Internal Party Democracy and Policy Formulation: Rationales, Trends, Relevance

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Promoting Internal Party Democracy: A Selling Point, A Serious Danger, Or a Redundant Exercise?

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In this paper I examine the implementation and operation of internal party democracy (IPD) in eight political parties: the Australian Labor Party, the Australian Democrats, the Australian Greens, New Zealand Labour, the Green Party of New Zealand, the Green Party of England and Wales, the Liberal Democrats and New Labour. In particular, the paper analyses the role of the membership in the development of party policy, and how this varies across democracies (Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom) and party families (social democratic, green and liberal democratic). I analyse why political parties adopt IPD and how this is linked to their history and ideology; the key institutional mechanisms used to give expression to the aspirations of IPD; their continuing relevance; and how both parties and activists have adapted to changing patterns of participation within parties and opportunities for influence.
This paper presents a comparative empirical analysis of the development of party policy by
democratic means across three democracies (the United Kingdom, Australia and New
Zealand) and three party families (social democratic, liberal democratic and green). I
examine the practical operation of internal party democracy (IPD) in eight parties, each of
which claims to offer its members significant opportunities to influence the content and
form of party policy. The paper is structured around three central themes that engage with
the key questions of the workshop: Why do these parties promote IPD? What are the key
institutional trends in intra-party decision-making? How do changes to the nature of
participatory opportunities within parties affect their role as vehicles for democratic
engagement?

In answering the question ‘Why promote IPD?’ I examine the relevance of three
imperatives: party history, ideology, and electoral/party competition. I argue that whilst
parties value IPD as a means by which to gather policy ideas, a reward for members’
campaigning efforts and as a source of legitimacy for the party organisation, paradoxically
IPD has little value in attracting votes and only limited value in attracting members to a
party. Rather, the continued promotion of IPD is closely tied to a party’s historical
development and ideological aspirations. The second part of the paper analyses
contemporary trends in the exact form of IPD in policy development. I argue that there are
four main variants of democratic participation in policy-making within parties: direct,
representative, delegate and consultative, each of which finds expression in various
practical mechanisms, e.g. the party conference, policy working groups, consultation
exercises and local meetings. The paper examines which types of participation are
prioritised by different parties and why, and evaluates the effectiveness of these different
forms of IPD in encouraging meaningful membership participation. I note a key trend in
IPD from direct to consultative forms of participation and to engaging the broader public in
policy debates as a response to declining numbers of active party members. Finally, I
explore activists’ practical responses to these developments, and the implications that the
changing nature of participation within political parties has for their relevance as partisan
democratic institutions.

The research design

The paper reports the key findings of my recently defended doctoral dissertation: ‘Parallel
Lives: A Comparative Analysis of the Relationship between Membership Participation and
Elite Representation in Contemporary Political Parties’. The dissertation presents a two-
part comparative analysis of the formulation of policy by the party membership and its
subsequent application to legislative debate by the parliamentary party, roughly spanning
the decade from 1997 to 2007. A total of eight parties are included in the research: the
Australian Labor Party (ALP), Australian Democrats and the Greens (Australia), the NZ
Labour Party and the Greens (New Zealand) and New Labour, the Liberal Democrats and
the Green Party of England and Wales (UK).

I justify the ‘small n’ comparative method adopted in the research design on the ground that
it enables an explicit and systematic analysis of several parties with qualitative elements to
be undertaken, and thus a more conclusive and vigorous assessment of the hypotheses and
predictions than a single case study. Yet by restricting the sample I do not lose the context
and dynamics that might otherwise be obscured or over-generalised by large-scale studies,
and can develop a more nuanced and contextualised account of party organisation that builds on previous comparative works of greater scope (see for example Webb et al. 2002; Katz and Mair 1994; Katz and Mair 1992 – all edited collections).

The majority of original data for this research has been gathered through interviews with party members, activists, office-holders, staffers, councillors and parliamentarians. A total of 52 interviews were conducted between 2003 and 2008, which took place by telephone and in person in cities in Australia, New Zealand and the UK. The interview material has also been supplemented with a qualitative analysis of party documents (rules, constitutions, briefings and internal memos) and existing quantitative primary data on membership participation (for example, party membership surveys conducted by Seyd and Whiteley et al. 1992; 2002; 2006).

**Promoting internal party democracy**

Why do political parties promote IPD and how does the extent to which members are able to formally participate in intra-party policy-making differ between parties, both within and across democracies? Previous research has suggested that a party’s disposition towards democracy and participatory ideals will be strongly affected by its ideology, with green and left-libertarian parties most likely to emphasise democratic themes (Kittilson and Scarrow 2003: 62; Kitschelt and McGann 1997; Kitschelt 1989). Viewing parties as essentially purposive organisations (Luthe and Müller-Rommel 2002: 6), the logic of this argument derives from the mantra that parties ‘practice what they preach’. As Kittilson and Scarrow (2003: 65) argue, ‘self-consciousness about organizational principles is perhaps most characteristic of parties that want to transform the political order: such parties often use their own charters to demonstrate how alternative models of political organization might work’.

**Social democratic parties**

Parties of the labour movement in the UK, Australia and New Zealand were founded on the basis that party policy was to be determined by the membership and approved at conference rather than being formulated by parliamentary elites. In this way, a party’s grassroots provided the requisite connection between its elected representatives and civil society, thus translating ‘mass preferences into public policy’ (Key 1961: 432). As exemplars of the mass party model, these parties emerged to represent a relatively distinct social base, the working class, in a politics that was about the ‘competition, conflict and cooperation’ of these well-defined groups. In organisational terms, the distinct interests of each group were articulated within the party programme: ‘a coherent and logically connected whole’ – implemented with strict discipline by the parliamentary party, yet formulated with the extensive involvement of the party’s grassroots (Katz and Mair 1995: 6-7).

