

Broadening Participation

Thinking Beyond Party Membership

newpoliticsnetwork





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New Politics Network Policy Paper
September 2003

New Politics Network
6 Cynthia Street
London N1 9JF

Published: September 2003

Editing, design and layout: Benjamin Linsley

Cover image: Getty Images

Additional material: Emily Robinson, Peter Facey & Benjamin Linsley

Printed: Halstan & Co. Ltd., Amersham, Bucks, HP6 6HJ

Distributed: Warnes Mail Marketing Ltd, London

ISBN 0 9545982 1 0

The opinions in this paper reflect those of the individual authors only.

Foreword



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Political Parties have to think of new ways of engaging the public if we are to represent our communities effectively. In doing so we will need to be prepared to rethink our party structures, rules and some of our traditions to draw in new generations of people who wouldn't otherwise go anywhere near political parties.

In recent years, for example, the Labour Party has developed its policy-making process through the Partnership in Power process. Before Partnership in Power, only a handful of members engaged in sticking together policy composites at conference. Today, thousands of members (and non-members) in hundreds of constituency Labour parties are helping to construct our manifesto for the future.

But just because Partnership in Power is important, it doesn't mean that there is no room for improvement. We have changed a lot over the past two years – more engagement in local Labour parties, documents more open and accessible, policy commissions with clearer work programmes – but there is much more for us to do. It is vital that we continue to bring more investment into the process of engaging our members in policy making, seeking out new ideas, reinvigorating our values. This is a real challenge.

It is vital that we can transform our political structures – too often Party politics are perceived as monolithic, bureaucratic, a one-size-fits-all model. Our challenge is to move from servicing a bureaucracy with a decreasing number of activists, to servicing a community with an increasing number of members. If we fail the danger is that we are left marooned on a political island where we talk to each other in a language which only we understand. While at the same time, in our communities, alienation is our biggest enemy and becomes a breeding ground for the Far Right.

I am determined that the Labour Party will find new ways of campaigning, new ways of building relationships, and new ways of putting across our values as the shared values of the communities we seek to represent. To achieve this, we need to assist our local parties to make generic changes in their structures and their way of working so that they reflect the local circumstances in which they operate. We need to invest in recruitment and the personal development of our members' skills and capacities.

We also need to invest and find new ways of engaging our ethnic communities. And we must continue the process of providing increasing access for women and people from ethnic minorities in the public arena – as Members of Parliament, councillors or on public bodies. Furthermore we need to find better ways of engaging with youth and to have a policy platform which relates to their aspirations.

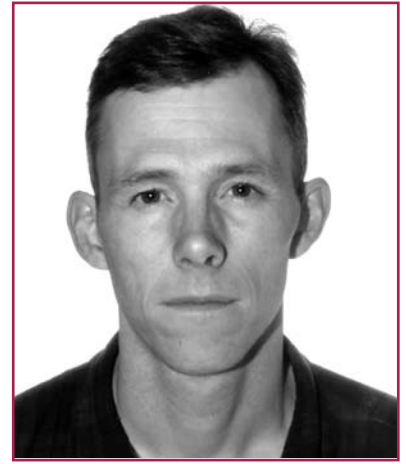
The challenges of facing out into our communities and reaching out beyond our members are huge. But if we fail to address these challenges and become irrelevant and obsolete, the challenges we face in the future will be greater still.



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Why bother? Bucking the party membership market in Britain



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Parties, we are told, are broke and need fixing. Like TV networks too used to their cosy oligopolies to be able to compete effectively in the contemporary digital age, they're losing audience share and the creative talent is going elsewhere. They are, if we believe some of the antiparty propaganda, hollowed-out hulks, close to being completely washed-up. At the very least, they seem to be having trouble convincing people they're really up to the job anymore.

But before we pension parties off or, alternatively, think about how to help them cope with, if not regain, the hegemony they once enjoyed, we need to think about what is it we expect them to do. At a minimum, their job description would include the following:

- representing socially or culturally significant interests at the same times as aggregating their contending or contradictory preferences;
- structuring an otherwise bewildering array of choices available to voters at parliamentary and local elections which, by their very presence, they render competitive and for which they recruit candidates;
- facilitating the formation of governments that produce

relatively co-ordinated and coherent policy responses to perceived and real problems;

- and effectively mediating between millions of citizens and a state that might otherwise act exclusively in the interest of those it employs and those whose economic clout gives them (rightly or wrongly) a disproportionate say in its direction.

