those countries reflected the continuing impact of geography through the persistence of territorial-based electoral systems as opposed to the nationalizing impact of PR adopted in most of Western Europe. Ironically, the changes now characterizing contemporary European parties appear to be making them more like those in these other systems than ever before. This challenges us to develop a common framework for understanding how they all function.

Finally, traditional models of party organization do not deal at all well

with parties that are operating in genuinely multi-level systems – that is political systems in which the separate levels enjoy significant autonomy. Federal systems provide one instance of this because they provide sets of overlapping central-local party organizational units, and authority can be exercised by separate and multiple leaderships accountable to either common or different party constituencies. It seems likely that successful Europarties will develop many of these same characteristics.

Common to meeting all these challenges to developing a model of party types that will allow us to: incorporate the changes altering the old parties of Western Europe; ensure that the analysis extends to include the characteristics of parties in newly emerging democracies; include the features of the parties of the Anglo diasporas; and admit the realities of parties operating multi-level systems, is a recognition of the strataarchical organizational imperative. And if Mair is surely right in identifying the critical defining feature of this imperative as the increasingly autonomous character of different faces or units of parties, it is important to note that this very autonomy is constrained by a fundamental interdependence of parts and that any party's position on the strataarchical continuum is an open question.

Most parties are no longer, if they ever really were, definitively hierarchical, and their internal conflicts are not necessarily zero-sum games. Commenting on the British Liberal Democrats, Russell et al. (2001: 2) complain that it is not clear 'where real power rests'. But that is the point. In a strataarchical party, organizational power and authority does not finally rest in any single place, or with any single set of individuals – it is (more or less) broadly shared. To develop a framework for reconciling the apparent contradictions implicit in the changing patterns of party life and understanding the internal dynamics of these parties we need to recognize the critical reality of mutual autonomy as a key feature of modern party organization.

Parties as Franchise Organizations

What features of an organization can provide for varying levels of mutual autonomy among its constituent parts so that it is able to be responsive to the (external) imperatives of the competitive system it finds itself in as well as to the (internal) demands of individual members? Political parties must do this in the face of a particular organizational reality – many of their key actors may be committed full-time professionals but most of their members are volunteers whose continuing availability for and commitment to partisan activity is limited by shifting levels of loyalty and a considerable propensity for easy exit. Starting from Schlesinger's (1984) rational choice position, Hopkin and Paolucci (1999) suggest taking the business firm as a model for political parties. The key features of their model are leadership dominance by a career-oriented political entrepreneur and unrestrained use

of electoral-professional techniques for the organization and mobilization of voter support. This perspective provides them with a useful framework for analysing such highly personalized and centralized organizations as Spain's Unión de Centro Democrático or Italy's Forza Italia. However, Hopkin and Paolucci conclude that the institutionalization failures inherent in the strategies of those parties indicate that, while the business firm model can easily be adopted by opportunistic politicians, it cannot provide the basis for an enduring organization capable of fulfilling the basic functions demanded of democratic political parties. Nevertheless, their insight about the parallels between market-oriented commercial firms and electorally oriented political parties is worth pursuing. What is needed is an organizational model that can accommodate and institutionalize the stratarchical dimensions of modern parties with their demands for internal autonomies. A franchise model provides just such a framework.¹

Franchise systems exist to couple the efficiencies of scale and standardization with the advantages of local participation in ongoing operations and delivery of the organization's product. Typically, a central organization, recognizable by its common brand, determines the product line and sets standards for its production and labelling, designs and manages marketing and advertising strategy, and provides management help and training as well as arranging for the supplies needed by local outlets. For their part, individual franchises exist to deliver the product to a particular market. To do so they invest local resources, both capital and personnel, in building an organization focused on the needs and resources of the community they serve, and are preoccupied with delivering the product to their target market. In expansive systems, there will necessarily be a range of intermediary organizational units, some responsive to the centre's interests, others to the local franchisees, designed both to carry out specialized functions and to mitigate the inherent tensions between the centre and the individual franchises that reflect their mutual but competing interests.

