

INSIGHTS INTO INTRA-PARTY DECISION-MAKING IN LATVIA'S POLITICAL PARTIES

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the decision-making processes within political parties in Latvia. Two important variables have been chosen for analysis: 1) policy formulation (which actors are involved in the elaboration of election programs), and 2) candidate selection (how parties create their electoral lists). A survey of Saeima (Latvia's parliamentary body) deputies indicates that party board members have the most say in deciding which individuals to include on electoral lists and which policies to pursue; financial supporters seem to have almost no impact on parties' internal decision-making processes.

Key words: intra-party decision-making, political parties, Latvia.

INTRODUCTION

Today, having a modern democracy without a competitive party system seems unthinkable. Political parties play the most important roles in state governance, policy formulation, interest representation, and elite recruitment and socialization. While the competitive aspect *between* parties is recognized as a necessary precondition for a stable and functioning democracy, the questions as to whether or not parties should also be *internally* democratic has been raised. The term *intra-party democracy* describes how and to what extent party members are involved in decision-making processes within their organization—including the recruiting party leadership, selecting candidates and formulating policies. Daunis Auers (2015, p.117) has indicated that “the least-researched dimension of Baltic political parties is the internal one: parties as organisations.” Auers has also pointed that parties in the region are “particularly opaque, having traditionally been seen as top-heavy and more reliant on centralized leadership than on the rank-and-file membership” (2015, p.117). Mihail Chiru and Sergiu Gherghina (2012) reach a similar conclusion on parties in central and Eastern Europe, that party organizations in the region are rather oligarchic. This article uses a survey of parliamentary deputies to determine which groups exercise the most impact over policy formulation and candidate selection processes that occur *within* Latvia's political parties. In accordance with previous research, we expect that party boards (or party leadership) will have the most influence over policies and personalities within Latvia's political parties.

Interest in intra-party democracy has been emerging in academic debates for decades. Discussions of inter-party democracy tend to relate to two broad questions. The first of these two questions concerns the link between a democratic regime and the way its parties are governed internally. Can we have a viable democracy with political parties that are internally undemocratic? That is, should decision-making within parties reflect universal democratic norms? The second of the two primary questions related to inter-party democracy asks if parties with internal democratic decision-making practices can effectively fulfill their functions and compete with other parties. If democracy on a party level demands that a broad range of individuals have a say in party affairs, then some would also expect decision-making processes to become more time consuming, less effective, and maybe even more bureaucratic. With this in mind, can internally democratic parties effectively react to urgent matters? Moreover, does internal democracy ensure the selection of the most suitable leadership for the political party or the formulation of the best-designed policies? Saglie and Heidar (2004, p. 365) have indicated that, "while inter-party competition is widely appreciated, intra-party democracy is questioned." Thus, there is no concrete agreement as to whether parties with internally democratic decision-making structures are vital to democracy. And, if they are indeed vital, how exactly is universal democracy connected to or dependent on party democracy?

1. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Intra-party democracy is often contrasted with party oligarchy. In an oligarchical party, members play a marginal role in policy formulation (Loxbo, 2011). Robert Michels (1915, 1962) has been skeptical about the prospects of a democracy that lacks internally democratic political parties. Yet, according to Michels, intra-party democracy was a mere utopia. Intra-party democracy is certainly desirable, but also unreachable in reality. Michel's famous "iron law of oligarchy" implies that all organizational forms inevitably develop oligarchic tendencies within their structures. Another view is that in order to attain democracy, parties "must be ruled by oligarchic principles" (Teorell 1999, p. 364). In this view, what happens inside the parties is irrelevant as long as they secure democracy through free competition among different alternatives. According to Teorell and like-minded thinkers, what matters is competition amongst—not within—parties. Proponents against intra-party democracy often draw parallels with the competitive market, where parties compete for votes as enterprises compete for consumers, thus parties are accountable to their voters not to their members (Saglie and Heidar, 2004). According to Duverger (1954), internal party democracy can cause serious problems for party competitiveness and hinder a party's ability to compete with their opponents. "With decentralized authority structures and free discussion comes the risk of internal dissension" (Teorell, 1999, p. 364). Political parties comprise legislative bodies and form the government. The stability of these institutions depends on effective and cohesive parties. On the other hand, the gradual cartelization of parties (Katz and Mair, 1995) weakened the role of individual membership and strengthens the role of the state. Advocates of this view might argue that parties have evolved in such a manner as to offer a state-funded service to the voters.