Doing all of these tasks equally well would be a tall order for any institution. But if parties are falling down on some, that doesn't mean they're failing completely. Indeed, if, following political scientists like Stefano Bartolini and Peter Mair, we divide parties' functions into two - on the one hand, 'representative' functions and, on the other, 'procedural' or 'institutional' - then there is a case for saying that they manage the latter reasonably effectively.

Electoral choices, for instance, may be less well-defined, but they are still broadly structured and contests are basically competitive and rarely won by default for lack of people fool enough to want to stand. Governments are formed reasonably quickly (indeed virtually overnight in our Westminster system) and only the most hardened pessimist and cynic would argue that they don't at least try to tackle issues of short and long

term concern in a fairly consistent and hopefully successful manner, and with more two-way communication between state agencies and citizen-consumers than we would have dreamed of just a decade or so ago.

Where parties are falling down - or at least falling short of our expectations - is on representation. Indeed, as Bartolini and Mair among others point out, this is in some ways the essence of the dilemma they, and we, face. It is still the case that, in the absence of any better alternatives, 'modern democracy', as American political scientist, E.E. Schattsneider, famously put it sixty years ago, 'is unthinkable save in terms of political parties'. Yet parties, to borrow a phrase from a rather more contemporary European thinker, Phillippe Schmitter, are 'not what they were'.

The march of globalisation and multi-level governance doesn't yet seem to have impacted too seriously on their ability to do the procedural or instrumental stuff (though Schmitter has his doubts about even this side of things). But they seem to have lost whatever confidence, let alone affection, they used to command from the people, whom - in theory anyway - they are supposed to represent.

While, as my Sussex colleague Paul Webb has shown, the evidence for this apparent crisis isn't quite as alarming (and definitely not quite as straightforward) as some suggest, no one would argue that the figures look good. Aside from both the well-known decline in trust of governments and politicians and the much shakier evidence of a long term drop in turnout, data collated by Webb suggests that for over a decade some two-thirds of the electorate has remained cynical about the motives of parties, believing they're only in it for the votes. He also shows that since 1964 and 2001, the number of people with very strong party attachments fell from 44% to 13%, indicating what in the jargon would be called a significant erosion of partisan affinity.

The evidence on party membership is just as damning. In the early sixties, educated guesses suggest, almost 10% of voters could be called members of the three main parties. Now the figure would be under 2% - a drop of 80%. Worse, detailed survey research by Patrick Seyd and Paul Whitely points to a spiral of declining activism among those who do join.

None of this is unique to the UK. Research by Peter Mair and Ingrid van Biezen, and by America's foremost authority on the whys and wherefores of party membership, Susan Scarrow, show that, while some countries tend to have higher memberships than others, all have experienced pretty steep declines. Interestingly, though, it looks as if the decline has been going on for decades from a high point in the 1950s.

In fact, there is good reason to argue that the levels of participation that proponents of party revitalisation would like us to get back to were a historically-specific blip rather than a norm to which we can't possibly hope to return. The mass party, normally of the left or the Christian Democratic centre-right, was the product of its time - a 'golden age'

when large-scale industrialisation brought organised workers together to exercise a right to vote they had only just won (or won back) and in an age where religion still counted for something, where the welfare state and mixed economy were still to play for, and where there was not so much to distract people, either in terms of leisure opportunities or less conventional political activity.

Before this golden age, politics was contested by so-called 'cadre parties' of local or national 'notables', only some of which (the Conservative Party being a case in point) bothered to build up a membership - and even they avoided giving it any say in what the party actually did in parliament and government. It may be that, as campaigns and communications become ever more direct and sophisticated, we are seeing as Dutch political scientist Ruud Koole has suggested, the transformation of the mass party into the 'modern cadre party'.

Though not quite what many political scientists rather too casually label 'cartel parties' - parties that rely so much on the state that their connection with civil society becomes tenuous to non-existent - these 'electoral professional' parties may see little point in members beyond what modicum of money and legitimacy they still provide. Efficient, strong, election-winning organisation doesn't rely on membership any more.