The relationships between a central organization and its local franchises can vary enormously, and indeed need not be the same for each individual franchise within a single organization. Large, rich or important units may well have a level of independence and power not shared by smaller or less vital outlets. Franchise systems can be centralized, decentralized or federalized, depending upon the efficiencies and/or philosophies of the members and, inevitably, there will be tensions between the parts as each tries to influence the other to its advantage. To structure the relationship, and institutionalize the rules ordering the system, franchise contracts spelling out the rights, responsibilities and obligations of each guarantee their autonomy and mutual interdependence. This design allows each element to perform its functions relatively unhindered by the others. It ensures that the central office can penalize a local affiliate if it fails to meet the organization's standards and provides mechanisms for local units to hold the central organization to its policies and responsibilities.

In principle, franchise organizations should be more flexible and adaptable than monolithic and hierarchical bureaucratic organizations. They have the advantage of producing a reliable, identifiable product which consumers can count on, a centrally controlled communication programme that ensures they are delivering a consistent message to their clients, and a leadership free to make decisions about product lines or target markets. In addition, they also have the advantage of attracting new local investment, generating a set of participants who have a strong incentive to build and maintain an effective organization. These local partners will be more attuned to local community perspectives, practices and market demands than those in a remote headquarters, an advantage in attracting support in a changing environment. Individual franchises can also test market product innovations and delivery services, providing valuable ground-level information feedback to the centre.

This model has been successful in a wide variety of industries and activities, providing goods (e.g. automobile companies) and services (e.g. fast foods or interest articulation groups) to mass publics across national and even international space. Organizations such as McDonalds have managed to penetrate widely different societies and cultures offering a standard product line, varied around the edges to satisfy local sensibilities (Dr. Pepper soft drinks in Texas, Lobsterburgers in Nova Scotia). Their franchise operators locate, build and operate outlets designed to capture consumers in communities they know well. Not all individual franchises are the same (some are unionized, others not), nor do all have the same relationship with the company (which for some changes over time), but thanks to a consistent labelling and advertising programme all are part of an easily recognizable organization offering essentially a familiar branded product to mass publics.

Without stretching the analogy too far, or suggesting that political parties are little more than the political equivalent of a hamburger chain, it is possible to recognize in the franchise model a framework for analysing and interpreting the organization and operation of stratarchical parties. As a whole, the party embodies and sustains a brand that defines its place in the political spectrum and is the focus for supporters' generalized loyalties. Typically, parties' central organizations are responsible for providing the basic product line (policy and leadership), for devising and directing the major communication line (the national campaign) and for establishing standard organizational management, training and financing functions. In office, the central party is likely to play the principal part in any governance responsibilities the party assumes. Local units, however they are defined (geographically or otherwise), more often provide the basic organizational home of most party members, and are typically charged with delivering the product, i.e. creating organizations that can find and support candidates as well as mobilizing campaigns to deliver the vote on the ground. Intermediary and specialized units can support these activities, but,

once institutionalized, all elements must recognize their part and accept the power and role trade-offs as a necessary part of the bargain for making the party, as a whole, successful.

This simple framework provides for the functional autonomy of organizational elements that exist within parties while still leaving considerable room for variation between and within parties in terms of the relationships between units or the locus of particular activities. It does not proscribe any particular balance of forces or pattern of influence in a party so that quite different solutions to the problems of policy development or personnel recruitment can be institutionalized in parties structured in franchise terms. In one, local organizations might play a decisive role in candidate selection processes, while in others that power could be reserved for a different level of the party machine. The role of members, and so the incentives to membership, can vary considerably depending upon the level at which individual members are attached to the party and what part they can play in the life of those units. Where professionally supported national leadership roles are differentiated from local mobilization efforts, the party in public office might dominate central policy-making activity while leaving local franchises free to manage the politics of the grassroots. In an environment of declining levels of party identification (Dalton, 2000), that would allow the relatively autonomous elements of a franchise party to pursue an increasingly available electorate in ways that are independent, yet compatible, of one another.

There is not space in this article to put a franchise model in developmental perspective, asking whether franchise party structures are simply a natural evolution of classic cadre parties, the remnants of depopulated mass parties, or the efficient form of catch-all or electoral-professional party machines. Indeed parties may even be deliberately created in franchise terms by attaching their brand to existing groups (e.g. Sweden's New Democracy) or building an organization *de novo* in essentially franchise-structure terms (e.g. Italy's Forza Italia).² The issue of how this structural option operates is distinct from the question of its historical generation: some parties will have come to it later, or by different routes, than others. The critical point is that a franchise model provides a framework for analysing the stratarchical dimensions of a party's organization and for understanding its working. It points to the questions of how party units are linked together, how they manage to institutionalize relationships of both dependence and autonomy, and how leaders and members operate the system.

