Can Stratarchically Organized Parties be Democratic?  
Evidence from the Canadian Experience

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In this paper we are concerned with the old question of internal party democracy. Must political parties that depend upon a substantial membership inevitably end as oligarchies? Has the emergence of the cartel party, the ‘public utility’ of modern democracies, spelled an end to active citizen-partisans? To approach this issue we explore the suggestion that stratarchical organizational forms might provide parties with a way out of an apparent democratic dead end. The paper considers the logic of such parties and then examines how Canadian parties have been organized around stratarchical principles. The second substantial part of the paper turns to an assessment, in terms of the standards adopted by the Canadian Democratic Audit, of how, and to what extent, these parties might be considered democratic institutions.

Sorting out the internal structural dynamics of political parties leads Katz and Mair (1993) to focus on what they call the three ‘faces’ of party organizations: the party on the ground, the party in central office, and the party in public office. These distinct elements are held to be in competition with each other for organizational dominance and it is the particular balance struck among them that is the characteristic feature which distinguishes different types of parties – cadre (sometimes called elite), mass, catch-all and cartel – from one another. On this basis alone the model constitutes a major break through in our conceptualization and understanding of party organization in liberal democracies. However it does two important things more. First it provides a framework for the analysis of the evolution of parties, and party competition, since the emergence of electoral democracy in Western Europe. Tracing the competitive advantages of the different faces of the parties, and the social bases for them, illuminates the underlying dynamics that explain the rise and fall of party types (Katz & Mair 2002). Equally significant, the model links the character of party organization to alternate conceptions of democracy (Katz 2002), though whether distinct party types generate different understandings of democracy or whether shifting conceptions of democracy call forth different types of parties seems to be an open question.
The argument is by now familiar but it is important, for our purposes, to spell it out briefly. The 19th century was an era of cadre (elite) parties which were little more than the networks of local notables who marshalled enough support to get themselves elected to public office. The parliamentary caucus (party in office) easily dominated the party on the ground (the notables’ local supporters) and had little need for a party congress and bureaucracy (central office). Katz and Mair (2002: 115) quote Beer approvingly in describing this kind of party as “an agglomeration of local parties more than …a single national organization.” Such parties are to be understood as the key players in a Schumpeterian democracy where democracy is little more than a “popular choice among competing parties” (Katz 2002: 89).

With the expansion of the franchise, the party of mass integration emerges as a superior organizational form, capable of mobilizing greater resources – especially votes. And as Katz and Mair (2002: 116-120) argue, this shifted the internal balance of power in parties heavily in the direction of its central office which was needed to manage its electoral and membership life. In theory the relationship between the party in central office and on the ground was ‘symbiotic’; in practice, Michels taught us that power was heavily vested in the party’s central office core. In the mass party, the once powerful party in public office is to be subordinate, carrying out the democratically determined will of the wider party. This represented a changed understanding of democracy in which parties were now to be understood as “the political arm of one of the classes, ethnic groups or economic interests that make up society” (Katz 2002: 89), and whose role during elections was simply to mobilize their electorate.

The very success of the mass party was at the heart of the next turn in party evolution. Opponents moved to copy some of the mass party’s electoral advantages, especially its large membership base, without giving up control of the wider organization. Thus, in the catch-all party, the party in central office sought to control the party on the ground while legitimating their position by presenting itself as its agent. By operating as a broker of electoral interests, the party pursued an entrepreneurial approach (cf. Kirchheimer 1966, Panebianco 1988) that echoed a conception of democracy as a choice between competing teams of leaders. But at the heart of the catch-all party is a fragility that reflects the unsettled relationship between the party in public office and the
party on the ground. The internal conflict that this tension engendered got played out in the party in central office (Katz & Mair 2002: 122).

So far, a well-known story. But Katz and Mair (2002: 122) now argue that “in contemporary party organizations … these conflicts seem to have been settled, in what we now appear to witness in the ascendancy of the party in public office.” This, of course, is manifest in their famous cartel party (Katz & Mair 1994). Indeed, it seems that the politicians who dominate the party in public office deliberately moved towards a cartel model in order to liberate themselves from the demands of the other faces of the party and to provide some certainty to their resource needs. Parties in public office have freed themselves from the other two faces of the party by becoming one of the “institutions of government” (Katz 2002:90). This reflects a conception of democracy in which political parties are the public utilities that deliver democracy (electoral choice) to the voters. The claim that the century-old struggle among the three faces has now “been settled” does seem to fly in the face of experience of continuing change. Perhaps recognizing this, Katz & Mair (2002: 134) suggest that if there is to be a next stage in this evolution of democratic organizations it may be towards the "so-called anti-party parties". Whether that would lead to much more populist orientations to democracy or to “a more genuine problem of legitimacy” is left as an open question.

In many ways this analysis suggests the evolutionary path has come full circle: cartel parties, dominated as they are by the party in public office, may be little more than 21st century versions of the elite parties of the 19th century. For cartel theorists, a key question is “how can the primacy of the party in public office be successfully asserted?” (Katz & Mair 2002: 127). This speaks to concerns for issues of party democracy, and how the party might legitimate its role in the system, but also to larger issues of the place of this kind of party in modern liberal democracies. And if cartel parties are to be built in new democracies where there is no evolutionary history, with its organizational residues marking the balance amongst the three faces of the party, how are such parties to operate? Katz and Mair (2002: 128-9) offer two possibilities. The first is that the party in public office can strengthen its position through “internal party democratization.” This apparently magic trick rests on the presumption that leaders can manipulate pliable members to swamp the militant activists who are thought to pose the greatest challenge to their dominance of the party. It is not clear that this is an accurate reading of the views
of members and activists\(^2\), but it hardly seems a democratic solution. The second, and not necessarily competing, possibility is for parties to “adopt a stratarchic form” (see also Mair 1994). That seems a viable strategy, though how it might be implemented given the organizational residues of earlier internal party balances is never specified. Katz and Mair seem rather dubious about its prospects for they recognize that while the party on the ground might flourish in a stratarchic setting they suspect that it would still be “stuck on the ground” with little effective control over other parts of the party.