All of which makes you think... by focusing on decline and what to do about it, aren't we begging the question? Are we really so sure that we need to worry about membership? As Paul Webb has noted, the decline of mass membership needn't bother anybody with a 'thin' or Schumpeterian conception of democracy as a functionally helpful competition between two or more teams that takes some account of voter

preferences. Only 'participationists' with a 'thick' conception of democracy - often left-wingers who look at US politics and think there but for the grace of mass membership go we - need lose sleep. Put bluntly, does membership, in and of itself, really matter?

The answer is it may do, not least because the separation between representative and procedural functions is only an analytical one. In fact, the one may depend on the latter: An obvious link is recruitment: it may be possible in the US for parties to shoulder tap and parachute sufficient candidates of merit to act as local and national legislators, but they operate in institutions that can function without the levels of party discipline that allow parliamentary rather than presidential democracies to do their day-to-day work. In Britain and Europe, we need councillors, MPs and even MEPs who, to put it bluntly, are socialised into toeing the line when it comes to the crunch. Otherwise governments cannot form, will not last and won't get policy through parliament. Moreover, membership and progression through the party offers one way in to politics to those whose background, ethnicity and gender may otherwise make it difficult for them. All classes need new blood, even the political class.

Another link between the representative and the procedural is the need for policy coherence and consistency that can only come through some minimal ideological underpinning. Without members to uphold this and keep leaders somewhere near to the mark, they risk becoming even more ad hoc, poll-driven and simply responsive than they already are. And the programmes they present to electorates will be even harder to distinguish, decreasing turnout (especially among the young, the badly-off and the undereducated) to the extent that, as in the US, policy becomes divorced from the needs of a substantial minority of the

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“A system of primary elections should be introduced for all incumbent candidates. At present a very small number of local party members have the power to choose the candidate in almost all seats. In many safe seats this power is far more important than the vote itself. A primary would mean that all voters in a constituency would vote from a field of candidates put forward by the incumbent MP's party. If a candidate in a safe seat resigns in the immediate run-up to an election 500 voters should have the right to delay the election in their constituency until a primary has taken place.”

Frank Field MP, in a lecture at the Reform Club in June 2001

population.

Finally, membership - especially if spending is capped - can still be an important source of finance. This not only renders less necessary the kind of state funding that could turn apathy toward politicians into antipathy. It also means parties may be rather less desperate to get the kind of corporate funding that calls into question the objectivity and the quality of the policy decisions they make.

So, having established members have some functional worth, what is to be done?

Social theorists are fond of discussing, though less good at solving, what they like to call the 'structure-agency problem'. How much can be explained by the environment in which an actor operates and how much of what happens is down to what that actor actually does? Marx caught the dilemma nicely when he noted that "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past."

During much of the twentieth century, some of Marx's more slavish or simplistic followers failed to pick up on the first part of his epigram. They may still have been fond of naming and shaming the odd class enemy or traitor, but few doubted that ultimately we were all victims or representatives of systems and forces we could do little (without the aid of a revolution anyway) to escape.

In the opposite camp to the collectivists who over-stressed structure were individualists who

overvalued agency, who subscribed, for instance, to various 'great man' theories of history: 'were it not for Winston Churchill, we'd never have won the war' etc. etc.

Nowadays things seem a little more complicated - and rightly so. Does anyone really think, for example, that, but for Margaret Thatcher, we'd still have free school milk, a nationalised coal industry or publicly-owned utilities? On the other hand, if it wasn't for Tony Blair would we really be in Iraq right now? Both Macmillan's 'events, dear boy, events' and Fukuyama's 'the end of history' have combined to put paid to any lingering certainty regarding the supremacy of structure over agency, or, for that matter, its opposite.

Most of us realise, either intuitively or intellectually, that structure matters as much as agency and vice versa. We also realise that, as best expressed by Tony Giddens in his pre-pet-guru days, there is clearly a reciprocal relationship between the two: structure may constrain agency, but it cannot preclude it, nor can it remain unchanged, since the infinite individual acts that unconsciously reproduce it are performed by beings and institutions that are inevitably human not robotic.