Regardless of whether or not labour parties in the UK, Australia and New Zealand can still be categorised as ‘mass parties’, or whether they have adapted to become catch-all or cartel organisations, the rhetoric they ascribe to their formal policy-making processes still reflects the chain of command particular to the mass party organisation. For example, in 1997 Labour undertook significant organisational reforms designed to ‘democratise’ the party’s
decision-making and policy formulation process (see Russell 2005). Since the implementation of the internal policy document *Partnership in Power*, the influence of the party’s constituent unions has been downgraded and replaced by a policy process ‘designed to involve all party stakeholders (including members, local parties, trade unions, socialist societies and Labour representatives) as well as the wider community’ (UK Labour Party 2006). According to the party, members now have unprecedented opportunities within this framework ‘to get involved in the party processes and debates…through a more deliberative and extended procedure’ (UK Labour Party 1997). A decade later, Prime Minister Gordon Brown again emphasised Labour’s commitment to membership participation: ‘we need a 21st century party to meet 21st century challenges that requires us to involve and engage ourselves in all our communities and also to consult the membership and make them fully involved in the future’ (*The Guardian* 11 June 2007, p. 10).

Membership involvement in the rhetoric of social democratic parties in New Zealand and Australia also remains strong. For example, in promoting itself to potential new members, the ability for individuals to influence party policy through their local branch is portrayed as a particular advantage of NZ Labour Party membership:

Labour Party members have the opportunity to contribute directly to party policy, and help implement the commitments made in our manifesto. Your local Labour Party will hold regular policy forums which all members can take part in, which can feed into our Policy Committees. The resulting policies are then debated at our annual conference, and if passed, become party policy (NZ Labour 2007).

Similarly, the Australian Labor Party claims it has a commitment to making the operation of the party ‘as attractive, inclusive and participatory as possible’ (Hawke and Wran 2002: 5). One of the clearest statements of social democratic party ideology and a ‘bottom-up’ policy structure can be found in the ALP’s Constitution, which provides that policy ‘is not made by directives from the leadership, but by resolutions originating from branches, affiliated unions and individual Party members’ (Part A, Article 7).

**Green parties**

The aspirations of green parties to grassroots democracy and their emphasis on membership participation, power sharing and consensus decision-making are products of the green movement’s broader ideology. In contrast to the organisational structures of mass and elite based parties, movement parties such as the Greens consist of ‘coalitions of political activists who emanate from social movements and try to apply the organisational and strategic practices of social movements in the arena of party competition’ (Kitschelt 2006: 280). A strong commitment to direct participation is characteristic of these parties, and scholars have argued that their formal organisational structure tends to decentralisation and a rejection of party hierarchy in an attempt to ‘preserve some of the spirit of movement politics from which they evolved’ (Offe 1985: 243; see also Poguntke 1993: 387; Carter 2001: 108-110; Gunther and Diamond 2001: 30; Kitschelt 1989: 62); and to create links between civil society and political parties through the practice of participatory democracy (Icke 1990: 47; see also Petithomme 2007: 13).
Direct participation through decentralisation and local autonomy is a key characteristic of the formal policy development processes of Green parties. In its Statement of Core Principles, the Green Party of England and Wales declares that the party emphasises ‘democratic participation and accountability by ensuring that decisions are taken at the closest practical level to those affected by them’ (Principle 6). Direct participation is regarded as ‘the highest form of democracy…All the major political decisions which affect our lives should ideally be made with our active participation’ (Principles of Government 102). Similarly, policy decisions in the Australian Greens are arrived at through a process of ‘grassroots democracy’, one of the four pillars enshrined in the party’s Charter and Constitution. The policy process operates according to the principles of consensus decision-making and with the maximum possible participation of members (s 44.2). The party’s federal structure (comprising of local, State and national organisations) allows for membership participation and decision-making at several territorial levels. For example, policies that concern only one local group, electorate branch or State party may be decided by the relevant group (s 45.1) according to locally-determined decision-making procedures as long as they are consistent with consensus and participatory principles.

That the party’s policy process is ‘participatory and democratic’ is one of the key elements stressed by the NZ Green Party in its Green Policy Guidelines document (2006). However, perhaps reflecting the party’s relatively greater involvement in the legislative arena and the imperative to form coalitions and compromise in what is now a consensus rather than majoritarian democracy, the emphasis on direct democracy and intra-party consensus decision-making does not feature quite as prominently as in the rhetoric of the Australian and English Greens. Although the party conference is constitutionally the supreme body for setting the political direction of the organisation (s 8.1), the party places more importance on the need for the policy process to be ‘clearly understood and trusted by the membership of the Green Party’, and for the objectives of participation and democracy to be balanced with efficiency and effectiveness (NZ Greens 2006).

Liberal democratic parties

Both the Liberal Democrats and the Australian Democrats share similar histories as splinter parties (or groups of individuals) that broke away from established major parties during conflicts over party organisation and ideological direction. These histories have shaped the liberal democratic parties’ current organisation, with both parties vowing to ‘break the mould’ of two-party adversarial politics. The Australian Democrats were established as a party of the ‘new politics’ movement, embracing the ideals of consensus, rational debate and citizen participation in political decision-making. This organisation is typical of new politics parties, disillusioned with the lack of responsiveness and non-democratic structures of the traditional parties (Carty 1997: 103; Sugita 1995). The party’s commitment to internal democracy is codified within its Constitution (2006), where ‘ownership’ of the party is vested in its membership, which determines party policy, selects parliamentary candidates, office bearers and party leaders by plebiscites open to all financial members. The development of party policy takes place under the broad constitutional objective that ‘policies shall be formulated with the maximum participation of members and shall finally be determined by the direct and equal say of the membership by a voluntary postal vote’ (s 9.1).
The Liberal Democrats have been regarded by party analysts as the most democratic of the mainstream UK parties – offering significant opportunities for membership participation when contrasted with Labour and the Conservatives (Webb 2000: 209; Ingle 1996: 130). Members are given the opportunity to develop party policy by participating in working groups and discussing policy papers and motions in local and regional meetings, which are then voted on by their representatives at conference (Liberal Democrats 2008). The preamble to the party’s constitution reaffirms this democratic commitment: ‘we believe that people should be involved in running their communities. We are determined to strengthen the democratic process’ (Liberal Democrats 2006: 7).