Thus the evolution of party organization seems to have led to a democratic dead end. Parties are now driven to adopt internal rules and forms designed to foster either the manipulation or the isolation of their members which allows their public office-holding elites to maintain their organizational dominance and enables them to set the political agenda and control the electoral game. However, a reading of the shifting balance among the distinctive faces of party organizations may take on a different cast if we recognize that in genuinely stratarchical organizations there are really only two significant faces to the party organization. And the logic, character and tensions in this dyadic relationship are more problematic than the Katz and Mair argument might suggest. Canadian parties provide a different reading of democratic relationships within stratarchical parties.\(^3\)

**Canadian Parties – 19th or 21st century institutions?**

It is easy to see the major Canadian political parties as remnants of the 19\(^{th}\) century. At first glance they look like nothing so much as cadre parties dominated by the party in public office (Carty 2002a). Organizationally they look more like “an agglomeration of local parties” than a disciplined or coherent single national organization. It would be misleading to represent this as the settled outcome of the struggle for dominance amongst three faces of the party for the principal Canadian parties have never really had a party in central office.\(^4\) When they eventually created formal institutions to organize their supporters, that face of the party organization was never empowered and indeed was deliberately excluded from the serious business of organizing and conducting election campaigns. From the beginning Canadian parties had dyadic structures: there was a party on the ground and a party in public office, and the principal organizational challenge was finding a way to balance the two.
Katz and Mair’s intuition that stratarchy is a viable organizational response to the disappearance of the party in central office as a vital part of political parties is born out by the experience of Canadian parties. In their earliest manifestations as cadre parties they were led by local political entrepreneurs in a comparatively homogeneous rural and small town society. Those men had no special claim to elite status and so the relationship between the party on the ground and in public office was evenly balanced. To harness supporters those parties developed a stratarchical organizational structure that can best be described in terms of a franchise system (Carty 2002b). That structure was so successful that it defined the template for the country’s successful parties.

However the persistence of successful cadre-style parties through the 20th century constitutes its own puzzle for Katz and Mair’s comparative study suggests that across western Europe such elite-controlled parties were successively replaced, first by mass parties defined by the social cleavage system, then by catch-all parties managed by opportunistic politicians, and finally by cartel organizations living off the state. In Canada, successful political parties always lived off the state: prior to WW I they exploited their control of state employment and government contracts to provide themselves with the resources needed to contest elections; later, the long dominant Liberal party moved to “embed itself within the structures of government”, its “institutionalization as an aspect of government” transforming it into “the government party” (Whitaker 1977: 420). Here surely was the prototypical cartel party, with its parliamentary caucus operating as the electoral face of the state. Its task was to operate the electoral machinery that periodically collected the votes necessary to legitimate the system. More recently Canadian parties have legislated an electoral and party finance regime that has seen the state provide the support they need – initially by providing reimbursements and tax credits, and more recently by simply giving the parties a quarterly allowance. For most of their history Canadian parties have lived (if not always well) off of the bounty of the state. In this sense they have always been cartel parties.

This line of argument would suggest that Canadians developed 21st century cartel parties in the 19th century. The stratarchical forms they adopted have persisted. While there has been a continuing tension between the party on the ground and the party in public office, periodically rebalanced by new party leadership mechanisms, the result has not allowed for any easy “ascendancy of the party in public office” either by
manipulating or isolating the party on the ground. This leads us to ask how these stratarchical parties operate and with what consequence for internal party democracy and the parties’ contribution to the democratic life of the country.

Stratarchical organizations are based on the principle of a division of labour “in which different and mutually autonomous levels coexist with one another, and in which there is a minimum of authoritative control, whether from the bottom-up or from the top-down” (Katz & Mair 2002: 129). For party organizations, the hard questions immediately centre on the specifics of the division of labour; for democrats, the key questions focus on the nature of the relationships between the two faces of the party. While the levels may be mutually autonomous they are not merely an agglomeration of independent entities: they are interdependent elements of a wider organization. The question then is how do parties make autonomous interdependence work?

Canadian parties structure the relationship between the party in public office and the party on the ground in a bargain which defines its division of labour. In theory it is clear and simple: in practice it provides for a continuing and not always subtle pattern of competitive interactions in which each side is continually trying to expand its influence over the other. The defining relationship can be characterized as one in which the party in public office is assured of disciplined support from the ground in exchange for the party on the ground receiving local autonomy in the management of its affairs. The critical issues are support for what and autonomy over what, and how are they interdependent?

The party in public office is responsible, as elite parties always have been, for determining party policy. The role of articulating policy is largely centred in the hands of the party in public office’s leadership and the parliamentary caucus is disciplined to support it. Although conventions (of delegates from the party on the ground) are periodically held to debate policy questions, their decisions are seen only as a policy resource guidebook for the leadership as it responds to the issues of the day. This is most evident at election-time when the leader’s tours and debates dominate the parties’ campaigns and define the national electoral agenda. These campaigns are designed and managed, not by the parties’ very modest bureaucracies which manage routine organizational activity between elections, but by a cadre of personal supporters hand-picked by the leader for this role.
Local autonomy for the party on the ground means that the local association is free to run its own affairs as it sees fit. The most important of its activities are choosing its candidates for public office and organizing and managing campaigns on their behalf. Coupled with the principle of local autonomy has been the norm of local democracy which states that the local associations are open to all supporters who have a right to participate in key decisions. In practice this has meant that local partisans meet before every election to choose their candidate and that incumbent members of the party in public office must come back to their local party associations to be renominated.