The contemporary dilemma for political parties likewise has to be understood as a relationship between structure and agency, between an environment they have to live in and choices they have to make. Merely trying to understand how parties got themselves into the mess they seem to be in misses at least half the story. Blaming the parties for their own misfortunes ignores fifty years of social change whose impact on all our lives, our life-styles and our life-chances has been massive. How could

parties have escaped unscathed?

As with diagnosis, so with prescription. It is only human to want to do something rather than sit idly by, especially when political parties - nowadays pretty permeable institutions - are the most obvious place to start. But any politician or pundit coming up with some kind of self-improvement cure for political parties is doomed to failure. No party, after all, is an island entire of itself. All are part of an interactive and interdependent political, social and economic system. Change in one part of that system, even presupposing it can be achieved, may well be cancelled out by change in another part.

Rather more indirect treatment, based not so much on assisting parties but on manipulating the system or environment in which they operate - helping them to help themselves, as it were - may indeed help. But it is no more likely to bring surefire, let alone swift, results than the direct approach. Employing direct and indirect approaches simultaneously may well enhance efficacy. But it can never completely get us round the twin problem of too many variables and too much room for unintended consequences.

Reformers are also handicapped by the fact that, as is so often the case in politics (and indeed economics), they are proposing an institutional answer to what may be a cultural question. While there is of course a link between institutions and culture, experience suggests that there is at the very least a time lag between changes in the former and changes in the latter. There will be no quick fixes, even presuming there are any fixes at all.

This is not necessarily a counsel of despair. It's more a note of caution or a kind of caveat emptor. Before buying into anything, we need not only to check that those making them have established a convincingly rounded diagnosis, but also that their proposed treatment obeys the political equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath's prime directive - 'First, do no harm'.

To be worth a second look, let alone merit serious consideration by those in a position to change things, any proposal must firstly at least acknowledge - albeit implicitly - the interaction between structure and agency, between the wider political system and political culture, on the one hand, and parties themselves on the other. Secondly, proponents need to convince their audience that prima facie their proposal is unlikely to do any damage to parties' already fragile claim to be doing their job properly.

Some things that have already been tried in other countries - boosting the number of women candidates, having trial, discount and affiliated memberships, legally compelling parties to have democratic selection procedures - at least have the merit of meeting these two criteria. The use of primaries and the enlargement of our conception of what does and does not constitute a member

to include registered supporters probably meet them, too.

These ideas acknowledge that participation these days may have to be low-cost in terms of time as well as money. This is something that credit-card cause groups like Amnesty, Greenpeace and animal welfare societies have long since admitted and prospered from. The proposals also recognise the increasing (though not as yet determining) role of candidate-centred politics. They have, then, the considerable merit of not measuring participation according to yesterdays yardsticks. Nor do they seem likely to make anything worse. Even if primaries and registered supporter schemes fail to entice the semi-detached members thus recruited to become fully-fledged active participants, it is hard to see how they will add to the increasing numbers who feel no kind of attachment at all. Unless, of course, they lead some who would otherwise go the whole hog to remain content to stay half-in and half-out.

Primaries and registered supporters schemes may not turn the tide, but they may do something to stem it. Evidence from America, where parties have never had membership in the way that we would understand the term, seems to suggest that the proportion of people having their

say in presidential primaries has remained pretty constant since the 1960s - something that cannot be said of US figures on those attending party meetings or volunteering during campaigns.

The fact that turning up and mucking in politically has become an even less popular pastime than ever it was in the United States should come as no surprise to anyone with even a passing acquaintance with Robert Putnam's work on the decline of social capital in the USA - a decline many see mirrored in Europe. Putnam's message is not an encouraging one for anyone hoping to help parties help themselves.

Things aren't easy for groups that require people's time and effort in return for little more than a marginal boost to their social life, to their opportunities for personal development and advancement, and to their sense of doing something worthwhile, unselfish and hopefully fun. Parties in Britain can offer little more in terms of incentives than they do already. The problem of membership is primarily a problem of supply. No matter how pressing their demand for members may be - and it may not be so very pressing - parties cannot buck a market that ultimately they cannot hope to control.