Franchise Parties

At the heart of the stratarchical party is a franchise contract that defines the essence of a particular party's intra-organizational bargains. It delineates the important party units in terms of their autonomous powers and responsibilities, identifying the relationships among them and indicating how their

autonomy is to be maintained.³ It represents the political accord that defines the party's internal organizational power and balance. The power of the franchise model is that it focuses on the contract that defines and incorporates the stratarchical bargain between the key elements in a party's organization, addressing the central questions as to what extent this imperative structures its organization (the more or less question), and just how it is expressed and organized. Given political parties' manifest preoccupation with electoral competition,⁴ primary elements in their franchise contracts will focus on control over the creation and labelling of their electoral products – policy and candidate personnel – and the resources needed to conduct electoral campaigns.

For the most part, decision-making on policy and programmatic issues is a matter for central party organizations to ensure that the party is providing a consistent message to its supporters and the electorate. And catch-all, electoral-professional and cartel theorists all appear to agree that the imperatives of modern electoral competition have worked to consolidate control of this activity in the hands of the party in public office, and often the party leadership more narrowly defined. Yet, in some cases, perhaps most obviously in multi-level systems, policy may be determined at different levels across a party leaving it presenting divergent or even contradictory policies to distinctive electorates. This has been true of pragmatic parties like the British Liberal Democrats, whose Scottish organization's policies have differed from those of its English and Welsh wings (Ingle, 1996: 129), or more ideological parties like the Canadian New Democrats, whose national and provincial party organizations have sometimes differed, even on issues of fundamental constitutional politics (Morley, 1988: 125–6). In these cases, policy incongruence is simply one of the costs of a genuinely stratarchical party organization. While theorists may decry the violence that this does to the logic and principles of democratic choice, the electoral consequences for the party may not be bad. Given a differentiated electorate, a party may well benefit from such inconsistencies, winning votes from supporters of the distinctive positions.

Critical personnel decisions can be made at various levels in stratarchical parties: candidates can be selected by local electoral district associations, by state level organizational bosses or by the national leadership, leaders by grassroots members or national conferences. As these are among the most important decisions made by parties, the power to do so is jealously guarded and fought over. Where different units are making policy and personnel decisions, there is a considerable possibility that they will produce competing images of the party with significant electoral consequences, as electors are increasingly being invited to see parties in terms of the individuals they are asked to vote for. This is an old dilemma for parties, but one aggravated by the assertion of stratarchical autonomy. In many cases decisions about who should choose candidates is shaped by the logic of the electoral system a party inhabits (e.g. decentralized territorial systems as in Ireland or

Canada favour local association selection), but there is no simple or necessary relationship. In Australia, local associations select Liberal party candidates, while deal-making factional state bosses choose them in Labor. In both those instances the parties' franchise arrangements carefully identify where, and thus to whom, the labelling power belongs.

If parties are to persist, they must find ways to institutionalize the structures that define their internal organizational bargains within a constitutional framework.⁵ This is a particular challenge for a strataarchical organization. Paul Webb's (2000: 196–9) account of the British Conservative Party's 'new and binding codified constitution' provides a vivid example of how parties now carefully attempt to spell out the various rights and responsibilities of party members and units in determining issues of personnel and policy, and what the trade-offs in such arrangements are. Of course, despite the best efforts to institutionalize their structures and practices, challenges to the internal power arrangements within parties are endemic. As Webb's (pp. 201–9) account of change in the British Labour party implies, constitutional battles within parties are fundamentally about rebalancing the powers and responsibilities of various party units. In some parties, critical elements of the franchise system contract are spelled out in powerful unwritten understandings, then institutionalized and enforced by the exercise of the exit option of volunteer activists and members. In Canadian parties, for instance, the long-standing convention that structures their franchise arrangement gives the members of local constituency associations the right to select (and deselect) parliamentary candidates before each general election (Carty et al., 2000: 160–71). Since the early 1970s, the national election law has effectively given party leaders the right to veto local candidates. However, leaders rarely exercise this power, because it too often proves to be counterproductive, generating widespread opposition within their own organizations and prompting the desertion of local supporters just at the moment they are most needed.

