Bending Michels' 'Iron Law of Oligarchy':
can democracy ever be for
'home consumption'
in political parties?

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Abstract
Ever since Kirchheimer wrote about the evolution of Duverger's mass parties into catch-all parties, studies of political parties have commented on the loss of membership influence on policy. The idea that members have lost power is widely shared both in academia and amongst political practitioners. Indeed, when told of a project to investigate membership influence on policy in the British Labour Party Tony Benn, the grand old man of the Labour left commented 'That's going to be a very short book. At the moment it is zero'. However, as early as 1911 Michels, with his 'iron law of oligarchy', showed that even at the beginning of the 20th Century membership influence was 'zero'. So, if the catch-all party is not the cause of membership powerlessness it is worth going back to Michels and more fully analyse his reasons for oligarchy in party organisations. The argument of this paper is that the 'oligarchic consensus' illustrated by Benn's comment is overstating the lack of membership influence. The paper will apply the iron law to the Danish Socialist People's Party (Socialistisk Folkeparti) to show how, under certain circumstances it is indeed possible for party members to have a notable level of influence. The findings of this paper highlight the need for further research to be carried out on membership influence on party policy and a re-evaluation of the power of party members.
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Introduction:

Whilst democracy may be unthinkable save in terms of political parties (Schattschneider 1942: 1), by contrast there is a commonly held assumption that democracy within parties is equally unthinkable. This assumption has been at the heart of most studies of intra-party politics and indeed is a central feature of the literature detailing the evolution of Duverger's membership oriented mass parties into electoralist voter focussed catch all parties. As will be explored below, the primary and widely accepted argument of this literature is that party leaders have become increasingly concerned with attracting as many voters as possible from whatever part of society they can. As a result party members, traditionally the backbone of the party, have been excluded from the policy making process and replaced by pollsters and spin-doctors.

This view has gained a wide following both in academia and amongst political practitioners. Indeed, when told of a project to investigate membership influence on policy in the British Labour Party Tony Benn, the grand old man of the Labour left commented 'That's going to be a very short book. At the moment it is zero' (author's notes from Labour Party conference 2005). However, the argument of this paper is that this 'oligarchic consensus' illustrated by Benn's comment is overstating the powerlessness of party members. The argument will be made by returning to one of the very first theories of party organisations, Michels' (1949) 'iron law of oligarchy' and applying it to the Danish Socialist People's Party (Socialistisk Folkeparti, SF) to show how, under certain circumstances it is indeed possible for party members to have a notable level of influence.

It is true that Michels would not disagree with the notion that party members have little influence. Indeed his 'iron law' makes it clear that they cannot have any influence. However, what is interesting is that Duverger agreed with Michels and argued that even in the mass party, members were largely excluded from influence. So, as both Michels and Duverger agree that party members had no influence to begin with, it seems strange that they are said to lose influence with the rise of the catch-all party model. Consequently, as the voter focussed catch-all party is not, as
is commonly assumed, the cause of the lack of membership influence in political parties, then it is worth going back to Michels and more fully investigate his ‘iron law’ to get a better understanding of power in political parties.

This paper will argue that whilst Michels is correct in saying that there are strong oligarchic tendencies in political parties it is possible, under the right circumstances, to bend his ‘iron law’. In other words, party members are not as devoid of influence as is often assumed.

At this point it may be necessary to say a few words about what is meant by ‘influence’ in this paper. Influence can take many forms, but in the following ‘membership influence’ will be taken as being when party members are able to make their representatives in publicly elected assemblies take a stance that these representatives disagree with. In other words, for this paper membership influence is when, in cases of disagreement between the parliamentary party and the extra-parliamentary party, the parliamentary party backs down and falls in line with the wishes of the extra-parliamentary party. This is then about influence on policy as expressed by the actions of a party’s publicly elected representatives.

In the following the literature on the move from mass-parties to catch all parties will be outlined before going on to examine Michels’ ‘iron law’ in some detail. Following that the paper will use SF as an example of a party which has to a significant degree succeeded in resisting the ‘iron law’. This paper is therefore a study of a ‘deviant case’ (Lijphart 1971) which will be used to challenge the oligarchic consensus evident in the academic literature on political parties and, judging by Tony Benn's comment, beyond. The paper will conclude by looking at the implications of this study for our understanding of the role and power of party members.

**The Mass party**

According to Duverger, the idea of the individual party member came from the socialist parties of the late 19th century. Before the extension of the franchise in late 19th century Western Europe there was little need for extra-parliamentary organisations; a small group of influential men was all that was needed for an MP to achieve election (Weber 1990: 32-33). Duverger gave the name ‘cadre-party’ to these loosely connected groupings of notables and MPs (Duverger 1964: 64).

Cadre parties began to face serious competition when, in the late 1800s, the franchise started to be extended beyond the propertied elite. As more and more
‘commoners’ gained the right to vote groups such as trade unions and socialist societies concerned with the conditions of the working class mobilised to garner the support of these newly enfranchised ‘masses’. As a result the socialist mass parties emerged in the West European states (Duverger 1964: 24, 63-71). The mass party was therefore, in the words of Weber: ‘...[a child] of democracy, of mass franchise, of the necessity to woo and organize the masses’ (Weber 1990: 35).