Political Parties in Great Britain

Fig.1

Party Membership Fluctuations in the Post-War Period (Individual Membership)			
Year	Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrats*
1950	908,161	2,805,000**	-
1960	790,192	-	-
1970	680,191	1,750,000	234,345
1980	480,156	-	-
1983	295,344	1,200,000	145,258
1984	323,292	-	100,000
1985	313,099	-	-
1986	297,364	-	-
1987	288,829	1,000,000	79,500
1988	265,927	1,000,000	58,000
1989	293,723	750,000	82,000
1990	311,152	-	-
1991	261,233	-	-
1992	279,530	500,000	100,000
1993	266,270	-	-
1994	305,189	-	-
1995	365,110	-	-
1996	400,465	-	-
1997	405,238	400,000	100,000
1998	387,776	204,000	-
2003	c250,000		71,791

* Note that the Liberal Party 1983-88 became the Liberal Democrats in 1988

** refers to 1953

Fig.2

Public Attitudes Towards Parties (British Election Study 1997)	
"Some people say that political parties are necessary to make our political system work in Britain. Others say that political parties are not needed in Britain. Using this scale where would you place yourself?"	
Parties are ...	
necessary 1	43%
2	33%
3	18%
4	3%
not necessary 5	2%
Don't know/no response	1%

Fig. 1 - Reproduced with the kind permission of Patrick Seyd from Seyd & Whiteley (2000), p.5. Supplemented with data, for the years 2001-2003, from various additional sources.

Fig. 2 - Reproduced with the kind permission of Patrick Seyd from Whiteley & Seyd (2002b), p.11.

Social Characteristics of British Political Parties

Fig.3

	Labour Party Members who joined the party before 1994	Labour Party Members who joined the party after 1994	Labour Voters (identified through 1997 British Election Survey)
Male	60	63	49
Female	40	37	51
Aged under 26	2	7	11
Aged 26-35	10	18	19
Aged 36-45	20	22	20
Aged 46-55	26	21	19
Aged 56-65	17	15	15
Aged over 65	25	17	16
Graduates	37	30	9
Non-graduates	63	70	91

Fig.4

	Conservative Party Members	Conservative Voters (identified through 1992 British Election Study)
Male	51	45
Female	49	55
Aged under 26	1	9
Aged 26-35	4	20
Aged 36-45	11	18
Aged 46-55	17	18
Aged 56-65	24	14
Aged over 65	43	21
Age at end of full-time education: up to 16	55	64
Age at end of full-time education: 17-18	25	19
Age at end of full-time education: over 18	19	14

Fig.5

Male	55
Female	45
Aged under 26	2
Aged 26-35	5
Aged 36-45	11
Aged 46-55	23
Aged 56-65	22
Aged over 65	37
Graduate	42
Non-graduate	58

Thinking beyond party membership



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Political parties are voluntary organisations whose members and activists pay money for the privilege of belonging. Not only the parties themselves, but the country as a whole, depends upon the services of these volunteers. It is they who dedicate their time, energy and money to the survival of the party political system. They stand as candidates at election time; contribute to policy formation and, perhaps most importantly, root the parties in the communities which they hope to represent, legitimising their claim to speak for 'ordinary people'. The motives of party members are diverse and, for the most part, undocumented. They join for a variety of personal, social and political reasons and their dedication goes largely unrewarded and unremarked upon. Yet, without their efforts, the British political system would undoubtedly grind to a halt.

The number of people willing to support the party system in such a way has been in steep decline since the 1950s and it is not difficult to imagine a situation, fifty years hence, in which there is no one left to perform this vital role. Despite this, there has been no attempt either to question parties' continuing dependence on their members or to seek alternative forms of organisation.

Unlike most membership

organisations, political parties exercise real power over the lives of their fellow citizens. They have a near-total monopoly on political power in the UK. All of the members of the House of Commons are members of political parties, and it is parties that choose which candidate shall stand where. Indeed it is not hard to argue that in many constituencies the most important election is that which takes place as part of the party's selection process. Once a candidate has been chosen to stand in a safe seat, there is often little real contest left.