In line with the party centralization thesis, questions about the role of intra-party democracy become less relevant and intra party democracy also appears less possible as elites establish control over party organizational structures. Loxbo observes that “mainstream party research tends to hypothesize, implicitly or explicitly, that intra-party democracy has declined, if not disappeared altogether” (2011, p. 538). Katz and Mair’s (1993) famous distinction implies three faces of party organization, those of: 1) the party in public office (parliament or government), 2) the party on the ground (members, activists, and voters), and 3) the party central office (leadership of the party organization). In a later publication (Katz and Mair, 2002), they conclude that the party in public office dominates party organizational structure and has led to a weakening of the party on the ground. Essentially, leaders have melted with the party and vice versa.

On the other hand, many scholars defend the premise of internally democratic parties. Democratic decision-making procedures may foster participation; as a result, “citizens can take an active part in decisions that affect their lives” (Saglie and Heidar, 2004, p. 386). Teorell (1995) defends the idea of deliberation by institutionalizing intra-party deliberative polls in manifesto elaboration and candidate selection procedures. It means that party members should not only be included in choosing among policy alternatives, they should also be involved in the formulation of these alternatives. Hence, they should evolve from passive actors to active decision-makers with the power to have a real influence over the content of policies.

Ware (1979) has pointed out that internally democratic parties are less prone to oligopolistic conflicts between competing elite groups. Expanding the scope of those involved in decision-making may also lead to the selection of the most capable leaders. Free competition can ensure that the most suitable party members are elected as party leaders. If the leadership or candidate selection is restricted to a limited number of people, backstage deals become more likely. Obviously, the presence of democratic mechanisms does not necessarily prevent secret deals or intrigues from occurring within a party, but they do afford party members the possibility to engage in the inner life of their organizations. Expanding the involvement of party members can prevent conflict and contain conflicts from the public eye, reducing the risks to a party’s image. On the contrary, if party elites constantly use their status to suppress others, internal imbalances can emerge and weaken the party’s organizational capacity. Parties suffering from internal struggles are unable to fruitfully perform their functions.

Since party leaders are crucial political figures, their selection is an important function for all political parties (Ennser-Jedenastik and Müller, 2015). Party leadership “exercises major influence on the policy, (...) the party’s behavior vis-à-vis other parties, and typically the most important government position available to the party in office is reserved for the party leader” (Ennser-Jedenastik and Müller, 2015, p. 930). By changing their party’s leadership, party members can change party policy (Pettitt 2012).

In opposition to the cartel party thesis, which emphasizes the dominance of elites and their disregard for party members, Herbert Kitschelt (2000) argues that in times of weak party loyalty, party elites are actually more responsive to party members. Party members and loyal activists can be important agents for the party’s policies. They can promote the party to their particular

circles, thus enlarging their party's electoral base. Even Katz and Mair (2002) have admitted that there is substantial evidence suggesting that parties have become more responsive to their ordinary members by involving members in important decision-making procedures. Party membership is still an asset to parties in many ways. Among a number of other advantages (Mair 1994), party members offer political parties: financial resources through the payment of membership fees; human resources as members can occupy positions inside or outside the party; and organizational and political resources as members not only attract new voters, but a large membership in itself legitimizes a party.

As on the state level, on an organizational level, we cannot talk about absolute democracy. Every political party has its own *degree* of intra-party democracy. Robin T. Pettitt (2012, p. 630) observes that although "some parties are indeed more or less permanent oligarchies . . . others have seen an increase in membership influence." Thus, democracy, on either the party level or the state level, cannot be absolute. "There are different democratic *procedures* as well as different *degrees* of internal democracy" (Saglie and Heidar, 2004, p. 388).

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

Peter Mair (1994, p. 372) has written that "there continue to be severe limits to the comparative understanding of precisely how party organizations work." Similarly, Loxbo (2011, p. 540) argues that "the inner life of party organizations remains largely unexplored" in terms of decision-making practices. Research about intra-party affairs is empirically challenging because it demands access to information that can only be obtained through direct contact with party representatives. An analysis of party documents (such as statutes) is fruitful to the extent that it reveals the formal existence or absence of democratic mechanisms embodied in a party's decision-making processes. Moreover, party leaders might publicly defend their organization as democratic, but in reality it might not function according to democratic principles. Also, mass media coverage cannot provide a reliable view of the inner life of parties. Hence, for the larger public, decision-making inside these political organizations remains a rather concealed process.