There is no standard franchise party structure and the model should not be taken to imply that parties need adopt the simple central office–local outlet pattern suggested by the McDonalds metaphor, though some political parties, like those in Ireland, might seem to fit that basic mould. Other parties have employed remarkably varied strataarchical structures with concomitant authority relationships among their parts. The Swedish New Democracy Party may have adopted the most transparent franchise structure. It opted against building any of its own local organizations and simply signed 'written contracts with autonomous local parties who [then] had the right to use the party name' (Widfeldt, 1999: 43). Some parties have distinctly regionalized structures, as in Australia where the Labor Party's organization is largely driven by powerful and autonomous state level machines, while its Liberal opponents have a national party structure that is 'not just federal but confederal or pre-federal . . . without an organizational arm that can act directly on the membership' (Sharman,

2001: 294). Similar cross-party differences have begun to emerge in the franchise (local-national) bargains of postcommunist Polish parties (Szczerbiak, 1999). In other parties the basic franchise contract varies within the party. Canada's long dominant Liberal Party has an organization in which national and provincial party structures are fully integrated in some provinces while having no organizational or membership links in others (Dyck, 1996: 177–9); in Germany, party structures vary sharply between the eastern and western parts of the country (Grabow, 2001). In all these cases, it is the autonomy of the various organizational units – however they are structured and linked together – to make their assigned policy, personnel or resource allocation decisions that establishes the strataarchical reality of the party.

Some party theorists, like Koole, resist acknowledging that parties can have strataarchical structures for that would mean accepting that individual elements enjoy real and significant organizational autonomy and that parties are not simply singular, coherent actors in a competitive system. Yet party politicians know this to be true and one of the central realities of their existence. Their task is to find ways to organize and operate in ways that overcome the coordination and management difficulties generated by the autonomy enjoyed by their party's various structural units. In this lies the basis for much factionalism within parties. By whatever name, 'factions', whether formally structured or loosely and casually articulated, provide a vehicle for linking sets of individuals across separate and distinct elements of the organization and so constitute an integrative device in strataarchically organized parties. Politicians seeking to establish some dominance or control within their party find that factional activity provides them with an important tool for coordinating decisions taken in otherwise relatively autonomous organizational settings. In this sense, factions exist to establish hierarchically linked internal control systems in strataarchical structures: an old party type within a new party form.

Factions come in various types and reflect the orientations and resources of those building them. Ideological or policy-based factions are common, especially in parties of the Left, where ideological commitment has been central to a party's self-definition, electoral orientation and supporters' commitment. The Australian Labor Party, operating as a complex net of state-based organizations, is held together by a set of ideological, highly organized competitive factions, and its important national personnel, policy or resource allocation decisions can only be managed through the bargains struck by faction leaders (Albanese and Robinson, 1996; McAllister, 2002: 392). In Britain, many of the reforms promoted by the Labour Party's leadership over the past two decades were designed to strengthen the hands of party leaders by weakening the power of the Left faction across the party's various policy-making and candidate selection forums (Webb, 2000). In Canadian parties, factions are both informal and highly personalistic, designed to win and hold support for leaders and leadership

candidates. Given the highly decentralized mechanisms for choosing and holding leaders accountable, individual politicians must build party-wide personal organizations capable of penetrating far-flung and disconnected party units if they hope to be successful. The highly pragmatic orientation of most Canadian parties and politicians leaves most such factions bound together by the promises of mutual obligation and reciprocal support. In many other parties, patronage has traditionally provided an important base for factional existence. Thus, material incentives long tied politicians together in parties like the Japanese Liberal Democrats or the Italian Christian Democratic Party. But whether the factional glue is provided by ideological, personal solidarity or material incentives, in all cases faction-building serves as an integrating force across party structures whose stratarchical character otherwise makes party coherence and consistency a problem. The form factional networks take reveals much about the character and dynamics of a party's internal relationships and the politics it engenders.

While factions can be seen as serving essential integrative functions, the reality is that they are fundamentally instruments of division and conflict and so possess an obvious capacity to split parties. Thus, to the extent stratarchical imperatives stimulate and structure factionalism, they increase the fragility of party organizations. Splits can be driven by ideologically based factionalism, as in the case of the Democratic Labor breakaway from the Australian Labor Party, or by personalized factions that drove leadership conflicts in Ireland's governing Fianna Fáil Party and led to the emergence of the country's Progressive Democrats. Factionalism does not always (or even often) lead to party splits, and factions have existed in hierarchically organized parties, but a full analysis of stratarchical party organization must pay attention to them for their impact on the workings of a party and their consequence for a party's capacity to engage its partisan opponents effectively.