Parties as participatory organisations

Overall, the formal approach to policy-making that best characterises social democratic parties is the importance ascribed to aggregating the interests of the membership in a ‘bottom-up’ manner, through discussion forums and local meetings which then elect delegates to party conference to approve or reject policy on the members’ behalf. The structures of policy-making in green parties are similar to those of the social democratic parties in that policy is formally decided at local level, where delegates are chosen to attend conference. However, what distinguishes green parties is their emphasis on discussion and deliberation (both elements of consensus democracy) and an associated aversion to formal voting in intra-party decisions. Green parties also stress decentralisation and local autonomy to a much greater extent than do the social democratic parties. Although the Australian Democrats and the Liberal Democrats share many commonalities in their ideology and history, it is perhaps a reflection of their shared liberal ideology that the parties’ policy processes differ quite considerably. The Liberal Democrats could be best described as an amalgam of the features that characterise the social democratic and green parties: a culture of discussion, debate and compromise and an emphasis on local autonomy, but within a more formalised structure, revolving around local meetings, policy committees and electing representatives to conference to ‘make’ official party policy. The Australian Democrats are a unique case; their policy being formally decided by direct participation of the entire membership in a voluntary postal plebiscite after discussion in branch meetings and the party’s National Journal.

Therefore, parties’ participatory rhetoric and policy processes are closely linked to their history (particularly the rationale for their formation) and ideology, leading to distinct differences between party types (and in some cases, such as liberal democratic parties within them). However, despite their diverse histories and ideologies, all the parties surveyed in this study are united by their common claim to foster membership participation in intra-party policy formulation. What is particularly interesting about the survey of parties’ participatory rhetoric is that it stands in stark contrast with the majority of academic accounts of the actual influence of party members over policy. Many scholars have claimed that providing a voice to the membership is at best a futile exercise and, at worst, a threat to the electoral success of a party (Michels 1962, Downs 1957, Schattschneider 1942).

This gap between academic discourse and parties’ own rhetoric raises an interesting question. If membership participation is unachievable, undesirable or detrimental to electoral fortunes, why would a party want to offer its rank and file a say in policy? A significant amount of academic attention, particularly in the work of Susan Scarrow (1996),
has been devoted to establishing a link between internally democratic structures that encourage participation and deliberation, and the legitimacy of political parties. The notion of legitimacy derives from the logical assumption that the internal organisation of parties should mirror the democratic organisation of the state (Blondel 1978: 140). Active and robust memberships assist the electoral fortunes of parties, enabling them to present themselves as organisations driven by members, rather than dictated by professional politicians (Scarrow 1996: 42). The fact that parties have not amended the formal degree of influence accorded to the membership or reduced their role in policy development may stem from their own inertia. However, it may also indicate that the normative expectations of society as to how parties should organise have not changed since the start of the twentieth century, and that party rhetoric is largely a reflection of these expectations. In many countries, including Australia and New Zealand, the relationship between a membership base and party legitimacy is illustrated by the legal requirement that parties have a minimum number of members in order to register to contest elections and receive financial support from the state (Gauja 2008: 250-1). However, it is important to acknowledge that legitimacy is not of itself an indicator of the quality of democracy within parties as members may provide electoral benefits even if membership control is more apparent than real (Scarrow 1996: 42).

Therefore, maintaining a membership base is crucial for the legitimacy of political parties as actors in the democratic process. However, participation in policy development can also be viewed as a reward for labour. Members are more likely to participate (contributing finances and labour) if they are able to ‘have a say’ and influence the party’s programme. Previous academic research on membership activity within parties has shown that perceived selective outcomes matter (for example see Seyd and Whiteley 2002). Further, despite trends to more professional campaigning techniques, keeping members mobilised as a labour resource has been shown to be electorally beneficial. An active membership that is prepared to canvas for the party and deliver leaflets has been found to have ‘highly significant effects on constituency outcomes in general elections’ (Seyd and Whiteley 2002: 17; see also Denver and Hands 1997; Johnston and Pattie 1997; Seyd and Whiteley 1992; Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson 1994).

Members can also contribute to their party’s success by injecting new ideas into the organisation and maintaining links with the electorate. It is a point that is often overlooked in comparative studies of modern political parties; but parties are still essentially constituted by their members. As noted, the membership base attached to parties has been regarded as performing an integrating and mobilising role, at least in a normative sense, ensuring closer contact between citizens and ruling elites – achieved in part through popular involvement in the creation of party policy. Although this strategy has undergone a resurgence numerous times in the decades since, it was especially popular within UK Labour in the mid 1970s and 1980s, with new members deemed to bring ‘new blood’ to the organisation and help it ‘respond to new ideas and keep in touch with electoral opinion’ (Scarrow 1991: 130). The Australian Democrats and Liberal Democrats recognise a similar role of their activists in gathering valuable input ‘as to what people respond to on the doorstep, the arguments they’re being asked…what questions do we have to answer? How can we explain our policies better?’ (Greg Simpson, Liberal Democrats Head of Policy and Research, interview, 15/2/07). Furthermore, there is a perception within parties that in order for their ideas to be disseminated within the party, members must have some corresponding role in the policy process:
I can’t see why anyone would join a party where they can’t have some say in policy, either through a convention or a conference or through a membership ballot. Members should be involved and must be involved. I think it gives you a far better tap into what the community is thinking as opposed to this isolated place on a hill in Canberra. It’s a world unto its own sometimes and I think you tend to lose track of what people are getting at (former Australian Democrats leader, Meg Lees, interview, 4/2/03).

We’re okay to deliver pamphlets and go door-knocking but we’re not okay to make policy? Most of us are in the party because we believe in stuff, not because we like fundraising (NZ Labour Minister and former Party President, Ruth Dyson, interview, 10/3/08).

Nevertheless, beyond providing legitimacy, it is not clear that the implementation of intra-party democracy brings any electoral benefits to a political party. For example, the Australian Democrats, regarded as the most democratic of the Australian parties (Johns 2000; Warhurst 1997), allowing their members the power to create official party policy by ballot, have never managed to poll more than 11.3% of the electorate in the lower house and 12.6% in the Senate. The potential instability and infighting associated with democratic internal party debate may in fact harm a party’s image in the electorate. Internally democratic parties are portrayed by the media as indecisive and incapable of governing effectively: the Australian Democrats have been labelled ‘fairies at the bottom of the garden’ and the UK Labour Party is often criticised for failing to quell backbench dissent (see for example, Cowley 2005, The Times Online 15 September 2008).