The main goal of the mass parties of Western Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s was to gain parliamentary representation for the workers of the early industrial revolution, now enfranchised in increasing numbers. They were thus extra-parliamentary organisations created with the aim of breaking into parliament to represent the interests of the membership (Duverger 1964: xxx). Therefore, at least formally, the parliamentary group was there to serve the interests of the membership (Duverger 1964: 25). Consequently, one of the distinguishing features of the mass party was the large formal membership influence on the organisation through the selection of parliamentary candidates and the party leadership and through membership control over party policy (Bille 1997: 28-29).

The success of the mass party model compelled the cadre parties to ‘countermobilise’ (Lipset and Rokkan 1990: 135), i.e. create permanent membership organisations. The left wing mass party model had become a ‘contagious organisation’ that spread from its origin on the left to the rest of the political spectrum (Duverger 1964: xxvii, 25).

The result was that by the 1950s socialist mass parties with extensive membership organisations, often numbering hundreds of thousands, had successfully secured representation in all national parliaments in democratic Europe. By mobilising a specific but large section of the population in a permanent organisation the socialist parties had achieved great electoral success and become a natural governing alternative to the liberal and conservative parties of the centre right. The parties of the right had in turn been forced to take on at least the appearance of a mass party. It therefore seemed that the mass party model was the one best suited to modern mass democracy (Bille 1997: 30).

After the mass party

However, in the late 1960s Otto Kirchheimer presented the thesis that the much changed cadre parties were in many ways better suited than the traditional mass
parties to the post-war environment, with its reduced class antagonisms and wider demands of the electorate (Kirchheimer 1969: 186-187). The old cadre parties, having adopted some of the features of the mass party were becoming what Kirchheimer called ‘catch-all people’s parties’ (Kirchheimer 1969: 184). The catch-all parties rejected the notion of integrating into their organisations the whole or at least substantial parts of a particular group in society and instead turned more fully to the electoral arena (Kirchheimer 1969: 184). The goal was not to mobilise a particular group, but to attract voters from whichever quarter of society they could, hence the name ‘catch-all’.

Two of the central features of the catch-all party is a ‘further strengthening of the party leadership’ and a ‘downgrading of the role of the individual party member’ (Kirchheimer 1969: 191-191). The argument goes that as parties increasingly tailor their policies to suit the opinions of the public, rather than convince the public of the merits of existing policies, the leadership needs to have a firm control over policy making so that it can act swiftly and efficiently in an ever more volatile electoral market (Scarrow et al. 2002). This naturally means centralisation of policy making.

This change is said to have had a profound impact on the role of the members in the organisation. In the mass party the members served a crucial role as conduits between the party leadership and the specific section of the population the party was trying to mobilise (Panebianco 1988: 264). However, as parties started to focus on attracting a wider audience the use of professional ‘communication-experts’ and pollsters have become more important than the amateur campaigners in the local parties. In these increasingly professionalised vote-seeking organisations there seems to be very little use for members. The members are no longer ‘...the very substance of the party, the stuff of its activity’ (Duverger 1964: 63) but rather ‘...a historical relic which may obscure the newly built-up catch-all image’ (Kirchheimer, 1969: 190). So, even though recent studies have reaffirmed the importance of members in local campaigning (Denver, Hands, Fisher and MacAllister 2003; Ward 2003) this still only means that members are now little more than unpaid workers in electoral marketing machines.
What did the members have to lose?

However, whilst this is the generally accepted view of membership influence, that it has declined in the move from mass party organisations to catch-all party organisations, there are reasons to believe that it may not be as simple as that.

One of the first detailed examinations of party organisations, Michels’ *Political Parties* (1949) is probably best known for what Michels called ‘the iron law of oligarchy’ (Michels, 1949: 377). Michels argued that organisations are inherently oligarchic:

> It is indisputable that the oligarchical and bureaucratic tendencies of party organisation is a matter of technical and practical necessity. It is the inevitable product of the very principle of organisation (Michels, 1949: 35)

Michels never defines ‘oligarchy’ (Cassinelli, 1953: 777), but by piecing together what he does say, it is possible to get a good idea of what he meant by it. At one stage he writes that ‘the socialist parliamentarian [...] largely escapes the supervision of the rank and file of the party, and even the control of its executive committee’ (Michels 1949: 136). Later he talks about the power of union leaders to decide when to use the union’s funds to support striking workers (Michels 1949: 144-145). On the basis of that observation he concludes that the ‘... leaders have openly converted themselves into an oligarchy, leaving the masses who provide the funds no more than a duty of accepting the decisions of that oligarchy’ (Michels 1949: 145, my italics). This discussion of the autonomy of the leadership has led scholars to conclude that Michels deemed organisations oligarchic when ‘...the people who hold positions of authority within an organisation are not checked by those who hold subsidiary positions within the organisation’ (Cassinelli 1953: 778, see also Hands 1971: 159).