Party Membership

The role and scope of party membership in stratarchical parties go to the heart of two of the major changes that are transforming contemporary political parties. First, ordinary party members are winning more decision-making power within their organizations, especially with regard to personnel decisions in candidate selection and leadership choice. But despite their having a more authoritative say, membership numbers are falling in almost all parties (Mair and van Biezen, 2001). This is the puzzle of increased exit at a time of enhanced voice. In the absence of studies on the temporal relationship between the two, it is not clear what, if any, relationship there is between these two developments. The second dimension of change is the reported displacement of activists as critical party actors by the

democratization of internal decision-making that has given ‘ordinary’ members enhanced power through direct votes on personnel and policy questions. Mair (1994: 16) suggests that this process of marginalizing the activist layer, which he characterizes as ‘the traditionally more troublesome layer’, works to the advantage of the party in public office’s leadership, strengthening its power and autonomy. He admits, however, that this squeezing of the middle may leave both leaders and members more important given their increasingly autonomous spheres of activity. A key question in the analysis of strataarchical parties must therefore be the extent to which their structure really empowers or disenfranchises members, and whether empowered members constitute a mobilizable resource for leaders or a significant check on their power. The franchise metaphor suggests that there is no simple or single answer to those questions. Members may play quite different roles with respect to differing activities depending on which party units they are connected to and what powers those organizational elements possess. As individuals, they may also operate in more than one unit of the party and so have differing impacts depending on the field of action.

Scarrow (2000) cautions against a too ready acceptance of the portrait of long-term membership decline in the mass parties of Western Europe, or any simple equation between numbers and influence or capacity. She points out that large memberships have largely been a phenomenon of the post World War II decades and there is evidence that, despite these recent membership declines, contemporary parties have actually ‘expanded organizational coverage and increased involvement in local government’ (p. 98). It is also not clear who has been leaving the parties – it may be that those leaving are disproportionately among the traditionally inactive. That seems to have been the case in Britain, where, by the early 1990s, Labour had seen a greater membership decline than had the Conservatives but was left with more active members (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002: 60–1). If that pattern holds more generally, then the membership declines seen across most Western party systems may simply reflect a shedding of the inactive, leaving the so-called troublesome activists to make up a larger proportion of the remaining party members.

Mair’s arguments about the impact of the increasing power of ordinary members imply that they are less ideological (more pragmatic, more compromising) than traditional activists and thus more manageable by the party leadership. Both of these assumptions need to be tested. Seyd and Whiteley’s study of British Labour Party members indicates that the party’s middle-class members are driven by ideological and policy incentives, but they note that it is selective – personal career – incentives that stimulate activism (1992: 81, 87, 117). Their subsequent study of Conservative activists suggests that most of them are also driven by instrumental incentives and an interest in private returns (Whiteley et al., 1994: 124–5). Given this, it is not at all clear why activists, with their substantial personal stake in the party, should really be less manageable than members whose

continuing links to the party are bound by little more than an ideologically defined predisposition to its policies. In any event, activists have been seen as 'more troublesome' only because, by definition, they exercised power in significant organizational units. Ordinary members have been described as 'more docile and more likely to endorse the policies (and candidates) proposed by the party leadership' (Mair, 1994: 16), but they have rarely been given an opportunity to do otherwise. The question is not so much whether more power has been given to ordinary members, but whether organizational changes have redistributed the rights and powers of various organizational elements of party structures to the significant advantage of these members. And if so, how are members responding to this new stratarchical environment?

Membership numbers and influence are likely to be tied to the autonomy and power of the unit, or units, through which members participate. In the Australian Labor Party, members join and participate through local associations, but the politically significant decision-making units are the state-level structures that constitute the party franchises with the important powers of labelling candidates and managing campaigns. In the opposing Liberal Party, local associations have more autonomy in selecting candidates, but there too state machines are at the centre of much key organizational decision-making and operations. With compulsory voting, party members are not even needed for election day mobilization. The net result is that party membership rates in Australia are among the very lowest in the Western democracies (Scarrow, 2000: 90).