Over the past thirty-three years, all three main parties have opened up this process to their members, becoming more democratic and – at least in theory – more representative of the electorate as a whole. In 1976 the Liberal Party became the first party to give party members the right to elect the party leader and throughout the 1980s and 90s all parties adopted a One-Member-One-Vote (OMOV) system for key decisions. Whilst this varies across the parties (see appendixes, pp. 29-31), it is typically used to select parliamentary candidates and party leaders and in some circumstances approve policy or even manifestos.

Had this process of internal democratisation taken place in the 'golden age' of party membership, it would have meant that millions of

people would be able to participate in these decisions, instead, its effects have been undermined by plummeting membership figures. In some cases, a few hundred people are able to decide who will be elected to represent a constituency in parliament.

If we accept that membership figures are unlikely to spontaneously multiply themselves, we must face the question of whether or not this is an acceptable, or indeed sustainable, situation.

Each of our political parties has its own distinct political culture, based on history, structure and philosophy and it is important that any changes respect these. It would be unrealistic and counter-productive to recommend a one-size-fits-all organisational structure. It is important that parties find their own way to respond to the challenges thrown up by the decline in membership, but it is also important that their thinking on this matter takes place in the context of a wider debate where the 'public interest' is a significant factor.

In a recent paper on the funding of political parties, *Strong Parties: Clean Politics*, the New Politics Network argued that state funding would help parties in their fight to re-engage the electorate. In this paper, we examine the options open to parties themselves; focussing on

the ways in which reform of their internal structures and cultures could reconnect voters with the organisations that represent them. We believe that it is possible to reverse the current trend and enable more electors to have a relationship with their party of choice but in doing so, it is necessary to broaden our approach to political activity and to find ways of involving the growing pool of party supporters who may not wish to become full members.

Looking West?

The USA has a unique political system, in which parties' as organisational structures, in the European sense, do not exist. American parties do not have fee-paying members, in fact it is illegal to charge anyone to become a party member. Therefore, candidate selection is not restricted to those who have bought the right to participate; it is, to a varying degree, open to all electors. Some states operate an open-primary system in which any registered voter is able to participate in the selection of candidates for both parties. In others, the process is 'closed', i.e. limited to those who have registered their support for the party in question. This registration is free and takes place at the same time as voter-registration. A party 'member' is then anyone who registers their support for a party.

The consequences of this surpass the boundaries of what is likely to be considered acceptable in the UK. Unlike in Britain, where parties determine who is eligible to be a candidate; in the US anyone who is a registered voter can, in effect, run for the nomination, although the exact laws governing candidate selection do vary between states.

California has a population of some 33 million, around 15 million of whom are registered voters. Of these, 79% are registered supporters of either the Democratic or Republican parties.

In March 2002, just over 5 million Californians voted in primary elections. Although this represents only 35% of registered Democrats and 43% of registered Republicans, the figures are still impressive if you consider that in Britain we would regard this as an internal party selection exercise.

Importing a solution

It is always difficult to take an element of someone else's political system and say how it could be transported into your own. American political parties do not have manifestos and policies in the way that European political parties do. Party platforms in the US are in effect the policy of the individual candidate rather than the collective policy of a party. Similarly, the organisational and campaigning role, which is fulfilled by party members in Britain, is undertaken in America by the supporters of individual candidates. Strong parties are not needed in a system dominated by the might of the individual.

Our political parties are more ideologically based than American ones and their political culture and their function in our political system is different. Allowing anyone to nominate themselves to be a candidate for a party simply because they are a registered supporter would open the party to hijacking by candidates who are only interested in winning the nomination, but have no commitment to the party's principles and beliefs. This would be seen by many as an attempt to de-politicize politics at a time when many voters claim that there is already a lack of difference between the main parties.

Searching for a Mid-Atlantic solution.

Whilst we would not advocate the wholesale introduction of American-style party organisation in Britain, it does provide a valuable corrective

to the assumption that our existing system is the only possible option. The question we are seeking to provide an answer to is whether we can create a new type of relationship between voters and parties that adds something positive to the way in which parties operate?

Registered Supporters: stealing a small element.

The aim of a 'registered supporters scheme' is to create a pool of people who have a relationship with a party which is less than membership but more than simply voting. The main problem lies in identifying who these supporters are. In America, party supporters sign up when they register to vote. If this information is not collected via the registration process then it falls to parties to build up their own lists through whatever means are available to them.