Michels outline a number of reasons why parties tend to become oligarchies.

Firstly as organisations grow and become more complicated voluntary labour will no longer be sufficient and it will be necessary to appoint full-time leaders with a certain level of expertise in the running of organisations. What Michels calls expert leadership becomes necessary (Michels 1949: 31), i.e. an organisation requires a group of people who’s sole duty it is to run the organisation. When that happens:

> The members have to give up the idea of themselves conducting or even supervising the whole administration, and are compelled to hand these tasks over to trustworthy persons
specially nominated for the purpose [...]. The rank and file must content themselves with summary reports [...] (Michels 1949: 34)

So, without formal changes in the organisation (Michels 1949: 34), the members are gradually sidelined from influence and a body of professional leaders take over.

Secondly, Michels argues that political parties are in effect fighting machines in the electoral arena and as such must ‘conform to the laws of tactics’ (Michels 1949: 41). What he means by ‘laws of tactics’ is quite simply that wide spread consultation takes time, and in the day to day struggle of politics, swift decisions have to be made: ‘democracy is utterly incompatible with strategic promptness, and the forces of democracy do not lend themselves to the rapid opening of a campaign’ (Michels 1949: 42). So, for a party to be able to react with sufficient speed to events and moves by other parties ‘a certain degree of cæsarism' is required (Michels 1949: 42) and hence in political parties, ‘...democracy is not for home consumption' (Michels 1949: 42). In other words, to be effective fighting machines, parties have to be organised along oligarchic rather than democratic lines. So, according to Michels parties that want to be successful simply cannot be internally democratic. Michels is not alone in this assertion. In discussing the problems of democratic principles and the need for effective leadership Duverger writes: ‘Democratic principles demand that leadership at all levels be elective, that it be frequently renewed, collective in character, weak in authority. Organized in this fashion, a party is not well armed for the struggles of politics’ (Duverger 1964: 134).

However, far from objecting to this state of affairs Michels argues, that the membership are in fact grateful to their leaders to take on the burden of leadership, which is Michels’ third cause of oligarchy: ‘Though it grumbles occasionally, the majority is really delighted to find persons who will take the trouble to look after its affairs’ (Michels 1949: 53, see also 60-68). Again Duverger is in agreement:

...leaders tend naturally to retain power and to increase it, because their members scarcely hinder this tendency and on the contrary even strengthen it by hero-worshipping the leaders: on all these points the analysis of Roberto Michels continues to hold true (Duverger 1964: 134)
So, according to Michels and indeed Duverger, political parties will inevitably be run by a small group of people who have little need to take into account the opinions of the membership. They may not have total freedom of movement, but their ability to steer the party in the direction of their choosing is very significant indeed. If ordinary members are dissatisfied there is very little they can do to force the leadership to change in accordance with the wishes of the members. Indeed, they are positively disinclined to challenge the leadership.

There have been some criticisms of Michels work. Inconsistent use and lack of definition of central terms such oligarchy and democracy as already indicated above is a weakness in his work which has been noticed by several scholars (Cook 1971: 786; May 1965: 417, n2; Cassinelli 1953: 773 - 774; Hands 1971: 156, 158). Hands also comments on the lack of ‘hard empirical evidence’ and criticises his method as ‘proof by anecdote’ (Hands 1971: 157). Despite these weaknesses Michels’ basic argument, that parties are oligarchic organisations for the reasons mentioned above, has been broadly accepted. Indeed, Lipset calls Political Parties ‘one of the twentieth century’s most influential book’ and a ‘classic of Social Science’ (Lipset 1962: 20). Further, some of the most well know studies of voluntary organisations have Michels’ work as a central element (Eldersveld 1964; McKenzie 1963; Lipset 1956). Finally, whilst rarely mentioning Michels explicitly, there is a clear agreement in the literature outlining the change from mass parties to catch all parties that members have lost the power to control policy, which as we have seen above is the essence of Michels’ definition (such as it is) of oligarchy.

However, as we have now seen this ‘oligarchic consensus’ does not start with the rise of catch-all parties, but with Michels’ examination of the German SDP, one of the most important early mass-parties. It is therefore a little odd that mass parties should ever have been seen as somehow particularly internally democratic especially since, as we saw above, Duverger who coined the term relied heavily on Michels in his analysis of leadership. Duverger does write that the members of external parties hold their parliamentarians in somewhat low regard and strive to control them (Duverger 1964: xxxv). However, in his discussion of leadership he also makes it very clear that they are not at all successful in doing so.

So, if we are to believe Michels and Duverger, party members in mass parties had very little power to lose in the first place. If the absence of real membership influence was evident at the beginning of the twentieth century one might ask why
members are said to have become marginalised with the rise of the catch-all party. What exactly is the difference between the mass party and the catch-all party in terms of membership influence on policy? What did the contagion from the right do to membership influence that the mass party had not done already? To truly understand this it will be necessary to go back to Michels’ work and revisit membership influence in light of his theory.