There is only very limited evidence to suggest that IPD offers any membership benefits. In 2004-05, the Australian Democrats conducted a survey of members in which 76 per cent of respondents cited the party’s emphasis on participatory democracy as a reason for joining. However, despite the opportunities on offer to members to influence policy, participation in intra-party activities has remained very low throughout the party’s history (see Gauja 2005). Indeed, declining membership numbers in the UK Labour Party despite the introduction of the Partnership in Power policy framework indicate that IPD does not play a significant part in attracting members to a party. Between 1997 and 2008, membership in New Labour has more than halved – from 420,000 to 177,000 (Webb 2002; UK Labour Party 2008).

**Trends in the nature of IPD**

Based on parties’ formal opportunities for membership participation in policy development, it is possible to identify four main ‘types’ of participation: direct, representative, delegate and consultative. Designed to highlight the different opportunities members are given to participate in intra-party policy processes, the typology emphasises structural constraints and incentives and therefore departs from, yet complements, existing models of participation that emphasise the demand side aspect of political participation (see Seyd and Whiteley 2002: Chapter 2). The table below briefly summarises the types of participation, which party/party type they are favoured by and how they are manifest in policy formulation processes.
Table 1: A Typology of Formal Membership Participation in Policy Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Organisational Feature</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Australian Democrats; Green</td>
<td>Individuals have the ability to contribute directly to the making of a policy decision</td>
<td>Participation in working groups; policy ballots; autonomous local policy groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative</td>
<td>Liberal Democrats; UK Labour</td>
<td>Individual members represented on policy-making bodies; representatives not mandated</td>
<td>Liberal Democrat Conference; UK Labour NPF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delegate</td>
<td>Labor Parties; Green Parties</td>
<td>Individual members’ interests represented by delegates who must follow their wishes</td>
<td>Labor party conferences; Green party conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultative</td>
<td>UK Labour, Australian</td>
<td>Party relies on consultations with membership and policy submissions from individuals and groups</td>
<td>Policy consultations; forums/conventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Labor Party</td>
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*Direct participation*

Direct participation in the policy process is perhaps the most difficult model to practically achieve, as members must ‘have a voice in all key decisions’ (Miller 2005: 18) and be actively involved at the point of decision-making. Under this model, members represent themselves on policy-making bodies such as working groups and policy commissions, vote as individuals on matters of policy in membership-wide plebiscites, or make autonomous decisions in local groups. The implementation and success of this model of participation relies primarily on a party’s size and is regarded as working most effectively in small parties of less than 5,000 members (Miller 2005: 16) such as the Australian Democrats and the Green parties. Despite the difficulty of practically applying this model of participation within political parties, from a normative perspective it offers the most meaningful and effective opportunities for membership involvement in two respects. First, it is a reliable way to aggregate citizens’ preferences, as those who wish to be involved can be. Second, as party members are active participants in this process, direct participation fulfills the goals of education and political self-development as outcomes of policy development (Pateman 1970: 105).

*Participation through representation and delegation*

Both the representative and delegate models of participation create a link between members and policy without their direct involvement in decision-making. As the most common type of participation, members choose one or more of their number to represent their views and interests in policy decisions at a higher level of intra-party decision-making. The important difference between the two models is the degree of agency that the representative possesses in his/her policy decisions. Under the representative model, representatives should ideally take their members’ interests into account, but ultimately decide according to their own
judgement and conscience. On the other hand, delegates exercise no agency – they are chosen to convey the wishes of their members rather than make individual political decisions (see Pitkin 1967: 134). The success of both models (although particularly the delegate model) relies not only on the ‘representativeness’ of the selected few, but on a ‘strong connection’ between representatives and their local parties in the transmission of information and policy preferences. This idea of a ‘strong connection’ hinges on the ability of delegates to be able to come to know the preferences of their party members. We most commonly see these types of participation manifest in larger parties in the operation of party conferences, where conference attendees act either as delegates (social democratic parties) or representatives (Liberal Democrats) of the wider membership in the decisions affecting the adoption of party policy. Those parties with a distinct federal structure, particularly in Australia (ALP and the Australian Greens) emphasise the delegate model of membership participation and representation as a means by which to ensure that constituent regional parties are given adequate voice in national decisions.

Consultation

The final model of participation, consultative, involves the participation of members in the policy process through submissions to, and consultations with, party policy working groups. This participation can be distinguished from direct forms as members are not directly making policy decisions; rather they are feeding their views to intermediary bodies in the drafting process, such as working groups and staged policy forums. Although parties routinely consult with interest groups, think tanks and other interested parties when developing policies, only recently have policy consultations been used as a strategy to encourage membership participation (rather than seeking out expert opinion) in the policy process. This trend is occurring most prominently in the UK, particularly in the Labour Party through initiatives such as ‘The Big Conversation’ and ‘Let’s Talk’, although it is increasingly evident in the ALP, especially since entering government. By encouraging public discourse around salient issue areas, this type of participation appeals from a normative perspective as ‘democracy should be concerned with the rational formation of preferences through public discussion and debate’ (Teorell 1999: 367). However, the effectiveness of consultation exercises hinges on the extent to which they operate as symbiotic, ‘two-way’ channels of communication between political leaders and the community, as preference formation should ideally be endogenous to the decision-making process (Teorell 1999: 367).

The relationship between different types of participation

Although some parties favour a certain type of participation over another, it is entirely possible for different models of participation to coexist within the one party at different stages of the policy process. As Bobbio (1987: 53) observes in the context of state-level democracies, representative governance and direct democracy ‘are not two alternative systems, in the sense that where there is one there cannot be the other, but are two systems that can mutually complement each other’. However, a possible difficulty may arise when considering the relationship between these different types of participation, particularly if they are implemented within one organisation. Tensions may be created when direct/deliberative processes are established alongside not only representation, but also
broad consultation. In Dahl’s words, representative democracy may only be ‘a sorry substitute for the real thing’ (direct democracy) (see Dahl 1982: 13). In this situation, members accustomed to local groups may feel excluded from the political decision-making process by a shift to consultative forums. For example, the UK’s Power Inquiry reported that ‘asking people set questions in focus groups or polling is a poor substitute for real democratic processes’ (Power Inquiry 2006: 9). There is also a possibility that those expecting their views to be aggregated through direct ballots or large-scale consultations may become disenchanted in a shift to smaller deliberative groups.