Managed locally, most constituency campaigns are not well integrated into the party’s national effort and so take on the imperatives and shape defined by the candidate and context (Carty & Eagles 2005).

This stratarchical arrangement provides for a delicate balance between the two faces of the party. The party in public office determines both parliamentary and electoral policy and disciplines its membership: the party on the ground determines just who becomes (and stays) a member of the party in public office. The party in public office, and especially the leadership, has an interest in trying to influence just who becomes a member of the parliamentary caucus while the party on the ground is full of individuals trying to push the party in their preferred policy direction. Put crudely, the party in public office controls policy, the party on the ground controls personnel, and the genuine authority each has in its own sphere of autonomous decision-making allows both to play a major part in the internal life of the party.

In the absence of a party in central office, where the tensions between the public office and ground faces of the party might be played out, the party’s leadership becomes the focal point for the struggle for dominance. The party in public office can demand (and generally receives) near unquestioning support for the leader and control over policy: the party on the ground has the power to choose (and remove) the party leader. This provides for a party leadership that is at once both strong and fragile: leaders have enormous power and discretion to move and manage the party as they please, but they can be challenged and removed by (or through) the party on the ground. And as we shall suggest, this power allows the party on the ground not insignificant scope for influencing the direction of party policy.
Our argument is that the party on the ground’s control over personnel prevents it from being either manipulated or isolated. And it is because the structure is essentially stratarchical that the ground is still an important centre of party life and power. The local associations that make up this face of the party look nothing so much as “an agglomeration of local parties,” each with their locally distinctive organizations, memberships, finances and support (Carty 1991). It is in these associations, each structured by the political imperatives of the distinct and diverse electoral districts they inhabit, that partisans have a direct impact on wider party.

Central to the place of the party on the ground is the control over key personnel decisions that ordinary party members hold. Two aspects of this are important: a long standing tradition that all party members are entitled to participate in local votes in candidate and leadership selection processes, and a loose and open definition of membership that allows (virtually) anyone to join the party and immediately participate in its activities. Given with the absence of an articulated party in central office through which members might hope to play a part in policy-making, party membership constitutes little more than a franchise in internal party elections. All this has a direct impact on the shape and character of the party on the ground and its pattern of interaction with the party in public office.

With the reason for holding a party membership essentially being tied to the right to vote in party elections, large numbers swell the roles just in advance of an internal party (nomination or leadership) contest and then simply let their membership lapse in the aftermath. The result is an enormous volatility in local association memberships that can grow by thousands in the matter of a few weeks. The mobilization of such large numbers invariably reflects the efforts of those with a direct interest in the outcome of the party elections. Candidates recruit new members from among their friends, associates and identifiable groups for the single purpose of supporting them in the party contest. The result is a highly personalized and parochial membership base. This dynamic generates a mutually reinforcing pattern for the ebb and flow of members is largely governed by the interest, activity and electoral success of individual politicians. The openness of this process makes it relatively easy for challengers to penetrate units of the party and take them over. This gives the party on the ground a volatile base, honeycombed by highly
personalized networks which tend to be connected to one another through the links between their leaders – the most successful of whom constitute the party in public office.

Volatile memberships driven by personal ambition also makes for a great diversity in the make-up of local associations, and hence the wider party on the ground. Thus one local association may be dominated by enthusiasts for one particular policy while fellow partisans in a neighbouring association support an opposing position. A party may find its membership in one district dominated by new immigrants while others are controlled by those holding strong anti-immigrant opinions. Or the members of one ethnic community may pack the membership of one party in a particular electoral district while being recruited into a different party in a different district. From one perspective this diversity frees the party in public office from any clear direction by the party on the ground and allows (forces) them to practice a self-serving, opportunistic politics of electoral brokerage. But this also forces the party in public office to be constantly sensitive to political impulses from the ground.

There is little opportunity for the party in public office to manipulate the party on the ground. The party needs a basic core of members to maintain its electoral district associations and those individuals are all volunteers who cannot easily be dictated to. Mobilized as they are, their loyalties are often as much personal as partisan and so, for many, exit trumps voice, and voice loyalty as a political option. Yet these local volunteers control access to public office and the sheer volatility and personalization of the membership cycle make central domination of it difficult. Indeed the party on the ground provides a base for any challenger to launch an attack on the members or leadership of the party in public office by simply mobilizing large numbers of new members. In every election some Members of Parliament are unseated in nomination meetings in their own local party on the ground. Former Conservative leader Brian Mulroney took over his party in just such a fashion in the 1980s, and the current Liberal leader, Paul Martin, built a personal organization in the party on the ground that forced his predecessor from the party leadership and out of the Prime Minister’s office.

Vesting control over personnel in an open and democratic party on the ground results in the development of personal factions. Many of these factions are local and fleeting, but with the prize of the leadership, and its control over party policy, at stake, there is a strong incentive for would-be leaders to build up a highly personalized network capable
of reaching into as many of the varied and disparate local party associations as possible. They can do so only by mobilizing members into the party on the ground to support them in crucial contests which reinforces the volatility of that face of the organization. At some point the very instability or lack of continuity in the membership ought to raise questions as to whether the party on the ground has any identifiable continuing presence.

While we have argued that the stratarchical structure of Canadian parties assigns questions of party policy to the party in public office, the reality is that the party on the ground can try to use its control over personnel to shape it indirectly. Decisions that members make in nominating a parliamentary candidate or selecting a party leader speak to their policy preferences. And the party on the ground has learned that the way to change party policy – if not in specifics then certainly in direction – is to change the members of the party in public office. Thus it is difficult to read the record of party factionalism and leadership struggles in the major parties in recent decades solely in terms of personal ambition. In important ways they represented contests over competing orientations on important social, economic and constitutional issues. They were fought out in nomination and leadership contests rather than policy conventions precisely because that is where the party on the ground had real influence and could not be ignored. While matters of detail and implementation are the prerogative of the party in public office, the very volatility and openness of the party on the ground ultimately keeps it from being manipulated, and its veto over personnel keeps it from being isolated with no influence.

