We propose a workshop on political party leadership selection and removal.

Adopting the phrase ‘presidentialization’ of party politics, Poguntke and Webb (2005) argue that party leaders are becoming increasingly important. They suggest that leaders are accumulating power and influence in all three phases of party activity: legislative, electoral and organizational. Whether or not one accepts this argument, there is no denying that party leaders occupy a central place in western democracies (Marsh 1993, McAllister 1996, Leduc 2001). The influence leaders have within their parties, and more broadly on public decision making, makes questions of how they are selected and removed crucial to any enquiry about who wields democratic influence. Thus we propose a workshop focusing on the changing methods of party leadership selection and removal, the implications of these, and the origins of their adoption.

Questions relating to the internal distribution of power date back to the earliest literature on political parties (Michels 1911). Every model of party organization, be it the cadre, mass, catch-all, electoral professional, cartel or franchise model, highlights the relative strength of different groups of party actors (Kirchheimer 1966, Pannebianco 1988, Katz and Mair 1995, Carty 2004). Most of this literature highlights candidate selection and pays less attention to leadership selection. This likely results from there being less change in the distribution of power in this area of party decision-making until relatively recently.

Emerging research suggests that in recent years the three faces of party organization identified by Katz and Mair (1993) – on the ground, in central office and in elected office – have in many western democracies been involved in a struggle for authority in leadership selection. And, while not nearly universal, there is clear evidence of an ongoing shift in authority away from the parliamentary party towards grassroots members in leadership politics (Kenig 2009, Wauters forthcoming, Cross and Blais forthcoming, Leduc 2001, Cross 1996). These developments vary across parties but increasingly include formal involvement of a party’s grassroots membership in the leadership selection and removal process. This is consistent with suggestions that declining rates of party membership (Mair and van Biezen 2001) and public confidence (Dalton and Wattenberg 2001) lead parties to provide more internal decision making authority to their grassroots as an incentive to membership and to present a public image of being open and ‘democratic’ (Scarrow, et al, 2001, Mair 1994, Seyd 1999, Ignazzi, et al, 2005 and Scarrow 1999).

The first objective of the workshop is to document these changes in party organization. In this regard we are interested in establishing how widespread these developments are and what are the different forms of membership involvement in leadership politics (for example, selection through one member one vote, an electoral college, or at a delegated party conference). We are then interested in better understanding the motivations for
change and what factors result in the specific types of reform adopted. In this sense we propose to build on the literature relating to party organizational reform (for example, Harmel 2002, Harmel and Janda 1994, Deschouwer 1992, Panebianco 1988, Wilson 1980). We are also interested in cases on no change: why have some parties, like Fianna Fail in Ireland, resisted change while all other parties in their system have embraced it; and, why have most parties in some systems, notably Australia and New Zealand, generally resisted these reforms?

We suspect that the form of party leadership selection and removal has important implications for internal party democracy and the relative influence and security of the party leader. Mair (1994) has suggested that the expansion of the leadership selectorate beyond activist elites serves to strengthen the leader’s position as the more disparate general membership (or conference delegates) are harder to mobilize against him/her than is the parliamentary group (witness the current case of Labour’s Gordon Brown in the UK). Given that more expansive methods of selection have now been in place for several decades in some systems (for example, Belgium, Canada, the UK) it should be possible to empirically test this observation. In this sense we speak to the literature by Mair, and others, arguing that leaders may seek to empower the broader membership as a way of undercutting the authority of mid-level elites.

We are also interested in whether the objectives of parties undertaking these reforms have been met, particularly the question of whether these processes have successfully engaged the broader membership in party activity and whether leaders chosen through these methods have performed better or worst electorally. Other related questions include the impact of party selection and removal rules on the types of candidates who seek leadership positions and on the outcomes. We agree with Massicotte, et al, (2004, 3) that “winning in a game hinges to a large extent on the rules of the game,” and thus suspect that rule changes may impact on who contests and wins leadership contests.

The most recent cross national collection on this question is a 1993 special edition of the European Journal of Political Research edited by Marsh. This collection, quite useful at its time, is now dated and is limited by its country-by-country approach as opposed to a comparative, thematic one. There have also been a few journal articles written on the expansion of the leadership selectorate focusing primarily on the Canadian, Irish and UK cases (for example, Carty and Blake 1999, Fitzgerald, et al, 2004, Leduc 2001, and McSweeney 1999). More recently, others such as Wauters, Lisi and Cross and Blais have written on the subject and Kenig has most recently published two broadly comparative articles on this topic. We see this recent literature as evidence of scholarly interest in the subject.

Another development that would be facilitated by the workshop is the broadening of the scope of research in this area beyond Western democracies. Relatively few studies have been published on leadership selection in more recently democratized countries. Pieces on Central and Eastern Europe remain rare though it has been shown by the work of Van Biezen (2003) among others that studying parties in this region could enrich our knowledge. Their relations to the state and to civil society are very much different than in
established western democracies. A deeper look at leadership selection in these party systems would be particularly welcomed.

We suspect that many scholars interested in questions of party organization, intra party democracy, leadership recruitment and generally in questions of democratization and the relationship between state-wide and party democracy are interested in questions relating to this topic. We believe that these recent developments in party organization, occurring in parties in many democracies, present an important set of questions that are worthy of examination in an ECPR workshop.

We encourage papers from different methodological and theoretical perspectives. Empirical papers may be case studies of change in an individual party or party system, may examine one aspect of this topic from a comparative perspective, and more conceptually based papers might consider the democratic implications of these changes and how they relate to the place of parties within a democratic state.

List of potential participants

The following scholars are engaged in research related to this topic. Our expectation is that most of them, and others unknown to us, would apply for participation in the workshop.

Ofer Kenig, Israel  Bram Wauters, Belgium  
Marco Lisi, Portugal  Oscar Barbera, Spain  
Kenneth Carty, Canada  Thomas Poguntke, Germany  
Paul Webb, United Kingdom  Lawrence Leduc, Canada  
Thomas Quinn, United Kingdom  Timothy Heppel, United Kingdom  
Georgia Kernell, United States  Pat Lyons, Czech Republic  
Kevin Rafter, Ireland  Nicole Bolleyer, United Kingdom  
Ruud Koole, Netherlands  Anika Gauja, Australia  
Paul t’Hart, Australia  Emilie van Haute, Belgium

The proposal has received the endorsement of the ECPR Standing Group on Political parties, confirming the interest of the scientific community for a workshop on the selection of party leaders.

Biographical note on the workshop directors

Jean-Benoit Pilet is assistant-professor in political science at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. He works mainly on political parties, elections, electoral systems, candidate selection and Belgian politics. He is the author of articles in Electoral Studies, Representation, Comparative European Politics, Regional and Federal Studies, Politics, Environmental Politics, Ethnopolitics, Res Publica and la Revue française de science politique.
William Cross is Professor and Bell Chair in Parliamentary Democracy at Carleton University in Ottawa Canada. His current research is on political parties, democratic institutions and electoral systems. His work has appeared in many journals including Party Politics, Political Research Quarterly, The Canadian Journal of Political Science and The Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties. His book The Politics of Party Leadership Selection is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

References


Scarrow, Susan, Paul Webb and David Farrell (2001), From Social Integration to Electoral Contestation: The Changing Distribution of Power within Political Parties,