Members also join parties via a local (electoral district) association in Canada, but there the membership patterns are quite different. Canadian parties give their autonomous local associations the right and power to select, and deselect, candidates before each election in meetings open to all party members. Consequently, individuals join in order to participate in these choices. However, as the associations do little between elections, many individuals simply let their membership lapse during inter-election periods to take it up again when an inter-party nomination contest occurs in their district. Similar patterns exist in leadership contests whether they are conducted by direct votes or delegated conventions. This leads to cyclical patterns with memberships often growing by several hundred percent in the weeks before a party selection contest only to fall back in the aftermath.⁶ This is a clear case of significant 'voice' generating 'entrance', only to be followed by a quick 'exit' when the voice is stilled.

This curious cyclical membership pattern reflects both the autonomy but also the limited range of the local associations' role in Canadian parties. Associations are left free to run their own local affairs much as they like, including the significant power to award party labels to politicians, but have little or no say in the determination of party policy or the management of parliamentary life. In terms of our model, we can say the power of the local franchise is considerable, but clearly constrained. With membership vested

in this level of the party, its patterns reflect the role and power of these local associations. What does this say about the power of party members? On the one hand they might be said to be as influential as party members anywhere, because, given the powers of their associations, they have direct and relatively unchallenged control over the selection of candidates, the party leader and the conduct of local campaigns. These processes and individuals provide the party with its electoral face and shape the make-up and character of the party in public office. On the other hand, members have virtually no say over the policies on which national election campaigns are fought, or the collective positions taken by the parliamentary parties. Those questions are the responsibility of other elements of the franchise system that constitutes the party stratarchy. Whether party members are thought to be important or significant thus depends entirely upon the relative importance attached to these different decisions. Much the same might be said for Irish party members because a similar local-national franchise contract characterizes their parties (Scarrow et al., 2000: 145; Gallagher and Marsh, 2002), though for reasons worth investigating they have not developed the cyclical membership patterns that characterize Canadian parties.

Rahat and Hazan (2001: 313) argue that this sort of democratization of the candidate selection process ought to destabilize political parties by making candidates dependent upon their selectors. The logic of their position misses the point that party selectors enjoy their powers only by virtue of the stratarchical distribution of authority within the wider party organization. Thus, in Canada, Ireland and New Zealand, local party members know that the right to name their candidates is part of a more complex and encompassing franchise bargain in which the various organizational units embrace the opportunities but accept the limitations that the structure provides: it is not the members, but the local associations, which have the power to nominate. All the participants know that they are bound by their party's constitution and the norms governing its practices. To act otherwise, except in the way of attempting to stretch the rules through normal political competition, would be to threaten, and perhaps imperil, the basic organizational framework of action.

Sorting out the power of party members is thus a question of sorting out the details of the franchise contract structuring a stratarchical party organization. The fact that membership in many parties continues to fall, despite the apparent increase in party members' power, suggests that the units to which they are attached may not possess sufficiently clear and autonomous authority or that the benefits offered by membership do not justify the cost. Given that the most extensive expansion of member power is held to have taken place with regard to personnel issues (candidate and leader selection), the structuring of these processes (both formal and real), and the incentives they offer to membership, ought to be central to any analysis of changing party organization. It also suggests that ideological incentives to

membership in a stratarchical party will be muted, because members will be able to exercise their programmatic preferences only indirectly, that is by supporting politicians who share their views.

Party Leadership

The accretion of power in the hands of party leaders is an old story, whether it be attributed to the working of the iron law of oligarchy or the necessary condition for practicing catch-all politics successfully. The subsequent surrender of some of this power to outsiders and political technicians is understood to be a consequence of electoral professional organization in a modern media world. For politicians who must manage a cartel of parties as well as their own organization, flexibility and independence seem necessary conditions of successful leadership. The problem for party theorists has been how to reconcile these developments with enhanced power by grassroots members, particularly with respect to personnel selection and campaigning.

The organizational response to stratarchical impulses attempts to dissolve the problem by exchanging autonomy for clear limits on the bounds of action. It does not come, however, without its own structural consequences. Where local units are free to organize and manage a local campaign, they may well be conducted independently of national efforts with limited integration (organizational or in terms of policy appeals) between the two. A franchise structure can invite the use of electoral-professional staff by multiple and separate units in a party, and so contribute to their proliferation. Even where party leaders manage to control policy development, the fragmentation of campaign message delivery systems may inhibit their ability to send consistent messages and establish a favourable electoral agenda.