The recent decision by parliament to aggressively expand public financial support for Canadian political parties, while simultaneously constraining the ability of the private sector to fund them, has the potential to transform them in a significant way and should leave little doubt that they are (modern) cartel parties. As part of that development, the party leadership has sought to use the law to assert greater control over their party’s local associations. However, given that these associations depend on a variable flow of volunteers drawn into the party as a consequence of local decision-making autonomy on immediate personnel issues, the party in public office needs to maintain a genuinely stratarchical organization if it is to maintain an organization capable of campaigning and harvesting votes in a system whose electoral politics are structured by a geographically ordered electoral system.
Finally, it is important to note that this entire structure of stratarchical cartel parties is repeated, but not replicated, in the country’s provinces and territories. National and provincial party organizations are not integrated even in parties of the same name, party competition at the two levels (within provinces) is not symmetrical, and the electorates’ responses to them vary enormously (Stewart & Cary 2005). This puts parties in public office at one level in competition with parties in public office at the other for the active support of members who will maintain a party organization on the ground. It gives partisans two distinct arenas in which to be politically involved and given the propensity for exit that the structures of mobilization offer increases the internal volatility of parties on the ground.

The portrait to this point is one in which the party on the ground is neither isolated nor manipulated but has, within clearly defined limits, considerable scope balancing the influence of the party in public office. But at the same time we suggest that the stratarchical party on the ground is volatile, personalized, socially incoherent and factionalized. Is such a party a meaningfully democratic organization?

Do Canadian parties meet democratic standards?

Our model of the stratarchical party suggests that its fundamental internal dynamic is one that pits the party in public office against the party on the ground. In many ways this is a classic centre-periphery conflict. Here we turn to explore how Canadian parties resolve these tensions in practice and ask whether, in doing so, they meet basic democratic standards. Given that a central function of political parties in liberal democracies is to connect citizens to their governmental institutions by organizing people and ideas, we focus on three key party activities – leadership selection, candidate recruitment and policy development. Their stratarchical structure assigns the first two of these to the periphery (they party on the ground), the third to the centre (the party in public office). In assessing the extent to which these parties are democratic actors, we utilize the criteria adopted by the Canadian Democratic Audit project. A sweeping evaluation of the status of Canadian democracy in the early years of the 21st century, the Audit adopted three core standards as its benchmarks: participation, inclusiveness and responsiveness.⁵
Contemporary Canadian democratic values strongly favour participatory public decision-making. Nevitte (1996) argues that a major value shift, which he characterizes as a ‘decline of deference,’ has left Canadians suspicious of traditional patterns of elite decision-making and demanding more participatory structures and practices. For parties, this means a membership that is open and accessible to all, and that members ought to be able to participate in important party decisions. This leads us to consider both the rules governing participation in the parties’ activities and the actual participation rates of members and supporters. Large numbers might suggest the existence of a participatory party democracy but our second criteria demands that participation must be inclusive, reflecting the diversity of Canadian society. As a major immigrant-taking society, Canada has evolved into a dynamic multi-cultural society in recent decades. Thus, a consideration of inclusiveness must measure whether the parties incorporate the country’s various ethnic and immigrant communities as well as the young and old, men and women, Aboriginal Canadians and representatives of the socio-demographic mosaic. Finally, participation, even where fully inclusive, has limited democratic meaning unless there is a connection between it and subsequent institutional outputs.

Responsiveness examines the relationship between citizen inputs and personnel and policy outcomes of the decision-making processes. Thus, the democratic standard against which we assess Canadian political parties is one in which their central activities of leadership selection, candidate nomination and policy making are participatory, inclusive and responsive. A consideration of the realities of each provides us with a measure of the democratic character of these stratarchical parties, and their openness to the wider citizenry.

Leadership Selection

The election of party leaders is an enormously important activity undertaken by Canadian parties for the decision may well be tantamount to the selection of a Prime Minister: four of the country’s last seven Prime Ministers came to office by winning a party leadership contest rather than a general election. In choosing their leaders, opposition parties are effectively nominating their candidate for the prime ministership. As only two parties – the Liberals and Conservatives – have ever seriously competed for government, their leadership politics effectively narrow the field of prime ministerial candidates to two - from whom voters are asked to select one.
The evolution of the party leadership selection process is one in which the group choosing the leader has increasingly become larger and more representative of the party on the ground. In the 19th century party leaders were first chosen through informal consultations among the members of the party in public office and then later a formal vote of the entire parliamentary caucus. In the early decades of the 20th century Canadian parties became among the first major western parties to choose their leaders through a process involving its extra parliamentary membership meeting in convention. These conventions combined members from both the centre and the constituency peripheries. This method quickly became the Canadian norm and the composition of the conventions evolved to strengthen the role of delegates from the party on the ground. The final expansion in the leadership selectorate occurred at the end of the century when Canadian parties adopted a plebiscitary model of party democracy and turned the choice of their leader over to a vote of their entire membership, generally on a one-member, one vote basis (Young & Cross 2002a).

There is no doubt that the party on the ground is now in control of leadership selection in the major parties, and has been for several decades. Parties in public office have had individuals who are not their preference chosen and imposed upon them: leaders have been removed despite maintaining the confidence and support of the majority of their parliamentary colleagues. But this is not to say that leadership selection (and removal) is a highly participatory exercise for, as organizations, the parties themselves do not have particularly vibrant or stable memberships.