In 2014 we conducted face-to-face interviews with Latvia's *Saeima* (parliament) deputies. Altogether, eighty of one hundred parliamentary members agreed to participate and to answer survey questions. Our survey, consisting of forty-two questions, covered a broad variety of topics including: use of social media, social group representation, party ideological placement, and electoral campaign organization among other topics. The survey also included two questions about decision-making procedures within the respondent's particular party, that which the respondents represent or from which they were elected. Our first question concerned policy formulation. We asked respondents to evaluate the degree to which various actors have been involved in the elaboration of their parties electoral program. (We asked deputies to refer to the situation before the 11th *Saeima* elections in 2011). We distinguished between seven possible actors: 1) board members (party leadership), 2) deputy candidates, 3) party members in general (rank-and-file members), 4) experts from different areas, 5) society at large, 6) primary donors, and 7) political consultants and public relations experts. Each respondent was asked to evaluate the involvement of each of these seven groups on a scale of one to five.

Our second survey topic queried participants about the creation of electoral lists. We formulated eight statements that could describe the candidate selection process within a party and asked the participating deputies to evaluate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement. For example, we asked participants to evaluate the degree to which they believed financial supporters impact candidate selection process, or whether their party tries to achieve a gender balance when formulating their electoral lists. A full list of these statements will be provided in the next section.

This research inevitably has several weaknesses and restrictions. In the first question, we only asked participants to mark the involvement of various actors in manifesto elaboration, however, we did not ask them to evaluate how inclusive or exclusive the policy formulation process within their parties are. Thus, we cannot conclude that the survey measures respondents' satisfaction with the policy formulation processes within their respective parties. Moreover, we did not ask participants which groups should be given more (or less) access to their party's manifesto elaboration, or which groups have disproportionate influence over policy development. Thus, this question can only partly measure intra-party democracy in the area of policy elaboration. We also are aware that the statements in the second question are not exhaustive and could be supplemented with other statements. Moreover, our query related to candidate list formation includes a variety of statements that not only measure the involvement of various actors, but also explore the process of creating candidate lists within a party on a more general level. For example, participants were asked whether their parties consider gender balance or give priority to publicly recognizable members during this process.

The target population in this survey was parliamentary deputies. Thus, our research only addresses one organizational level of political parties in Latvia, namely, the party in public office (Katz and Mair, 1993). We did not include other party members, party activists outside the parliament, or members at parties' organizational levels. Thus, our obtained empirical results can be biased, because our survey respondents, to put it simply, are the 2011 election winners. Moreover, our respondents, parliamentary deputies, are the members of their respective parties who have successfully negotiated the internal candidate selection processes and obtained a seat in Latvia's parliament. In other words, they may be less critical about internal decision making processes than other members of their respective parties who were not elected or not included on the candidate list. This aspect has to be taken into consideration while interpreting the data.

3. THE INNER LIVES OF LATVIA'S POLITICAL PARTIES

Decision-making practices in Latvia's political parties have not been systematically researched. In fact, there is practically no empirically valid and reliable data about decision-making processes in Latvia's political parties¹. This research contributes to the lack of practical knowledge about

¹ In 2009, the Latvian branch of Transparency International, Delna, conducted a study titled, *How Democratic are Latvian Political Parties?* Delna examined the candidate selection procedures for municipality elections in two cities, Riga and Jurmala. The researchers concluded that decision-making processes within the Latvian parties studied were closed and that the involvement of party members was minimal. More information about the project can be found at http://delna.lv/wpcontent/uploads/old_files/Zinojums_Partiju%20iekshēja%20demokratija.pdf

the internal functioning of political parties in Latvia. It also gives a wider insight on how party members evaluate and think about the regulations that guide their respective party's internal life.

Table 1 relates participants' responses to various statements about how the respondent's party creates candidate lists. In responding to each statement, we asked deputies to consider only the national elections.