The problem is that there is very little systematic research on membership influence on party policy, presumably because it is assume to not exist. Research to date has served only to expose how little is known about the role of party democracy in the making of policy (Scarrow et al 2002: 144). Studies of membership influence have not gone much beyond candidate and leadership selection. There is no separate investigation of policy making in Bille (1997) only a reference to the ‘regrettable lacuna’ in our knowledge of the field (Bille 1997: 45). Scarrow et al. (2002) do deal with the role of the members in policy making but are forced to rely heavily on feedback from subject specialists rather than ‘hard data’ (Scarrow et al. 2002: 144 n 3). The issue is not central to Katz and Mair’s data set based on party rule books (Katz and Mair 1992; Scarrow et al. 2002: 144), nor to the 1994 collection of essays based on that data (Katz and Mair 1994). The one place where such rule book data have been used to explore membership influence is as part of a study by Widfeldt of parties as instruments of linkage (Widfeldt 1997: 41-51) and even here it only merits a subsection of one chapter. Mckenzie’s (1963) study of Labour and the Conservatives in Britain is an exception in that he does highlight the independence from membership control of both the Conservative and Labour groups in parliament. It therefore seems that the oligarchic consensus is based on a few well researched cases such as the main British parties.

However, whilst research on British parties seems to confirm the expectations of the iron law, other less researched cases, such as Denmark, show, as we shall see, a different picture and therefore help to modify the consensus that political parties are inevitably oligarchic and the members as being perpetually excluded. In the following the case of SF will be used to challenge the oligarchic consensus by returning to Michels' ‘iron law’ and investigate whether there are circumstances under which the law may be less strong. This paper will argue that part of the law is indeed universal, but that other parts of it are very much dependent on contextual factors which will vary from party to party. In other words, it is proposed that under
certain circumstances there is a very real possibility for party members to gain a significant level of influence, even if it will always take determination and hard work.

Examining the iron law

Let us then re-examine the details of the iron law in order to get some understanding of how ‘universal’ a law it is. As already mentioned there are three major components to Michels’ iron law: 1) the need for professional leadership; 2) the gratitude of party members; and 3) the laws of tactics. The question is if there are circumstances under which these factors will be less strong and thereby allow for intra-party democracy to flourish. The following pages will seek to answer that question.

Firstly there is the issue of the need for professional leadership in large organisations. This part of Michels’ law is hardly controversial and is a problem which has been acknowledged long before Michels. Indeed, it is one of the most important problems for advocates for direct democracy since at least the time of Plato, who even calculated that the optimal number of citizens in a democratic state was 5040 (Dahl and Tufte 1974: 5). Michels puts it even lower by arguing that once an organisation reaches about 1000 members, consulting the full membership on a regular basis becomes increasingly impossible (Michels 1949: 26). However, size is not the only problem. Time too presents difficulties. In his attack on representation as a form of slavery, Rousseau had to concede that for free men to be able to be constantly and directly engaged in the running of the state there needed to be a class of unfree slaves to do the daily work (Rousseau 1966: 79). Hence, there is a good case to be made that this part of Michels’ law is fairly universal and will inflict any organisation beyond a certain size. However, whilst Rousseau may have rejected representation as a viable form of democracy, as indeed did Michels, democratic theorists from the Federalists onwards did see in representative government a solution to the problem of reconciling democracy and large numbers of people. As Mill put it:

…it is evident that the only government which can fully satisfy all the exigencies of the social state is one in which the whole people participate… But since all cannot, in a community exceeding a single small town, participate personally in any but some very minor portions of the public business, it follows that the ideal type of perfect government much be representative (Mill 1991: 255-256)
The question now is if a form of effective representative democracy that still gives members influence is possible in party organisations. This crucially depend on the power of the two remaining factors that Michels identifies; i.e. the gratitude of members and the laws of tactics; or put slightly differently, it depends on the willingness of members to challenge their parliamentary representatives, and on the extent of ‘caesarism’ in a party.

Starting then with the issue of the gratitude of members. It is obvious that if members are to have influence they must first want it. Previous work by this author has already shown that membership gratitude for having someone else take the reins of power is not in fact universal (Pettitt 2006). There is both a popularly held view and objective evidence to suggest that the further to the left one gets on the political spectrum the less deferential party members tend to be. One left of centre politician wrote that ‘to be on the left is to be … temperamentally inclined to dissent’ (Hutton 2006: 26, see also Pettitt 2006: 296). This, as we shall see below, is also backed up by survey evidence. So, this is an area where there will be some variation between parties. It also seems likely that if there are parties where the iron laws does not apply, or applies less strongly, they are to be found on the left.

That leaves the laws of tactics and again there are good reasons to believe that this part of Michels’ law is not universal. As shown above Michels argues that to be successful in the political struggle a party requires a certain degree of ‘caesarism’. This is no doubt correct, but the important point is that the degree of ‘caesarism’ required in a party depends partly on the goals it is trying to achieve and the obstacles it faces in achieving them. Obviously the more ambitious its goals and the harsher the environment, the more efficient a fighting machine a party has to be.