The best estimates are that about one per cent of Canadians belong to a national political party at any given time, and of these close to one-half are inactive. This number changes quickly during periods of leadership challenge for one of the first signs of a leadership contest is a dramatic mobilization of members. Because so few voters, including the parties’ regular partisans, belong to a party, leadership campaigns start with candidates’ teams recruiting members to the party on the ground – many completely new to the party. The Liberal contest of 2003 provides a stark illustration of this. Table 1 shows the increase in party membership in each of the four largest provinces in the run-up to its leadership vote. In each case members mobilized into local associations increased the total membership ranks by large amounts.
Table 1: Liberal party memberships in 4 largest provinces: 2002-03

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>% increase</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>38,000</td>
<td>126,000</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>28,000</td>
<td>65,000</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Columbia</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>38,000</td>
<td>744</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alberta</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>450</td>
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Few of these new members join on their own volition; most are recruited into the party for the single (and simple) purpose of supporting a particular candidate in the party vote (Young & Cross 2002b). The vast majority of these instant members take no further part in party activities and withdraw from it immediately following the leadership contest. But even counting these dramatic mobilizations, only a small percentage of a party’s voters become members and participate in the leadership choice. For their 2003 leadership contest – one which was effectively electing a Prime Minister – the Liberals mobilized approximately a half-million members, about 10% of their electorate. However, as a measure of participation, these numbers can be deceiving as only a fraction of the members of the party on the ground take part in the elections. In practice, most of those recruited into the party during leadership contests never actually participate in it. In the 2003 Liberal case, just one-quarter of their members (representing perhaps 4% of their electorate) cast a ballot. This was a fairly typical leadership contest: the participation rate of a party’s partisans in leadership contests is routinely in the 2-5 per cent range in both federal and provincial parties.

Having opened the leadership to the party on the ground, and opened the party on the ground to public participation, the parties do not make participation in these contests particularly easy. The principal impediments include early cut-off dates for membership which stops names being added to the voting rolls weeks (sometimes months) before the election; the payment of a membership fee (in effect a poll tax for those who join simply to participate in choosing the leader) in the $10-20 range; and often long travel to cast a ballot a constituency party’s single voting location. This puts a heavy onus on the candidates who, in addition to mobilizing supporters into the party on the ground, must also often pay the necessary fees (though typically forbidden to by party rules) and arrange transportation for many who cannot be counted on to actually show up to vote in the contest.
This type of mobilization makes it very difficult for the members of the party in public office to control the choice of their leader. Candidates will seek the endorsement of members of the parliamentary party in an effort to illustrate their support, but the real job of winning the leadership contest must be done on the ground by mobilizing supporters in more than 300 constituency associations. The central party is not completely impotent for it can have some influence through shaping contest rules. Well organized candidates do seek to place their supporters in its decision-making bodies and work to ensure their loyalists control local associations. Thus the logic of leadership selection leads to the development of personal factionalism within the parties with these factions providing informal networks that can integrate the party in public office with the party on the ground. Supporters of the current Liberal leader (Paul Martin) spent a decade following his 1990 leadership defeat organizing to ensure that members of their faction were active at all levels of the party filling key posts on its executive bodies and in the constituencies. By 2003, Martin’s supporters controlled enough of the organization to force the then leader (and Prime Minister) to step down and had enough influence to shape the membership mobilization rules for the subsequent party election in their favour. The very transient character of party membership, and the autonomy allowed to local associations, makes this kind of organizational takeover of the party on the ground possible for the best organized candidates.

This suggests that while the membership of the party on the ground has the upper hand, neither the forces of the periphery nor the centre has a clear path in leadership selection. The decision is certainly made by the parties’ ordinary members but the central party’s ability to set rules that frame the contest allows it some influence over the final decision. That said, the centre is not some independent entity in a stratarchical organization – it reflects the balance of organizational strength of competing leadership forces, measured in large part by their control of the party on the ground. The process appears highly participatory as tens of thousands of party members routinely participate. However, it is also clear that the parties construct significant barriers to wide-spread involvement so that ultimately only a small fraction of any party’s supporters actually participate in the process.

We do not know much about who participates in these contests in the national parties other than to say they constitute a constantly swirling membership. On the other hand,
we do have good data on who belongs to the federal parties between these mobilization campaigns and who participates in leadership contests in the provincial parties. All of that evidence suggests that the leadership selectorate is not inclusive in the sense that it is not representative of Canadian society. The core membership of the parties is disproportionately male, older, well-educated, economically well off, and of western European descent. The average age of a party member during a non-mobilization period is 59, about six-in-ten are men, they are significantly more likely than the average Canadian to have attended university and very few of them come from parts of the world that have been swelling the Canadian electorate in recent decades (Cross & Young 2004). The evidence at the provincial level, where recent leadership selectorates have been surveyed, is that those mobilized into a party for a leadership contest are modestly more representative but not sufficiently so as to offset the biases of the core group. Furthermore, it is this core group of members who are most likely to actually vote in a leadership contest while many (often a majority) of the transient members do not participate. Put bluntly, leadership politics are open to almost anyone motivated to participate but in practice they have been more notable for those in the electorate who have been excluded than included.

In terms of responsiveness, there are several considerations to note. The first is that the major parties have modified the one-member one-vote principle to entrench the imperatives of geography in the democracy of leadership choice. After experimenting with different methods, both major parties have moved to a system that echoes the logic of the single-member electoral system by giving the membership of each of the 308 local party associations on the ground the same number of leadership votes. In practice this means that individual members’ votes are counted locally and then converted into percentages of the local vote that is cast for the leadership with the result that a party unit with 5,000 members has the same influence as one with 10 members. Such dramatic differences are a consequence of the extreme regionalization of the contemporary Canadian party system. The move away from a pure one-member one-vote count reflects an appreciation that political responsiveness must be multidimensional given the strongly federal character of Canadian society and politics. Parties know they need to find leaders acceptable to voters in different regions of the country and are able to stimulate the building a strong party on the ground in hundreds of separate and distinctive electoral districts.
Assessing responsiveness is difficult for it is also not clear to whom the process ought to be responsive. The stratarchical structure suggests that it is to the members of the party on the ground. However, the very volatility of the membership of most local associations, and the fact that the membership is, in important ways, the creation of leadership candidates themselves, makes it difficult to identify this face of the party. Both its size and composition can change dramatically in a matter of a few weeks as it responds to the mobilization activities of members of the party in public office and leadership candidates. In 1983 the Conservative party removed one leader in February and chose another in June but between those two dates the efforts of leadership candidates (temporarily) transformed the party on the ground. The Conservative party that made the decision to remove one leader was simply not the same organization that, a few months later, chose another.