TABLE 1: Responses to statements on electoral list formation processes

Statement	1 (strongly disagree)	2	3	4	5 (strongly agree)	Do not know / NA
In the candidate selection process, priority is given to the members who are most active internally.	1.3%	3.8%	24.1%	41.8%	26.6%	2.5%
In the candidate selection process, priority is given to the members most well known to the public.	-	1.3%	11.4%	45.6%	39.2%	2.5%
In choosing candidates, my party tries to consider gender balance.	29.1%	22.8%	27.8%	13.9%	2.5%	3.8%
The criteria for candidate selection criteria is well known in my party.	6.3%	10.1%	26.6%	35.4%	17.7%	3.8%
My party's candidate selection process is open and clear.	7.6%	11.4%	32.9%	31.6%	13.9%	2.5%
In the candidate selection process, my party tries to balance the interests of all members.	10.1%	19.0%	32.9%	26.6%	8.9%	2.5%
The final candidate selection decision is made by my party's board.	1.3%	1.3%	10.1%	25.3%	59.5%	2.5%
Financial supporters have an impact on my party's candidate selection process.	44.2%	26.0%	13.0%	7.8%	1.3%	7.8%

SOURCE: Survey of *Saeima* deputies, conducted in June and July 2014

In Table 1, the first two statements explore the degree to which the respondents' parties give special priority to internally active members or those who are publicly recognizable. Offering a place in the electoral list to intra-party activists might be viewed as a reward for their commitment and contribution to party activities. The other statement might reveal a more tactical strategy, the inclusion of popular personalities, official party members or famous people outside the party, in electoral lists can attract both the voters and media coverage parties seek during electoral campaigns. Voter behavior in Latvia demonstrates that well-known personalities play an important role in determining electoral outcomes. Data show that most parliamentary members tend to agree with both statements. Namely, most respondents agree (almost 42 per cent) or strongly agree (26 per cent) that in the formation of electoral lists, priority is given to those that have been active party members. Similarly, the majority of respondents agrees (45 per cent) or strongly agrees (39 per cent) that a candidate's popularity can play a role in the candidate list formation.

Gender balance has become a particularly important issue. The under-representation of women in national and local politics (as well as in the higher ranks of the public sector) has stoked debates about formal mechanisms that could foster a more equal representation of women on parties' electoral lists. In Latvia, party regulation does not impose any obligation for equal gender representation. Thus, parties are not forced to consider gender-related criteria while forming their candidate lists or electing party leadership. A willingness to achieve a more balanced candidate selection remains an internal issue for Latvia's parties. As the data show, most parliament members reject that their parties would pay attention to the gender issue in candidate selection. Only about 16 per cent of the respondents expressed that achieving equal gender representation played a role in the candidate list formation process. Some deputies commented that the professionalism of the potential candidate should be given the highest priority, not gender.

The survey also included two statements that aimed to measure the existence or absence of candidate selection criteria and the overall openness of this process. Most respondents agreed (35 per cent) or strongly agreed (17 per cent) that the candidate selection criteria are well known to party members, while 16 per cent of surveyed parliament members disagreed. Again, these results may be biased and may not represent the overall opinion of party members as the respondents have been elected to the national parliament; thus they might be tempted to favor their party's internal mechanisms for candidate selection. A similar distribution of answers is evident in responses to the statement concerning the openness of the candidate selection process. Forty-five per cent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the candidate selection procedure in their parties can be described as open and clear.

Our questions about electoral list formation also included a statement related to a balance of interests within the party, namely, whether parties try to consider the interests of all members while designing their candidate lists for parliament elections. Almost one-fifth of the participating parliamentary deputies admitted that this is not practically possible, while more than 35 per cent of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their party's candidate selection procedure is designed to the balance interests of all party members. The final two statements aimed to examine the impact of two important groups of actors on deputy candidate selection. One statement concerned whether the party board gave a final approval for candidate lists and another was related to the impact of a party's financial supporters. Almost 85 per cent of respondents admitted that their party's board grants the approval for or disapproval of their party's candidate lists. This means that party board members can, if necessary, modify the order of candidates' positions on a candidate list or withdraw candidates deemed unsuitable. As expected, party members are not keen to discuss the influence of party sponsors. Many of the respondents reacted to this question by commenting that they have no relationship with their party's financial donors. Only nine per cent admitted that party donors have some say in the deputy candidate selection process. The majority of respondents either disagreed with the statement about donor influence or said that they do not have enough information to determine whether or not donors have an impact on their party's internal affairs.

The second variable we wanted to examine was related to policy formulation within Latvia's political parties. Survey respondents were asked to evaluate the involvement of different actors in the process of elaborating their party's manifesto on a scale of one (not involved) to five (very involved). We specifically asked participants to respond based on their party's situation before the 2011 parliament elections. Table 2 includes the distribution of answers.