Nonetheless, whether a particular type of participation is favourable or desirable is an inherently normative question that cannot be easily resolved. Different types of participation are intended to have different consequences and hence should be evaluated according to those consequences (Teorell 2006). For example, deliberative models are concerned with the legitimacy of political decision-making, representative models of democracy emphasise responsiveness to citizens’ preferences, whereas as participatory (direct) models emphasise self-development (Teorell 2006: 791-2). While parties may favour a certain model of participation (for example, representative forums such as conferences designed to aggregate the views of the membership), this may potentially diverge from the preferences of the party membership for policy involvement that, for example, facilitates political self-development and education. In this respect, the shortcomings of particular participatory models may not stem from the processes themselves, but from fundamental normative disagreements over the outcomes they are meant to achieve.

**Shifting forums for IPD**

Within the parties studied there are five key vehicles for policy development, each of which provide the practical means by which parties facilitate the different types of participation previously outlined: local meetings, policy development and oversight groups, the party conference, direct ballots and consultations. The main trend observable amongst all parties surveyed is the shift from more ‘traditional’ direct participatory forums (such as local meetings) to representative and consultative forms of participation, with greater community involvement sought by parties to offset declining levels of membership participation.

Local meetings appear to have fallen out of favour with party members, plagued by low levels of attendance across all party types (Seyd and Whiteley 2002 – see also Vromen 2006, Whiteley et al. 2006: 44). Although local party meetings are designed to provide members with the opportunity to discuss and debate policies in detail and to gather information and form opinions on policy issues with a view to feeding these deliberations into the policy development process, there are significant problems with the operation of local branch meetings as a forum for membership participation in policy-making. Amongst the social democratic parties in this study, disillusionment with the processes of local meetings was common, being described as ‘stultifying’ experiences by the ALP National Review (Hawke and Wran 2002: 5). According to ALP frontbencher Anthony Albanese, local branch meetings ‘tend to be dominated by one or two people and they tend to be dominated by local issues as well: roads and rubbish…That can be off-putting’ (interview, 18/7/07). Former UK Labour Party Chair, Hazel Blears, described many meetings in her
own party as ‘dull’, arguing that ‘the Labour Party at the grassroots needs to be more action, less meetings’ (*The Guardian*, 11 June 2007, p. 10).

Difficulties in maintaining interest in branch meetings are not exclusive to the larger parties. As Green MP Nandor Tanczos describes of the New Zealand experience, this is not necessarily due to members’ disillusionment with participatory opportunities being dominated by a small number of individuals, but rather what is perceived to be the ‘tedious’ nature of policy-making:

> I think it’s always a struggle to maintain levels of activity in branches. It’s always particularly hard to interest people in policy-making, which I’ve always found curious because people join the Greens because they are excited by the ideas and the thing people love to do more than anything is talk about ideas. But to have a structured policy discussion seems to turn people off. I understand why because if I think about having policy discussions – it sounds tedious, particularly where there is too much detail. I think one of the problems with what we do is that our policy is far too long and far too detailed. It’s really difficult for members to engage in – it’s too detailed for some people’s understanding of the issues. It’s so detailed that it’s really boring (interview, 13/3/08).

The conduct of local meetings varies considerably between individual branches, but those that are more vibrant often have a committed MP (or MPs) behind them. For example, attendance is significantly improved if the constituency MP is a guest speaker, and staging forums and debates with ministers or senior parliamentarians is a strategy commonly employed amongst all parties to boost turnout. Unfortunately this seems to indicate that in the absence of a salient local concern, branches are unable to organise regularly around policy issues of their own volition and that a ‘top down’ approach and an element of celebrity is necessary to incite interest.

Although comparatively fewer complaints are heard about the ‘boring’ nature of green and liberal democratic party meetings in Australia and the UK, they face another dilemma. Although these parties grant their local branches a significant degree of autonomy, which results in more relevant discussions, the agenda for local meetings is often overstretched. The problem is compounded by comparatively smaller memberships. Branch activities rarely centre upon the discussion of national policy and hence the connection between policy discussion in local parties and the ratification of policy (by ballot or at conference) is in reality quite tenuous. The frequency with which policy meetings are held leaves little opportunity for deliberation. In the Liberal Democrats, local party meetings that centre on the discussion of policy are ‘occasional’ at best (LD1, interview, 5/2/07). Interviews with Liberal Democrat and Green Party members in the UK revealed that the subject of most local party meetings tended to be just that – local matters rather than national policy issues.

When I was involved in the SDP 25 years ago there were discussions of policy. People would actually bring policy papers and so on. We don’t seem to do that very often…I don’t know how often people discuss policies now. There are certainly all sorts of fora for discussing policies online and so on, so I suspect that there are discussions on websites and so on, but in formal meetings we tend to discuss local business, particularly ‘how do we win the next set of elections?’, ‘how do we retain our MP?’ (Julie Smith, interview, 30/1/07).
Party conferences have also declined as genuine participatory forums within the parties surveyed. Although parties continue to place a great deal of emphasis on the ‘sovereignty’ of conference as the ‘owner’ of policy, they are now events where public exposure and press coverage have become just as, if not more, important than policy debate (Faucher-King 2005; Button 2002: 42; Shaw 2002). Very few members actually want to take on the responsibility of being a conference representative and in relatively few local parties are these positions seriously contested. For example, attendance at Liberal Democrat conferences is about 5,000, but only 1,600-1,900 of these places are filled by voting delegates (a large number of registrations are accounted for by media organisations and external observers). On average, there are about 900 voting representative places that are not filled. Given the formal importance of the party conference as the pre-eminent policy-making body within most political parties, one might expect to find some competition for places to attend. However, this does not appear to be the case. Of the 400 to 700 places at the NZ Labour Annual Conference allocated to local party members, ‘delegates are often simply activists who have volunteered to meet the necessary travel expenses in order to be at the conference’ (Miller 2005: 92). As a NZ Labour MP explained:

Because the paid party membership is small, if you want to be involved you’re never going to have a difficulty. You say ‘who wants to go to the conference?’ and everybody who puts their hand up goes. We find a way of doing that one way or another. And sometimes you’re struggling to get people to go – because if it’s out of Auckland and you’ve got to travel, there’s time off work and you’ve got to find the money to do it (NZMP2, interview, 3/3/08).