The extent to which leadership contests reflect policy debates may also speak to their responsiveness. Each party has overlapping, loosely defined factions structured around leading personnel within the party in public office to which party members may identify and align themselves. Leadership contests often pit these factions against one another for control of the fruits of power within the party. As suggested above, the campaigns are dominated by mobilization efforts that favour the group with the most extensive and decentralized organizational capacity. Formal policy debate is typically a minor part of these leadership contests but, nonetheless, the competing camps generally represent broadly differing perspectives on major public policy issues. While the candidates themselves may not engage each other in high level policy debates, they do generally represent factions with differing policy orientations. For example, recent Liberal party contests have seen leading candidates taking opposed positions on the fundamental constitutional questions that have dominated the Canadian political agenda for most of the past four decades. Members of the party on the ground are sharply aware of these differences and so, in the broadest sense, leadership contests take on a policy dimension that colours the personnel choice being made.

Finally, responsiveness raises the issue of the politics of leadership removal as well as selection. When the party in public office chose the leader they also had the authority to remove them. Institutionalizing control of leadership selection in the party on the ground also gives it the right to remove the leader. But the decentralized stratarchical
structure, and the volatile membership in autonomous local associations, makes any membership vote to remove a leader an unwieldy and lengthy process. Canadian parties schedule regular votes at two year intervals but the dynamics of this process are little different from those of the selection process, and although existing leaders have considerable advantages in marshalling their supporters, forces pushing for a leadership challenge are free to organize and mobilize on the ground anytime.

Real political difficulties can arise when a leader loses the confidence of the party in public office. While the parliamentary caucus does not have the formal power to remove a leader, recent experience suggests that it is extremely difficult for a leader to continue once it is clear that he has lost the confidence of the party in public office. Leaders can seek to force a vote in the party on the ground but the cost in internal party conflict – infecting the party from centre to periphery – is high. The Liberal Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien, simply resigned in this situation rather than face a vote of the party on the ground, where his opponents had been mobilizing the membership against him, which he was not confident he could win.

Candidate Nomination

The route to the party in public office is through a localized nomination process managed by the party on the ground and to which even sitting parliamentarians must submit before every general election. For over a decade there has not been a candidate elected who had not first been nominated by one of the major political parties. The regionalization of the party system makes this process the major hurdle for election to Parliament in many parts of the country. For example, in recent general elections the Conservatives have won more than 90 per cent of the electoral districts in Alberta, the Liberals a similar proportion in Ontario. Thus the relevant party nomination contests in those provinces have been the most important elections in those provinces and winning them has been tantamount to election to Parliament.

Tradition and form say that local party members are free to choose their own candidate. In practice, the relationship between centre and periphery is similar to that in leadership selection. While candidates are selected (and incumbents reselected or replaced) in open meetings of the local membership, central party is not absent from the process. By statute, the party leadership must formally acknowledge the identity of each local candidate (for ballot identification purposes) and this effectively provides the centre
with an ultimate veto over local decisions. Though this legal authority has been used sparingly, its availability, and the demonstrated willingness of party leaders to use it, provides those who dominate the party in public office with a tool for influencing local candidate selection decisions.

For the most part, central intervention in candidate selection amounts to rather benign attempts to ensure some order and consistency to the process across the country. Such provisions typically include rules dictating the timing of nomination meetings, establishing membership cut-off dates, standardizing membership fees (the cost of participation), setting a minimum age (in most parties below the legal voting age), and formulating residency. And some parties have gone further and sought to set rules that would favour the selection of female or minority group candidates. The real autonomy local associations possess means that the application of these provisions is often left in the hands of those who control the party on the ground. Leaders will use their veto to deny a party candidacy to those seen as politically undesirable though its very existence is often enough to discourage such candidates or their local associations. Thus it is the rare case when a candidate, chosen by the party on the ground, is formally rejected by the centre. In some cases, such interventions are welcomed by long-time party members when they have seen their local association swamped by the mobilization of thousands of instant members recruited to support the nomination of some outsider who is simply seeking a desirable nomination. In other cases, however, central interventions can be costly by provoking the local executive to quit in protest, leaving the party with no local leadership and organization on the eve of an election. This tension ensures that the relationship between the candidate nomination interests of the centre and the grassroots is always a delicate balance.

In recent elections, the governing Liberal party has gone further, changing its national constitution to allow the leader to name some local candidates. In 1993, and again in the post 2004 period, the leader used this authority to guarantee the renomination of all incumbent Liberal MPs, thus providing extraordinary protection to members of the party in public office from the normal vicissitudes of the nomination process. This undoubtedly allowed the party leader to bolster his position in the caucus, but more importantly ensured that MPs could devote most of their energy to the work of the party in public office rather than spending their time bolstering their position in the party on the ground.
where others might be seeking to take their place. Liberal leaders have also used their authority to simply appoint a few favoured candidates thus depriving the local association of its right to choose its own candidate. In most cases the appointment of a candidate by the party leadership is strongly resented by the local party members and can become a significant issue in the subsequent constituency campaign.