The common factor for all parties, indeed the principle definition of a party is that it fields candidates for election to public assemblies (Epstein 1967). Beyond that, parties, or more precisely individuals within them, may have a wide range of goals including, but not limited to, gaining government power, realising policy goals, the advocacy of a certain ideology, preventing certain policies from being enacted, and the pursuit of private wealth and individual high status. Some goals require more party discipline than others. Especially the pursuit of government power requires more in the way of internal discipline than flying the banner of narrow ideological dogma. Indeed, one British MP writes of the ‘desperation of political parties for office
and their consequent need to reduce visible disunity’ (Allen n.d.). Another said in a House of Commons debate that:

\[
\text{disunity made a massive contribution to the 18 years we [the Labour Party] spent in opposition and ultimately rendered the Conservative party unfit to govern. Disunited parties not only do themselves a disservice, but become paralysed and unable to pursue the public interest (Lewis 1998)}
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Further, Mitchell argues that 'lengthy periods of government formation are likely to be all about the leaders' generating intraparty consent' (Mitchell 1999: 278). Obviously, 'consent' can come through either agreement or coercion. In other words when we see a party 'acting in unison, this can be because the members actually agree with each other or because they are being made to act in accord with each other despite their personal preferences' (Bowler, Farrell and Katz 1999: 5). What ever is the case, it is clear that a party with government ambition is less able to tolerate internal dissent than a party without such ambition and hence the former is in greater need of 'caesarism'.

In addition the political environment a party operates in will make it more or less difficult for the organisation to achieve its goals. So for example the single member plurality (SMP) electoral system makes it significantly more difficult for, especially small parties to achieve their fundamental goal of having their candidates elected than would be the case in a more proportional system. As Webb points out, Britain, with its SMP system is in electoral terms moderately pluralistic with a wide range of parties attracting significant support. However, in legislative terms it is still a two party system because of the working of the electoral system (Webb 2000). Similarly, it is much easier to achieve legislative influence in a system dominated by minority governments and or coalition governments (see Strøm 1986) than in a system which is dominated by majority governments, especially if these governments tend to be single party governments. In other words, countries operating PR electoral systems with their tendency towards multi-partism (Duverger 1964) provide a far more benevolent environment for parties than countries with non-proportional electoral systems. Consequently, ‘the laws of tactics’ will apply less strongly under a PR electoral system.
Putting the iron law to the test

The rest of the paper will focus on SF as an example of the above factors at work. SF is a relatively small socialist party, ideologically located to the left of the Social Democrats. It was founded in 1959 by Axel Larsen, the former leader of the Danish Communist Party (DKP) and other former communists and independent socialists. Larsen's wing of DKP had wanted to loosen the party's ties with the USSR, but had lost out to a Moscow loyal majority. As of February 2006 SF had around 8600 members (Socialistisk Folkeparti 2006), which is the highest number of members since 1989\(^{\text{iii}}\) (Bille 1997: 254). It's electoral support at the 2005 general election was 6 percent, which resulted in 11 out of 175 seats. The party's greatest electoral success came in 1987 with 14.6 percent of the votes and 27 seats. Its worst result was in 1977 with 3.9 percent and 7 seats (Bille 1997: 251). The party has never been in government, but has through support of Social Democratic governments managed to achieve notable policy influence (Christensen 2002). SF has been chosen for a number of reasons. The most important is that the party is in a position which matches the circumstances under which one would expect to see a significant level of membership influence. This is exemplified by a number of factors.

Firstly, Denmark operates a highly proportional List PR system with a second tier to make up for disproportional outcomes at the constituency level. The threshold for gaining seats is a mere two percent, which means that even quite small parties can achieve that fundamental goal of getting their candidates elected to parliament. This highly proportional system also means that no party has been able to acquire an overall majority of seats for almost a century. This means that governments are often coalition governments and/or minority governments. Hence legislative power is very easy to obtain, even when not holding government office. As Strøm (1986) shows Scandinavian parties can remain in opposition and ‘not necessarily suffer any great loss of policy influence’ (596). In other words, Danish parties find it relatively easy to acquire parliamentary representation and policy influence. This is supported by Christensen (2002) who shows that in the post-war period all political parties in the Danish parliament have had some policy influence, either by being in government or by entering into binding agreements (politiske forlig) with a minority government. It can therefore be argued that Denmark is a relatively benign political environment and the necessity for ‘caesarism’ correspondingly low. Further, until recently SF has not been a party in government contention and the leadership has
not had particularly strong government ambitions\textsuperscript{iv} which again means less need for ‘caesarism’.

In addition SF members have shown a relatively high level of ‘ingratitude’ towards their leaders. Table 1 shows the responses of Danish party members to the statement ‘the role of party members is to support decisions made by the leadership’. This question is a very good measure of ‘gratitude’ in Michelsian terms since to Michels what the members are grateful for is the willingness of the leadership to make the important decisions (Michels 1949: 53). As is clear from the Table 1 SF members stand out as being particularly opposed to that view. A full 69 percent of respondents either disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement. Only the members of the Red Green Alliance, a small far left grouping of former communists and small left socialist parties, were more opposed to the statement.