Responding to the problem of limited membership representation, the NZ Greens have removed the formal policy-making power from their annual conference, which now functions only as a forum for discussion and deliberation. The NZ Greens’ annual conference is

Not really the place to sign off policy because it’s always limited who can get there. Therefore you couldn’t take that as a representation of the party. So what we’ve tended to do in more recent times at the policy conference is have issue groups and have discussions and questions to work through. But it’s more advisory. It might produce some recommendations, but it’s got no formal decision-making status (Tanczos, interview, 13/3/08).

To counter declining participation in traditional intra-party forums, parties appear to have shifted their emphasis to representative forms of IPD with members electing or appointing their counterparts to policy development or working groups, designed to coordinate policy-making within each party and ideally to aggregate the diverse array of members’ interests into coherent documents or motions. As a typical example of such a group, the primary functions of the NZ Labour Policy Council are to ‘prepare policies to be incorporated into the Labour Party’s next manifesto, including revisions to existing policies [and] developing new policies’ (NZ Labour Party 2003, s 146d). With the exception of the Australian

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1 For all parties in this study, with the exception of the Australian Democrats and the NZ Greens, the party conference stands at the apex of intra-party policy development as the only body that can adopt ‘official’ party policy.
Democrats, all other parties have made constitutional provisions for at least one such committee, outlined in the table below.

### Table 2: Composition of Policy Committees/Oversight Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Oversight Group</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Total no. of Members</th>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>Regions</th>
<th>Party Groups/Associations</th>
<th>Executive</th>
<th>MPs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy Committee</td>
<td>English Greens</td>
<td>At least 5</td>
<td>At least 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Policy Committee</td>
<td>UK Labour</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9 (30%)</td>
<td>22 (12%)</td>
<td>40 (22%)</td>
<td>32 (17.5%)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Policy Forum</td>
<td>UK Labour</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>55 (30%)</td>
<td>40 (22%)</td>
<td>32 (17.5%)</td>
<td>34 (18.5%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Policy Committee</td>
<td>Lib Dems</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>15 (47%)</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
<td>11 (34%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Committee</td>
<td>NZ Greens</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>20 (71%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>4 (14%)</td>
<td>3 (11%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Council</td>
<td>NZ Labour</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
<td>10 (45%)</td>
<td>2 (9%)</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Policy Committee*</td>
<td>ALP</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Coordinating Group</td>
<td>Australian Greens</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11 (79%)</td>
<td>4 (21%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* While the ALP National Constitution makes provision for the appointment of a National Policy Committee, there is no set composition and the only requirement for appointment is that members have ‘considerable experience in policy development’ (Part B, Art. 13).

Given the small number of places allocated to membership representatives and the small size of oversight groups overall, it is difficult for individual members with an aspiration to influence party policy to become directly involved in this stage of the policy process. Thus the legitimacy of these bodies rests more on their responsive and representative nature than the opportunities they offer to members for direct involvement. Entities such as UK Labour’s Joint Policy Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister, comprise primarily party elites: the leadership, government representatives and members of the National Executive Committee. There are only limited places available to members (30 per cent), who are appointed only after being elected to the National Policy Forum. The ALP’s National Policy Committee is entirely appointed by the National Executive and currently consists of union representatives, MPs and higher-ranking party officials (ALP 2007). The role envisaged of party members is clearly more consultative:

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2 Although they are routinely established, policy working groups within the Australian Democrats tend to be initiated on a more *ad hoc* basis in response to topical issues and areas of concern as determined by the party’s National Executive.
All Party members should be eligible to attend State Policy Committee meetings to contribute specialised knowledge and expertise on Federal policy issues. Final decisions on policy documents should continue to be taken by elected Committee members. Committees should, where feasible, conduct forums and consultations in provincial centres (Hawke and Wran 2002: 21).

General membership participation in the formal policy process of the UK Labour Party is also restricted mainly to policy consultations conducted by oversight groups. Consultation with the membership consists of ‘holding phone conferences with members of the policy commissions and those party units making policy submissions, sending regular email updates and hosting web chats’ (UK Labour 2006: 3). The party also stages local and regional policy forums, which members are invited to attend and contribute to the discussion with a view to making a policy submission to one of the policy commissions.

Indeed, consultation as the dominant form of participation is becoming more common within all political parties. For example, as party conferences are becoming increasingly stage-managed and are being re-organised to accommodate a more entertaining agenda to replace voting on policy motions, they appear to be evolving into a form of consultation. Not only is consultation used to ascertain the views of party members, it has also been used by political parties (particularly when in government) to go beyond the party membership for policy input and tap into the views of the community. Examples of this include the citizens’ juries, ‘Big Conversation’ and ‘Let’s Talk’ consultation exercises conducted by the Blair Labour government in between 2003 and 2007, online policy forums open to the general public established by all major parties in the UK, and the ‘community cabinets’ and the ‘20-20 forum’ initiated by the Rudd Labor government in Australia. Gordon Brown has justified these initiatives on the ground that ‘once political parties aggregated views from millions. Now they need to broaden their appeal to articulate the views of more than the few’ (Brown 2007). Nonetheless, in by-passing the usual avenues for party policy consultation, the move to individual participation through focus groups reduces the influence of the membership and may act to concentrate power in the hands of the party in public office (Katz and Mair 2002), as focus group findings (taken to be representative of public opinion) are fed straight through to the party leadership:

The problem with ‘the Big Conversation’ and ‘Let’s Talk’ and those kinds of things was that you couldn’t get anyone to say what would happen to the information once it was collated. No one was prepared to commit themselves to anything. So it wasn’t really Let’s Talk – it’s let’s tell you what we’re going to do and why’ (Robinson, interview, 2/5/07).

