

## **Workshop 21: Promoting Internal Party Democracy: A Selling Point, A Serious Danger, Or A Redundant Exercise?**

### **Workshop Directors:**

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### **Outline of the Topic**

Political parties have been in decline for at least four decades and it seems reasonable to conclude that the 'golden age' of mass parties is now part of history (Mair and van Biezen 2001). The development of catch-all, cartel, modern cadre, business-firm, and other types of political parties have been the subject of considerable discussions and analyses by party members, scholars, and media commentators (Katz and Mair 1995). Notwithstanding the merits of such work, the bottom line is that as political parties lose members they are also seen to be losing touch with society and moreover evolving into semi-state agencies (Bartolini and Mair 2001; van Biezen 2004).

Notwithstanding such assessments, political parties continue to exist and most of them try to recruit new members using a variety of strategies. For example, some parties have recently introduced measures to give ordinary members a greater say in the internal workings of the parties. Such initiatives are justified on the basis that they make membership more attractive to citizens and thereby counteract the public's lack of confidence in parties (Scarrow 1999: 341-62). A recent comparison of the nature and impact of these changes, however, is absent. Consequently, this workshop aims to bring an international group of scholars together to evaluate the role of internal party democracy cross-nationally and over time. This is a broad area of research and it makes sense in this workshop to focus on a number of key questions.

### *Key Questions:*

- I. How successful are political parties in giving the ordinary members a greater say? What kinds of measures are taken? What are the motives of the leadership in undertaking these initiatives or are leaders forced to do so by the rank and file?
- II. What are the effects of internal democracy for the internal life of parties? For example: in some countries leadership primaries have been introduced (cf. the

- struggles in 2006 between Ségolène Royal and her male competitors in the French PS, or the fight between Rutte and Verdonk in the Dutch VVD). How do these primaries effect the position of the leadership of the party, party cohesion, and its attractiveness to new members?
- III. What are the effects of (more) internal democracy for the external position of the party towards: (a) voters, i.e. does it make party membership more attractive?; (b) political competitors, i.e. does increased internal democracy necessarily lead to a less robust image of the party in the outside world?; and (c) issue groups, i.e. does more internal democracy supply non-party organisations with another channel to influence politics?
  - IV. Why do some parties refuse to democratize their internal decision-making process? In fact in some countries new parties have been established as ‘parties without members’ while in others this has not happened. This raises the important question whether these differences can be explained by dissimilarities across countries, electoral systems, party families, and between the so-called ‘old’ and ‘new’ democracies?
  - V. What do recent developments in the internal decision making process of parties tell us about the theoretical debate concerning the nature (and typology) of contemporary political parties?

### **Relation to Existing Research**

In a recent article Joseph LaPalombara (2007: 150) states: “Much of what is published about parties continues to be based on datasets ... which derive from surveys of mass publics. Rich though these materials and the research based on them may be, they leave us with scant information regarding the internal organizational nature and dynamics of political parties.” LaPalombara acknowledges the research on the political party as an organization, as undertaken by Katz, Mair and others (1994). This workshop aims to build on this kind of organizational research, but intends to go beyond it by focusing on the internal dynamics of political parties.

The evidence demonstrates that patterns of extensive party membership and partisanship, and party control of electoral politics evident during the 1960s had largely disappeared by the nineties (Scarrow 2000; Dalton 2004). In addition, analyses have shown that parties have simultaneously declined as channels for popular demands, thereby losing their legitimacy as representative organisations (Katz and Mair, 1995; Ström et al, 2003; Mair 2006). However, it would be a mistake to think that political parties have remained apathetic when confronted

with a changing environment and declining membership. Over the last two decades political parties across Europe and elsewhere have embarked on programmes of renewal with varying degrees of success (e.g. Seyd and Whiteley 2002; Saglie and Heider 2004; Cross 2004).

Consequently, research on changes in the internal dynamics of political parties over the last decade facilitates answering some fundamental question such as: Are party members becoming more or less important? Have parties really become more isolated from society? Is more internal democracy a selling point for parties, or does it pose important dangers for parties with regard to internal cohesion? More generally does increasing internal party democracy have any impact at all? These are some of the concrete issues that will be addressed in this workshop.

**Participants:** The likely participants in the workshop are scholars engaged in research on the internal dynamics of political parties from a political science, history or sociological perspective. The workshop concentrates primarily on parties in Europe, but contributions on parties elsewhere are also most welcome.

**Type of Paper:** Interested participants are invited to submit empirical (either comparative or case study) or theoretical papers.

**Endorsement::** this proposal has been endorsed by ECPR Standing Group on Political Parties.

**Biographical Note:**

Ruud Koole (b. 1953) is professor in Political Science at the University of Leiden. He studied history in Groningen and political science in Paris. He wrote his PhD-thesis on the organisational development of Dutch political parties (*De opkomst van de moderne kaderpartij - The Coming of the Modern Cadre Party - 1992*). He has widely published on Dutch politics and on comparative political parties. Currently he is Chair of the Department of Political Science in Leiden.

Pat Lyons (b. 1969) is a Senior Research Fellow at the Department of Political Sociology, Institute of Sociology v.v.i., Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Trinity College Dublin. His main areas of research are public opinion, electoral behaviour, political parties, and mass attitudes toward European integration. He is the author of a number of articles, book chapters, and a forthcoming book on public opinion.