So, it is evident from the above that SF sits in an electoral and organisational niche which should allow its members to at the very least bend, if not actually break, Michels iron law. Indeed as we shall see below, SF is a party which affords its members a reasonably significant amount of control over their parliamentary representatives.

**Bending the iron law in SF**

The following will look at three issues to illustrate the relatively substantial level of membership influence in SF. Firstly there is the formal rules of the party which has a great deal of membership influence written into them. Obviously, there can be and often is a wide difference between formal rules and actual practice. Indeed, one of Michels’ points is that no change is needed in party rules for oligarchy to emerge (Michels 1949: 34). Nevertheless, the rule book of SF is an interesting example of attempts being made to resist the oligarchic tendencies of organisations. However, also acknowledging the point that one needs to go beyond the rule books to understand an organisation a further two illustrations of intra-party democracy in SF will be investigated: 1) the debates in the party over the Treaty of Amsterdam; and 2) the attitude of the party’s leaders to membership influence.

Turning then to the formal rules of the party the first thing to note is that like all other Danish parties, the SF rules state that the party conference is the party’s highest authority (Pettitt 2004). In this respect SF is no different from its rivals. However, what does make SF stand out is that the SF rule book contains quite a
detailed description of the relationship between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary sides of the party. Clauses 18 and 19 of the SF rule book set out rules for the party’s MPs and for how the parliamentary group will work with the rest of the party. Clause 18 states that the party’s parliamentary representatives are obliged to work for the party’s policies as made by the conference and other relevant party bodies. It further states that ‘recommendations from the conference or the party leadership should be the deciding factor in shaping the position of the parliamentary representatives.’ This is clearly a strong statement of extra-parliamentary control of MPs. It is however, somewhat mollified by the rest of the clause which reads: ‘... no one is required to support views which go contrary to that person’s convictions’ a line offering a clear get out clause. However, this softening of what is otherwise a very strong statement of extra-parliamentary supremacy seems to be necessitated by the Danish constitution. Clause 56 of the constitution states that ‘members of parliament are only bound by their own convictions and not by any directions from their voters’ (Danmark Riges Grundlov). Consequently no party can actually demand complete obedience from their MPs. Hence there is still the question of how the relationship between the parliamentarians and the rest of the party is to be conducted in practice which is what Clause 19 deals with.

Clause 19 states that the role of the ‘parliamentary group’ (folketingsgruppe) is to promote and communicate the party’s policy and that in this task it must rely on the party’s other bodies especially the conference and national council (hovedbestyrelse), in essence a restatement of Clause 18. A particularly interesting part of Clause 19 comes with Section 2 which says: ‘Through the approval of programmes and political statements the conference decides the main lines for the party’s and therefore the parliamentary group’s work. Conference can in connection with these decisions recommend that the parliamentary group takes a specific stand point on an issue’ (my emphasis). Again this is a restatement of extra-parliamentary control over the work of the parliamentary party, not just in general terms, but also on specific day to day issues. The rest of Clause 19 deals with how that will work in practice. In the day to day operation of the party the national council is responsible for ensuring that the parliamentary group follows the policy set by the conference (Clause 19, Section 3). The problem obviously occurs when the parliamentary group or part of it does not follow the decisions of the party conference. This is dealt with in Section 5 of Clause 19. If the parliamentary group or individual MPs do not want to
follow a conference recommendation, the group is required to account for its behaviour to the national council. If the national council accepts the account it then has to decide on how to report to the conference. If the national council rejects the account the parliamentary group has to ‘deal with the case as if it was a recommendation from the national council’. Finally Section 5 states that if the parliamentary group rejects a recommendation from the national council it has to account for its behaviour and again the national council has to report to the conference on the matter. So, it seems that despite the strong language of Clauses 18 and 19, all that the conference is entitled to is a report from the national council on why the parliamentary party refused to follow the decisions of the extra-parliamentary party. However, it has to be pointed out that should the national council’s report be rejected by the conference the entire council has to resign and new elections are held. In other words, it is the national council which will be held responsible for the actions of the parliamentary group. Consequently, even after all this there is no direct way to make an MP obey the wishes of the extra-parliamentary party. Indeed, that would not be possible without breaking the Danish constitution. Nevertheless, SF is the only Danish party to have gone to such great lengths to describe the relationship between the parliamentary party and the extra-parliamentary party, which is an indication of the importance of extra-parliamentary influence in the party. Indeed an interesting contrast to SF is the rules of the small centrist party the Centre Democrats (Centrum Demokraterne, CD). CD’s rules specify that the parliamentary group is independent of the extra-parliamentary party, and that whilst the parliamentary groups will present to the party conference a political programme, this does not need the approval of the conference (Centrum Demokraterne 2002: §7, 2-3). CD clearly has taken the Danish constitution at its word when drawing up their rules. It is also interesting to note that in an interview with this researcher the long time leader of SF, Gert Petersen, recounted how in a discussion with the founding leader of CD, Arne Melchior, SF was accused of being in breach of the Danish constitution, exactly because of the influence of the extra-parliamentary party over SF’s MPs (Petersen 8 May 2004). This is an indication that these rules are in fact a reflection of a high level of real membership influence over the party’s parliamentarians.