Nomination contest dynamics are not significantly different from those of leadership selections. The rules for participation, like those for leadership votes, are modest: individuals must join before some assigned cut-off date, pay a membership fee, travel to a central constituency location, and then attend a party meeting to cast their ballot. As a practical matter, there are considerable real obstacles to participation by interested individuals: party nomination contests often take place long before the call of a general election so that, coupled with early membership cut-off dates and the little publicity they generally attract, nominations inevitably pass before many possible participants know about them. Where nominations are contested, candidates have strong incentives to mobilize locals into the party for the single purpose of supporting their nomination. Candidates may attract supporters from distinctive groups or interests in their local community, and thus indirectly reflect the policy preferences of those groups, but by-in-large nomination contest outcomes are more likely to simply reflect the comparative organizational ability of the candidates to turn out personal supporters at a meeting. Participation rates are not particularly robust. The available evidence suggests that while a few contests at every election draw several thousands, the typical contested nomination attracts just a few hundred. And the majority of nominations go by acclamation – either because they are politically undesirable or because an incumbent dominates the organization of the local party machine. Overall, perhaps about two per cent of the electorate participates in these selections, many of which effectively determine who is returned to parliament.

It is difficult to be precise about the extent to which the nomination process is inclusive – the degree to which the parties use it to integrate new Canadians into party and democratic life. While we do not know much about the socio-demographic characteristics of those who participate in nomination contests, there is considerable anecdotal evidence of significant nomination-directed mobilization in ethnic communities, a practice that appears as old as the country itself. These kinds of cohesive, often
hierarchical, networks offer candidates the opportunity to build alliances with community leaders who can deliver large blocks of supporters. Every election campaign generates media reports of hotly contested nomination campaigns in which long-time party supporters complain about an influx from a particular community joining simply to vote for their preferred candidate. Survey evidence suggests that very few of these new recruits retain their party membership in the aftermath of the nomination contest indicating that grassroots party organizations do not manage to include these groups in continuing party activity.

This decentralized nomination process does not produce a group of candidates that are representative of Canadian society. As Table 2 illustrates, none of the major parties comes close to nominating a representative number of female candidates. There is little systematic data for recent contests, but studies in both 1988 and 1993 revealed that two-thirds of party associations had no female candidate in their local nomination contest. Given that voters do not discriminate against female candidates (as indicated by the last column in the table) it would appear that the low level of female members of parliament reflects a supply problem – not enough women are standing for nominations in the party on the ground. Information on the number of visible minority candidates nominated is somewhat sketchier but best estimates are that, compared to their presence in the electorate, disproportionately small numbers of party nominees are members of a visible minority community.

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The parties have different philosophies, and hence take different approaches, to attracting candidates from under represented groups. Some do nothing, while others are quite aggressive in actively prodding their local associations to recruit women to run for a nomination. The difficulty from the perspective of the wider party is that the stratarchical structure provides them with little control over their nomination contests. While they can,
and often do, set targets for the number of women to be nominated, they are not in a position to force particular associations to nominate a women, or member of some minority group. The result is that the nomination decision is made by the party on the ground in over 300 distinctive and uncoordinated decisions. Party leaders regularly indicate that they wish their party would nominate more female candidates so that the party in public office would be more inclusive and representative. But given an electoral system with a district magnitude of one, and a party structure in which the party on the ground is neither isolated from the nomination process nor easily manipulated, there is little the leadership can do.

In those instances where there is an open nomination contest, the candidate the structure and process ensures that the final choice is highly responsive to the wishes of those local members of the party on the ground who participate in it. And the process is so open that it is easily penetrated, and captured, by almost any group willing to commit the energy and resources to a contest. That said, the great majority of local nomination contests are ultimately personality-centred competitions – they do not involve a significant policy debate among the candidates, and there is little opportunity for significant policy differences to manifest themselves in any meaningful way during the campaigns.

**Policy Determination**

There is little of consequence to say about policy study and development within Canadian political parties – little of it occurs. The party in public office, and particularly its leader, has traditionally been allowed the power and authority to determine policy and the membership has never been assigned any significant role in it. All of the parties hold occasional delegated conventions at which policy and program resolutions are debated and voted on. Despite pious declarations that these conventions are the “highest authority in the party” and that “basic policies shall be established in national convention”, the decisions taken in them not binding on the parliamentary party and are routinely, and expectedly, ignored at the convenience of the leadership. This is central to the basic centre-periphery bargain that orders the stratarchical relationship in the parties. Coupled to the extremely high level of party discipline in the Canadian parliament, this leaves little opportunity for partisans on the ground to enforce any policy responsiveness from the party in public office.
None of the Canadian parties have policy foundations like those found in many of the western European parties, and there are very few formal connections between the parties and otherwise independent policy groups. In between the highly orchestrated policy conventions that typically occur once during a four year election-cycle, there is no significant opportunity for rank-and-file members to participate in policy study and development within their party. Thus, it is not surprising that survey research finds that members of all the major Canadian parties are dissatisfied with the role they play in policy making within their party. In each case, members think the process is too elite dominated and believe that the grassroots members have less influence than they should. And this sentiment is not lost on voters. By more than a three-to-one margin, voters believe that belonging to an interest group was a more effective way of working for change than joining a political party (Gidengil et al. 2004: 131; Young & Everitt 2004: 30).

Members’ lack of interest in, or alienation from, a role in party policy formation could be seen in the run-up to a policy convention held by the (minority) governing Liberal party in March of 2005. News reports regularly indicated that, even in Ontario the home to over half of the parliamentary caucus, only a handful of the party faithful were turning up at local meetings to discuss policy resolutions in preparation for the national convention. The data on members’ views of the significance of the role they play in party policy-making, suggest that this indifference is not a result of a lack of interest in public policy but rather a reflection of the widely understood view that members’ participation in party policy processes has little influence on the policy decisions taken by the party in public office.