Similar to the lack of accountability felt by party members in New Labour, the failure of Australian Labor Party executives to reply to policy correspondence from individual branches has been flagged by the party as a cause for concern:

This situation must change. Branch correspondence must be dealt with promptly and competently. In some cases this would involve detailed responses outlining Party policy or directing the branch to another source. In other cases, members suggested, a simple acknowledgement that their correspondence had been read and dealt with was sufficient (Hawke and Wran 2002: 21).
The problem is due, in part, to a lack of resources – parties simply do not have enough staff to monitor the progress of individual submissions. Even if it is with good intentions, aiming high without being able to realistically implement the consultation programme is bound to cause disillusionment with the process:

We don’t have the army of people to respond to this. No political party’s got the research resources to respond on that kind of scale, so what people tended to get was an acknowledgment, which they generally found insulting: thank you for your interesting contribution, which has been duly noted. What it meant was quite quickly members became disenchanted with it as a process (Zeichner, interview, 25/3/07).

Consultations such as this also tend to blur the distinction in policy-making between parties and governments and highlight the impact of a party’s legislative status on IPD and its formal policy-making processes. Labour’s experience suggests that once a party assumes a position of government, it is easier for the leadership to argue that policies are formulated and executed for the population as a whole, rather than as a function of partisan representation or membership voice. For example, the citizen’s juries have been funded from the resources of Downing Street, not the party’s coffers. Similarly, the Australian Labor government’s 20-20 Forum and community cabinets have taken place under the guise of governmental rather than party policy development (see Davis 2001; Rudd 2008), despite both exercises being advertised on the party’s national website.

What are the implications of this trend? Traditionally, members of political parties have fulfilled an important function as a source of policy ideas. However, moves to outsource policy development through greater community consultation not only downgrade a key right of the membership, but fundamentally alter the chain of policy transmission and the role of party members within it. In the original mass party model of transmission, policies filtered up to the party leadership through the membership (see for example, Poguntke 1998: 156). This partisan connection occurred by virtue of party members consulting with their communities, and belonging to various organisations (such as unions, environmental movements etc.) – giving members a sense of pertinent policy issues and also serving as a wellspring of ideas. In turn, these ideas were crystallised into party policy through internal party processes such as annual conferences. The new model of policy development dispenses with the mediating role of the party membership, instead placing it and the community as two alternative sources of policy input. The leadership (in this case the government) is able to by-pass the membership by consulting directly with the community. Although members are still able to influence party policy through formal internal mechanisms, these processes are nonetheless criticised as offering limited opportunities for direct involvement and genuine engagement. Therefore members must relinquish their privileged policy status and participate in consultations with the ‘rest of the community’, as they have been encouraged to do so.

Organising Strategies for Influence

Responding to the changing nature of the formal opportunities for participation within political parties, party activists have found it necessary to develop new strategies for achieving influence. Some of the most successful instances of membership involvement and input into party policy have utilised means of engagement that cut-across, and in some
instances work outside the framework of the formal policy-making process. This section of the paper provides examples of three key strategies: issue-based collective action, utilising external influences and bypassing formal processes through direct lobbying.

**Issue-based collective action**

When asked of the capacity and the potential of the membership to influence the direction and content of party policy, all ALP interviewees cited the example of Labor for Refugees, a collective organisation of Labor Party members that advocated for, and achieved, a change in the party’s policy on asylum seekers between 2001 and 2007. As former MP and past Party President, Carmen Lawrence, recalls:

An interesting example of members finding means of influencing representatives is Labor for Refugees…The party, in the eyes of its members, had fallen well short of the basic principles of protecting human rights and they worked across factions, which is a very unusual thing. In the end, the changes that they wanted didn’t all happen at the first conference at which they were raised, but by the second they had pretty much all been incorporated into the Platform. Even those that weren’t explicitly incorporated were allowed…Over a period of four years that organisation within the Labor Party had a big effect, but there’s really been nothing else like that that I’ve seen… So it can happen if members move across those boundaries and make enough public fuss (interview 15/8/07).

Collective action strategies within political parties can be an effective means of participation. Members’ initiatives to shape policy are more likely to succeed if they can gather support across party branches, States or divisions. Therefore, engagement with a party’s policy-making institutions needs to occur horizontally (dissemination of the idea to create a groundswell of support) before it can proceed vertically up the policy chain (for example, to policy committees and conference). In this sense, collective groupings based around policy issues rather than geographic areas are particularly potent in mustering such support. The strong influence of affiliated unions within social democratic parties is an excellent example of such collective networks in action, organising primarily around industrial relations issues. Within the ALP, the Labor Environment Activist Network, Rainbow Labor (gay and lesbian) and Labor for Affordable Housing were also cited by interviewees as effective examples. Although they engage with formal party policy-making institutions, ‘these organisations are largely active around Labor Party conferences’ (Plibersek, interview, 11/7/07) and are characterised as having highly organised, professional and creative policy campaigns:

Groups have been particularly effective in setting up forums or vehicles outside of the formal structures of the party. I think Labor for Refugees has been incredibly effective. They set themselves the target of getting rid of temporary protection visas in the Platform, and they achieved that at the conference with resolutions from different branches. They offered speakers to go along to different branches. They produced t-shirts and had a website (Albanese, interview, 18/7/07).

The success of issue-based groupings in the ALP has led to calls for issue-based branches, centred on particular policy debates such as the environment, civil rights and refugee
policy, to be established to combat dwindling participation in traditional geographically-based branch meetings (Hawke and Wran 2002: 11). Although ethnic branches have been set up within the Victorian State Division of the ALP, the majority of States have failed to follow this model (Jaensch et al. 2004: 7). In contrast, sector groupings have operated effectively in the NZ Labour Party for several decades, with Sector Councils typically working across regions and branches in drafting and submitting policy documents. For example, one NZ Labour Minister emphasised the contact she had with both the Women’s Council and Young Labour in receiving and developing policy ideas, and the role they play at conference:

One day before our conference is [set aside for] sector groups and it’s the sector groups that work out the key remits that they want carried forward…That’s the one day that you can have everyone together, so we throw up all the remits and we go through those as a sector group and then we agree, as a sector group, we think we want these four or these six to go forward (NZMP1, interview, 12/3/08).