That then brings us to the question of how the extra-parliamentary influence evident in the party rules translates into reality. As an illustration of this the following
section will look at how the party dealt with the Treaty of Amsterdam. In July 1997 the EU member states agreed on the new treaty. In Denmark this had to be approved both by parliament and through a national referendum. Most Danish parties aligned themselves either for or against fairly quickly, but SF had experienced growing divisions over the EU and its position was far from clear. Seven of the party’s MP, including the chair of the parliamentary group Steen Gade and the former leader Gert Petersen, supported the treaty. A minority of six MPs, including the party leader Holger K. Nielsen, opposed it. On 17 August the party national executive voted by 28 to 10 to oppose the treaty. However, the final decision would be taken at an extraordinary conference on 6-7 September. After extensive and often fierce debate 183 delegates voted to oppose the treaty, with just 88 voting to support it. A majority of the extra-parliamentary party now opposed the treaty whereas a majority of the parliamentary party supported it. However, as Bille points out there is a tradition in SF that the parliamentary group follows the extra-parliamentary organisation (Bille 1998) and indeed that is what happened in this case. Steen Gade stepped down as chair of the parliamentary group to be replaced by another pro-treaty MP Jes Lunde. However, Jes Lunde agreed to vote with the wishes of the majority of the extra-parliamentary party and oppose the treaty. In addition two of the pro-treaty MPs, one of them being Gert Petersen, agreed to abstain, changing a majority of seven for and six against, to four votes for the treaty and seven against, with two abstentions. So, whilst voting discipline may have suffered somewhat at least it could now be said that the two sides of the party voted the same way.

The final issue to be examined in connection with membership influence is the attitudes of SF party leaders. Since the party’s creation in 1959 it has had five leaders, three of which have been interviewed by this researcher. All three expressed strong support for membership influence in the party. Both Gert Petersen and Holger K. Nielsen commented that in case of disagreement between the parliamentary party and the extra-parliamentary party it was the parliamentarians who had to change their position. Petersen mentioned having to break off negotiations with the Social Democratic government in 1979 because of opposition from the extra-parliamentary party (Petersen 8 May 2004). Nielsen talked about the above mentioned Treaty of Amsterdam process (Nielsen 18 August 2005). Further, in his autobiography Petersen writes that:
My view has always been that it should pay to be a member of the party, it should give special privileges. The members should, through their elected representatives at the conference and in the national executive have the last word on the party’s policy and views, also in the parliamentary assemblies. What other reason would there be for being a member? (Petersen 1998: 191-192, this researcher’s translation)

The party’s current leader, Villy Søvndal, is very much on the same path when he talks about the party having made a virtue out of being ‘the debating party’ (Søvndal 18 August 2005). There is then a very long history of party leaders who supported the idea of membership influence in SF.

So, as the above shows SF has a very strong element of membership influence. The party rules go to great length to protect and enhance membership influence and it is evidently common practice for the parliamentary group to follow the extra-parliamentary party in case of disagreement. So, it rings true when Pia Olsen, a member of the party’s national council and former leadership candidate, says that if SF members are willing to work at it and be persistent they can have as much influence as they want (Olsen 16 August 2005).

However, in recent years there has been a growing desire in SF for government power. Whilst the party was not offered to join the Social Democratic government of 1993-2001, there seems to be a growing willingness in the current Social Democratic leadership to offer SF a seat in government when the Social Democrats return to power (Danmarks Radio 2006). If this does indeed happen, it is likely to have significant implications for SF’s internal democracy. Whilst in a non-governing party, the leader might be able to walk away from negotiations and a parliamentary group change its position because of pressure from the extra-parliamentary party, it is difficult to see how this would be possible for a governing party. As Mitchell points out when: ‘in opposition the parliamentary party is subject to party rules. In government, ministers are subject to constitutional rules such as collective cabinet responsibility’ (Mitchell 1999: 285, n11). If the party is not in government pulling out of negotiations because of extra-parliamentary rebellion is not such a problem. However, being a coalition partner requires much stronger commitments, and much greater leadership autonomy. As was argued above, for a party with government ambitions, the iron law is much stronger than for a party without such ambitions. Indeed the experience of Green parties, widely known for their concern with intra-
party democracy, has shown the organisational pressures of government participation:

On the one hand, parties decide to adopt their structure to systemic constraints because they anticipate the need for centralisation should they eventually enter government. On the other, they reform their organisation after joining government because they quickly realise that their "reaction time" has been drastically reduced and they need more centralised leadership structures (Poguntke 2001: 5)

Certainly, if SF was to join a Social Democratic coalition government it would almost certainly have to deal with the clash between ‘ungrateful’ party members and an increased need for ‘cæsarism’. Whether, and at what cost to its internal democracy, SF is able to deal with these challenges remains to be seen.

Discussion

What the above has shown is that it is indeed possible to bend Michels’ iron law. SF may not have broken it out right, but it is clear that it is possible for members of some parties, provided the circumstances are right, to acquire a fairly significant level of influence.