TABLE 2: Responses to statements on the process of elaborating electoral programs

Actors	1 No involvement	2	3	4	5 Very strong involvement	Do not know/ NA
Party's board	-	3.8%	7.6%	27.8%	58.2%	2.6%
Deputy candidates	1.3%	8.9%	26.6%	39.2%	22.8%	1.3%
Ordinary party members	6.3%	22.8%	40.5%	17.7%	10.1%	2.6%
Experts from differ- ent areas	-	3.8%	31.6%	48.1%	13.9%	2.6%
Wider society	12.7%	20.3%	35.4%	16.5%	12.7%	2.6%
Party's largest fi- nancial supporters	32.5%	28.6%	23.4%	6.5%	1.3%	7.8%
Political consul- tants/ Poli-technologists	15.6%	23.4%	24.7%	24.7%	9.1%	2.6%

SOURCE: Survey of *Saeima* deputies, conducted in June and July 2014

As was expected, the respondents reported that the group most involved in their party's manifesto elaboration was party board members. Eighty-six per cent of parliamentary deputies evaluated their involvement in policy formulation as strong or very strong. Hence, the party elite is still the dominant actor in Latvia's political parties when it comes to a party's policy platform. The respondents reported that parliamentary deputy candidates wielded a substantial influence on manifesto drafting (62 per cent evaluated deputy candidates' involvement as strong or very strong). They also reported that experts from different areas were particularly influential (62 per cent of surveyed deputies indicated experts' involvement as strong or very strong). A party's reliance on professionals in policy formulation can indicate different things. It can mean that a party (although not all) acknowledges its inability to fully orient in all policy areas in order to offer the most weighted policy solutions. This could also signal that a party is actually out of ideas and is willing to seek solutions from experts who have no actual political responsibility if the implementation of a particular policy fails. Experts may also lack knowledge about financial possibilities and the consequences of their consultations.

Almost 34 per cent of participating parliamentary deputies agreed that their respective party, to some extent, collaborates with public relations consultants during the manifesto elaboration process. This could indicate that parties strategically evaluate which policy options

could enhance their chances of winning or losing an election. Too much reliance on media consultants can also signal a dangerous pattern and promote populism. It should be pointed out, however, that responses to the media as a group of actors were polarized. Thirty-nine per cent of respondents stated that political consultants have no or very weak role in their party's manifesto elaboration process.

The survey revealed that ordinary party members play a smaller role (although the margin is very minor) in policy formulation than the experts and the wider society. Though 27.8 per cent of the surveyed deputies evaluated the role of ordinary party members as "strong" or "very strong." Almost 30 per cent expressed a similar opinion regarding the influence of the general public. Whether this indicates the marginalization of ordinary party members is still to be seen. This research, however, demonstrates that inclusion in the list also gives also more impact over the content of electoral program. It is also interesting to witness that experts outside the party, according to the opinion of participating parliament members, are more actively involved in policy elaboration than party members at large.

According to the survey respondents, the group least involved in the elaboration of electoral programs within Latvia's political parties is comprised of those making the largest financial donations to the parties. Only 7.8 per cent of respondents evaluated the role of these donors as "strong" or "very strong," an absolute majority said donors' impact on their party's policy platform is absent or very minor. Almost eight per cent of deputies were unable to give a precise evaluation of the influence of donors on their party's elaboration of electoral programs. During the interviews it was evident that respondents were very eager to openly reveal the influence of financial supporters on policies or personalities.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to reveal aspects of the inner lives of political parties in Latvia. We focused on two important functions that every political party has to fulfill – the formulation of a policy platform for elections and the selection of deputy candidates. Our survey of party members elected to Latvia's parliament revealed several interesting findings. The survey responses indicated that party board members have the most impact on Latvia's political parties' policies and personalities, at least when compared with other groups such as ordinary party members. The survey participants also stated that the impact of financial supporters on their party's internal affairs is almost absent. However, this pattern in responses is questionable given media reports and the findings of previous studies. Namely, there have been a number of stories and reports (for example, *Latvijas Avīze* 2013) linking a variety of entrepreneurs' (mostly from the building sector) generous contributions to Latvia's parties, particularly those in power and subsequent sizeable contracts granted to these same companies for state or municipal construction projects.

The majority of the participating members of Latvia's parliament are satisfied with the way deputy candidates are selected within their parties. They also tend to agree that the candidate selection criteria are well known within the party. At the same time, they admit that parties do give priority to publicly recognizable persons and those that have been internally active.

Future research about intra-party life in Latvia should focus on other party members as well. What do ordinary party members, not necessarily just those that have been elected, think about their party's internal processes? Are they satisfied with the way party leadership is selected and how policies are formulated and candidate lists are formed?

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