In many parties, members have now won the right to participate in the selection and removal of leaders, either through direct votes or via mediating structures in which they have a significant voice (Blake and Carty, 1999). This evolution in the power of party members over questions of leadership parallels their relationship with local candidates and is evidence of the extensive authority of the membership on personnel questions. It stands in sharp contrast to their still comparatively modest impact in the parties' policy-making councils or on the writing of electoral manifestos. The programmatic autonomy enjoyed by leaders means that party members, from the ground up, know that the way to change policy or party direction is not to work at getting resolutions passed in party conventions but to engineer a change in leadership. The result is that policy differences are transformed into leadership conflicts that can easily become endemic. The stratarchical structure provides a variety of platforms from which both party insiders and outsiders can mount leadership challenges, and so

constrains the capacity of the professional leadership to dominate the party.

Leadership in these parties is, to borrow Koole's term, vulnerable. It is at once both strong and fragile. Leaders have enormous command over the policy and parliamentary life of their parties and are relatively free to move in electorally opportunistic ways as they see fit. At the same time, they must satisfy the policy and electoral demands of their supporters and the career aspirations of their professional colleagues. Failure to meet expectations can quickly lead to attacks on the leader, launched from within the party in office (whose support a leader must realistically maintain) and/or from members and activists safe in the autonomous organizational units they dominate. That members and professional politicians do not always agree on what is desirable or possible only makes a leader's balancing act more difficult. This dynamic of a strong but fragile leadership provides one of the characteristic realities of the stratarchical party.

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Worrying about 'excessive local autonomy in the selection of candidates', Katz (2001: 292) suggests that recent (stratarchical) changes in party organizations may contribute to 'undermining the leadership's ability to participate in a cartel-like arrangement'. He concedes that all is not lost if this internal party democracy provides some checks on the 'restraint of trade' practices of cartel politicians (pp. 293–4). However, institutionalizing democratic practices within hierarchically structured parties runs against Michels's natural oligarchic tendencies of organization. Embodying the stratarchical organizational imperative of interdependent autonomies within franchise parties provides a solution to the problem. This party type provides a democratic counterweight to the dominance of professional politicians and the cartelization of electoral politics.

The strength of the franchise model is that it recognizes that the stratarchical impulses of politics work unevenly over space and time and it provides a framework for ordering very diverse organizational solutions to the party-building challenges that politicians face. It suggests that the primary analytic task is to identify the fundamental organizational bargain that underpins and regulates the relationships among the various units of working parties – a return to a concern for the formal and informal arrangements that govern the behaviours of what Duverger (1964: 17) called the 'basic elements' of party organizations. A comparison of party 'franchise contracts' ought to provide a more unambiguous basis for developing typologies of party organization and activity than those that rely on differing programmatic appeals, social bases or origins in particular historical moments. Tracking changes in franchise structures over time will help identify just how, and how much, party organizations have changed and evolved in response to changes in their institutional and/or socio-political

environments. Unlocking the puzzle of party organization is a central issue for understanding democratic politics and franchise models provide an important key to the puzzle.

Notes

- 1 For an application of this model to Canadian parties, see Carty (2002). The next few paragraphs draw heavily on that article.
- 2 In Holland, 'Leefbaar Nederland' looks like a franchise party but appears to a case of otherwise unconnected local parties independently adopting a popular name. In this way, it appears to mimic the franchise party without actually establishing a franchise contract to bind the various parts together. I am obligated to Caterina Paolucci and Peter Mair for providing these examples of parties being deliberately built in franchise terms.
- 3 For an excellent account of a (N.Z.) party's organizational structure that lays bare its basic franchise bargain, see Gustafson (1986: 10–13). For the Canadian case, see Carty (2002: 733–6).
- 4 I am here relying on a definition of political parties as organizations that, at a minimum, contest elections. On parties' manifest and latent functions, see Merton (1949).
- 5 On the problem of party institutionalization, see the helpful essay by Levitsky (1998).
- 6 Similar patterns of electoral cycle membership mobilization exist in New Zealand's Labour and National parties.

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