This finding has a number of implications for study of political parties. Firstly it requires us to rethink the commonly held view that party members are devoid of influence, what was called the ‘oligarchic consensus’ above. The fact of a notable level of membership influence in SF requires us to take more seriously the notion of membership influence in political parties, something which is often ignored or even derided. What is needed is further research on membership influence to better understand the circumstances under which intra-party democracy can flourish. Such research would be good not only for our understanding of the internal arrangements of political parties, but also for ‘ungrateful’ party members in search of policy influence.

It also has to be acknowledged that SF is only one party and that to be able to confirm the findings in this paper a greater number of cases would have to be included. As Lijphart points out the validity of the conclusions based on the ‘deviant case’ must then be 'established by further comparative research' (1971: 692). In the first instance and based on the data in Table 1 it would be worth while to look at the
Danish Red Green Alliance and the Social Liberals. The Red Green Alliance members show an even greater reluctance to follow the lead of their ‘superiors’ than do SF members. In addition this is not a government seeking party and should therefore be in much the same position as SF. However, more interesting is the Social Liberals. This party has frequently been in government, yet according to Table 1, they also have really quite ungrateful members. Being a government seeking party they would supposedly have a fairly high need for ‘caesarism’, at least compared with SF, yet they also have members who are apparently unwilling to merely follow the leadership. How these contradictory forces work themselves out would be very interesting to examine. However, it would also be necessary to go beyond Denmark, yet here we are faced with two problems. Firstly there is the absence of data on membership gratitude. To the knowledge of this researcher the question used in Table 1 has only been asked of Danish party member and the members of the British Labour Party. Further membership surveys would therefore be necessary in order to identify those parties where members want influence, which could then be used to expand on this research. Secondly, there is the already mentioned absence of research on membership influence. We simply do not know much about the level of membership influence in very many parties. Both of these gaps need to be filled before a fuller comparative study can be carried out of membership influence in political parties.

A second implication is that it is necessary to rethink what has happened to membership influence with the rise of the catch-all party. It is no-longer enough to simply accept that party leaders have become more focused on the increasingly volatile electoral market at the expense of membership influence. Michels shows us that at least in some parties members had very little influence to lose even before the ‘contagion from the right’ made its presence felt. That being the case, why are party members said to have become marginalised? One answer may be found in the changed priorities of the catch-all party leadership when making policy. Farrell and Webb suggest that the ‘...increasing tendency is less one of selling themselves to the voters, but rather one of designing an appropriate product to match voter needs.’ (Farrell and Webb 2002: 102). In this environment the opinions of the members are increasingly ignored to the advantage of media managers and pollsters who are perceived as knowing far better than the members what will sell. This would suggest that what has happened is less a change in the balance of power within the party,
than an increase in the number of instances where the leadership use their existing power to overrule the members. Consequently, at least in some parties, rather than having actually lost influence, members are now becoming increasingly aware of their lack of influence. However, only further research on this topic would give us a clearer picture of what the rise of electoralist parties has meant for the power of party members.

A third and final implication is that those ungrateful party members in search of influence who feel they have none should re-evaluate their situation. If they are looking back to and perhaps trying to regain a lost era of membership power they may well be barking up the wrong tree. Depending on the political environment and position of their party there may never have been an era of membership power in their party. This may be a source of despair for some, but should perhaps rather be a cause to look for new methods to influence policy rather than to try turning the clock back to a largely illusionary era of membership power.

However, the most fundamental lesson from the above study is the urgent need for more research on membership influence. Not only because so little is known, but also because it appears that a great deal of the existing literature has been analysing the changes in membership power in the evolution of mass-parties into catch all parties based on erroneous assumptions about the mass party. In order to gain a better understanding of the power of party members and intra-party democracy a re-evaluation of what catch all-ism has meant to party members is necessary.
References


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Data source:
Bille, L., R. Buch, J. Elklit, B. Hansen, H. J. Nielsen and K. Pedersen (2000). “De danske partimedlemmer (the Danish party members)” *Dansk Data Arkiv (Danish Data Archive)*, Arkive Number DDA-14069
Notes

1 Political Parties was first published in German in 1911 and in English in 1915. References here are to the 1949 reprint of the 1915 English version.

ii Michels also argues that the tendency of party leaders to cling to office for as long as they can strengthens the oligarchic tendencies of parties. However, in this context this is seen as less important for two reasons; 1) leadership selections is not a very effective way of influencing party policy and 2) the party members are more interested in deciding on policy, rather than choosing those who are to do the deciding (see Pettitt 2007 for a further discussion of this). So, having the power to choose the leadership is less important than having the power to influence the decisions of the leadership. Hence the length of time a leader is in power for is not seen as being central to this paper.

iii This is incidentally also well above the limits set by Michels and Plato for a functioning democracy.

iv Recently there have been signs of this changing. The implications of that will be discussed below.

v The following is based on SF's rule book from 2005 (Socialistisk Folkeparti 2005).

vi The following is based on Bille 1998


viii Although, it has to be pointed out that Michels based the iron law of oligarchy largely on his own experience with a single party, the German SDP.