As another NZ Labour MP explained, in addition to being an effective means of organising opinion, issue or sector groupings provide multiple ‘entry points’ for citizens to participate in politics (NZMP2, interview, 3/3/08). Their strength within the party has gradually conferred them a formal status, as the party’s ‘organisational structure has evolved to cater for a pluralistic membership’ (Aimer 2006: 358). Sector Councils for Maori, women, rural affairs, gay and lesbian, local government, seniors and Pacific Islanders have been recognised in the Party’s Constitution (s 150).

Utilising external influences

Although Labor for Refugees was able to generate a significant level of grassroots support that enabled it to influence the agenda at State and national conferences, this was only achieved through a sophisticated organisational strategy and the generation of a substantial amount of publicity (Lawrence, interview, 15/8/07). The need for such publicity highlights the potential of the media as a tool through which to achieve awareness and shape policy debate, creating external pressures to influence internal processes.

The media and protest were used as effective tools by the Liberal Democrats party organisation to influence the leadership’s policy position on the Iraq War. In February 2003, a march to protest against Britain’s involvement in the war had been scheduled to take place in London. Unsure of the exact position the party was going to take on the issue, the Liberal Democrats’ leadership had been ambivalent on the party’s official attendance at the march. A group within the party’s grassroots, led by Federal Executive member Martin Tod (a marketing director by profession), saw the protest as a high-profile opportunity to pressure the party’s leadership into joining the demonstration and publicly advocating its opposition to the war. As a Liberal Democrats’ staffer explained:

A member of the Federal Executive, who I think would have been elected by the conference reps, just made a great fuss and said ‘you’ve got to show up and you’ve got to make a speech’. He organised placards and things for Liberal Democrats to carry…possibly to overstate it, and embarrassed the leadership into taking a stronger
position than some of the Leader’s advisers would have wanted (LD1, interview, 5/2/07).

Sections of party memberships with the requisite financial resources, such as affiliated unions, have used the media as a critical tool to launch campaigns against the party leadership. For example, in January 2008 sections of the NSW Labor Party mobilised in conjunction with Unions NSW to oppose electricity privatisation in that State by launching a broad political and industrial campaign, employing protest activity to generate media attention, launching a dedicated campaign website and commissioning a series of television commercials.

**Direct lobbying**

A final strategy to attain policy influence that was mentioned by several interviewees is to circumvent formal policy-making mechanisms entirely within the party, and to go straight to the party’s MPs. This course of action closely resembles that of professional lobbyists, and in part arises from the frustration that being a member of a political party no longer carries a privilege in developing party policy or influencing the political agenda of the government. As former ALP frontbencher Carmen Lawrence commented, ‘I suspect more people do that now, especially those who’ve got strong policy background’ (interview, 15/8/07). A similar frustration has been felt by activists wanting input into party policy through New Labour’s *Partnership in Power* program:

> Somebody from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds come to a meeting and said the first time they went through all the processes and sent in submissions and documents trying to change things, but they found it was much more effective just to ring up somebody they knew in the Ministry to try and have a word with the Minister or the Special Advisers. The unions work that way as well (Black, interview, 31/3/07).

Directly lobbying MPs can be a particularly successful strategy as it acknowledges the reality that MPs possess a great deal of discretion in interpreting, implementing and formulating policy. It also plays to the information ‘gap’ and need for advice and research that many MPs inevitably encounter, particularly in smaller parties and those in opposition that do not have unfettered access to government departments. Faced with limited resources, MPs will often seek to consult members who they see as experts or who are interested in a particular policy area as a way of obtaining information when making legislative decisions. For example, NZ Greens MP Sue Bradford invites interested members to contact her directly: ‘I am the MP responsible for housing so what I will do with people like that is say “if you’re really interested in housing policy, just communicate with me about it”’ (interview, 5/5/08). If members can make themselves known to party MPs as an expert or an individual interested in a particular area, there is a greater likelihood they will be consulted or at least acknowledged at the this stage of the legislative process.
Conclusions

Many of the findings in this paper raise broader questions for the nature of representative democracy in modern societies, and the function undertaken by parties in providing centres for citizen participation in politics. I developed a typology of the various organisational means by which parties facilitate membership participation in the policy process, either through direct, representative, delegate or consultative channels. Whilst parties of different types emphasised particular variants of participation, the paper identified a trend (led by the social democratic parties) to engaging party members by way of consultation – in contrast to their traditional focus on democratic participation through delegation. In order to remedy the perception that active members constitute an unrepresentative minority, social democratic parties in the UK and Australia (notably New Labour) have begun to open up policy consultations to the wider public, thereby ‘outsourcing’ the policy processes. This shift in the nature of participatory structures within parties marks a fundamental departure from the mass party model, challenging the ‘traditional’ role of party members as a means from which to source partisan policy ideas and input that is representative of the party’s supporters and voters. Subsequently, party activists have had to develop new strategies for influencing the political direction of their parties, which may mean bypassing formal policy structures by engaging the media and directly lobbying the party’s elected representatives.

Although the trend to outsourcing is seemingly incompatible with maintaining a vibrant and satisfied party membership, particularly if members feel as though there are being marginalised by the process, the broader implications for representative democracy are not necessarily negative. It may be that parties continue to function as aggregators of partisan interests and centres of political participation – but that this process is extended to the general public rather than being mediated by a party membership. However, the way such consultations are conducted then becomes the paramount concern for a healthy democracy. What distinguishes previous forms of policy participation in political parties (such as local meetings, conferences etc.) is the way in which they functioned to aggregate supporters’ views within a ‘bottom-up’ structure. Heavily facilitated by the party leadership, and particularly by the cabinet in governing parties, modern policy consultations could conceivably dictate (rather than aggregate) policy preferences in a top-down fashion. As such, this development needs to be closely monitored.

References