Party policy as enunciated during election campaigns is determined by the leader and his personal entourage of campaign operatives. The policy focuses, and the specific positions taken, reflect the views of the leader and his or her reading of the political landscape; members of the party on the ground typically play no role in this. In between elections, leaders and the associates and staff closest to them, continue to dominate policy formation though there is opportunity for the parliamentary caucus to have some influence over it and its implementation. This relationship between a leader and the caucus on policy development varies with the electoral strength of the leader and his shifting relationship with the caucus. There is inevitably a dynamic tension in relationship
which works to the advantage of the leader when the party is in office but can shift towards the caucus when it is in opposition.

Ordinary party members can only expect to influence policy through their gatekeeping role which allows them to shape the composition of the party in public office through a sporadic series of unconnected nomination decisions and in leadership choices. These are necessarily blunt instruments to be wielded only occasionally. Their very crudeness means that when taken up they can not be safely ignored by the parliamentary caucus and its leadership. The result is a party in public office that, despite its easy dominance of policy decision-making, must remain attentive to the political impulses from its ground.

Conclusion

We started this paper concerned with the problem of whether modern political parties were, or could be, in any real way democratic organizations. This is a central, if elusive dimension of any assessment of the place of parties themselves in working democracies for there is not any clear agreement on whether parties must themselves be internally democratic if a system based on party competition is to be judged democratic. The presumption of the Katz & Mair paradigm is that, whatever their past, modern parties are no longer democratic institutions. This state of affairs is the result of the triumph of the party in public office over the other two principal faces of the party – its central office and its membership on the ground. They concede that there are two ‘democratic’ possibilities – the first requiring a plebiscitary style of politics, the second depending upon a stratarchical organizational structure. Given that the first leaves the party membership manipulated, and the second leaves it alienated, neither seems to provide for a genuinely democratic party.

Canadian parties have long been essentially stratarchical organizations and so provide us with an empirical case by which we might assess the prospects for internal democracy in such a party. Our review of three central internal activities suggest that, on balance, party members in these quite decentralized organizations are neither alienated nor manipulated by the parliamentary caucus and leadership. With just two faces to these parties the centre and the peripheries find themselves deeply entwined in a set of
dynamic interactions in which both seek to maximize their influence and authority. This is not to claim that the party establishment in parliament does not try to shape and control their local members’ role in party decision-making and nor deny it generally manages to get its way. It is simply to recognize that the party on the ground is able to use its authority over personnel to have a direct influence on two aspects of immediate importance to the party in public office – its membership and its leadership. This forces the parliamentary party to continually engage with, and work through, its membership. The party leadership and elected elite’s dominance over policy is clear enough, but here too it is open to indirect challenges through the membership on the ground. The balance of influence continually shifts over time and from one sphere of activity to another: engagement is not alienation – no one is ‘stuck’ on the ground, members are not impotent, and neither face of the party is free from attempts by the other to manipulate outcomes to their advantage.

But are these parties democratic organizations? The standards of the Canadian Democratic Audit suggest they need be participatory, inclusive and responsive – not only to their own membership but also in terms of the wider society the link to the institutions of government. And here the judgments get more complex. The very character of their memberships – open, volatile and continually being reshaped – that is a central reality of the way in which the periphery interacts with the centre makes it difficult to be clear on just what constitutes the party on the ground, who really are the members. Their cadre-style structure creates an organization that is often little more than a shifting ‘agglomeration of local parties’. Yet it is a party in which genuine authority is vested in those who choose to participate in them, individual associations are open and easily penetrated by any group prepared to make a modicum of effort, and important personnel decisions are responsive to those who participate. In this immediate sense these stratarchical parties appear to be more democratic than the bureaucratized cartel parties of Western Europe with their larger memberships and the formalities of their internal politics.

Opinion evidence indicates that Canadians think parties are necessary for democracy. However, despite considerable opportunities for significant participation few, and increasingly fewer, Canadians are participating in national political parties. Despite the party’s openness, and the regular attempts by many in them to mobilize a larger and
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more representative base, they remain the preserve of a particularly narrow segment of an increasingly diverse electorate. Responsive to their own electoral interests the parties are rejected by most voters as effective instruments for democratic political action. As they are now organized and operate, these parties do not appear to enhance the quality and character of democratic life for most Canadians.

References


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1 In a number of instances mass proto-parties emerged before the expansion of the franchise and in some instances were responsible for driving franchise change. The classic case is Daniel O’Connell’s catholic emancipation association in Ireland in the 1820s and 1830s.

2 There is much in the data collected by Pat Seyd and Paul Whiteley (1992, 1994) on British party members that would cast doubt on this easy assumption.

3 Parties in a range of other countries— Ireland, New Zealand, and Australia suggest themselves—can be analyzed in similar terms. See Carty (2004).

4 The social democrats (organized as the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation from 1933 and as the New Democratic Party after 1960) sought to build a mass style party organization. Given they based their organization on their provincial parties they never effectively had a single party in central office. Despite success in four provinces, the party has never been a serious contender for national public office.

5 The Canadian Democratic Audit is a multi-author project based at the Centre for Canadian Studies at Mount Allison University. The first 6 of a projected 10 volumes have been published by UBC Press, with 3 more in press. Details of the project can be found in the forward of each study.

6 Much of the detail in the following accounts of the three party activities is drawn from W. Cross’ (2004) Democratic Audit volume on Canadian parties. Detailed references to party practice can be found there and in Carty, Cross and Young (2000).

7 These four provinces contain about 85% of the country’s population.

8 One candidate in 1997, and another in 2004, was elected as an independent but in both cases they had served in the prior parliament as an MP of a major party, first coming to office through the party nomination process.

9 These phrases are, for example, taken from the Liberal party constitution and are as specific as that document gets.