If registered supporters were to be tied into the allocation of state funding, as this organisation has suggested in a previous paper, it would be particularly important to develop a formal way of registering support. Over the last few years, a number of pilot schemes have examined a variety of potential reforms to the way our electoral and democratic system functions. These have included universal postal voting, as well as telephone and email voting. Why not pilot a scheme whereby voters could voluntarily indicate their support or interest in a political party and this information could then be transmitted to the party of their choice?

Building a relationship

There are a range of ways in which parties could involve supporters. Many of these would be incredibly beneficial not only to the individual supporters, but also to the parties themselves and, ultimately, to the political system as a whole. Some of the ideas we are looking at are already in use; some are currently being piloted and others

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are completely new. An examination of all the options open to political parties in their attempts to broaden participation is long overdue and will, hopefully, inspire some innovative approaches to the very real challenge which all three main parties are now facing.

Selection of Candidates

As we have seen most UK parties now use a form of One Member One Vote to select candidates for mayoral elections, devolved assemblies / parliaments, Westminster, European elections and even to vote for the party leader. One possibility is to keep the candidate approval and short-listing process in the hands of the party membership, while opening up the voting for candidates to all members and supporters. This would help protect parties from saboteurs and the insincere, while at the same time opening party selections to thousands of potential participants.

A Resource For Parties

Supporters would provide a pool of people who could be tapped for money and help and could hopefully be recruited as members. With the continued expansion of internet use it should be possible to provide supporters with information and to allow them to interact with the party for at relatively little cost. Many parties do already provide non-members with electronic information and news but this process is still very much in its infancy.

A Different Relationship

The concept of having registered supporters is not about undermining parties, their members or their activists. It is about allowing voters to choose the type of relationship that they would like to enjoy with their chosen party. If, as many commentators believe, we are moving to 'cadre' style parties made up of a hard core of members and activists,

to the exclusion of the mass of voters and even supporters, there is a great deal to be said for offering more people a looser form of party relationship, which may be more in tune with their life-styles. The choice parties have to make is whether that looser relationship with some is better than no relationship at all.

A system could be introduced whereby voters had the option to become a registered supporter of a party during an annual process of renewing their entry on the Electoral Register. It would involve nothing more complicated than a simple tick box added to a standard form issued by local authority electoral registration officers. The form would ask each resident whether they wished to register their support for a specific political party for the period of 12 months. The form would state that certain privileges could be derived from this status; these would however be left for each party to determine themselves. The information would be collated, handed on to the Electoral Commission and then on to the national parties' headquarters. The allocation of state funding could be based upon the results, as suggested in the recent New Politics Network paper, **Strong Parties: Clean Politics**; or the figures could simply be used as a mechanism for identifying people who wish to have a relationship with a political party.

The fundamental benefit for the political system would be the creation of an incentive for all parties to engage in electorate canvassing exercises annually rather than simply immediately prior to each election. It would seem logical to assume that we would see a period each year where all parties would seek to engage and canvass the support of their local electorate. The incentive created by the attached funding - or simply by the kudos of having high supporter figures - would mean that national parties would choose to focus more resources, effort and training in

developing local canvassing activity. The occasion of the annual publication of the Electoral Register would create a state of semi-permanent campaigning, akin to the annual rise in political campaigning in the run up to the month of November in the United States. Parties would develop the habit of entering into dialogue with their local electorate on an annual basis, rather than simply every four years. They would thus once and for all be radically challenging the oft-heard criticism that: "We only ever see your face at election time!" At the same time, voters would be encouraged to continually think about their party affiliation and actively engage in the political process in the years between elections.

At the most basic level, political parties exist to fight and win elections and their structure is designed to help them do this. If a party finds a way to engage more people and make itself more representative and reflective of the public's concerns it will have a distinct competitive advantage. The Conservative party is currently experimenting with a form of primaries, as well as looking at other ways to involve people with the party. It is up to others to pick up their challenge. The stakes are high, and not just for the future nature of our parties. Ultimately - as always - it's about winning power.

New Politics Network Recommendations

Identifying Party Supporters

Most local parties already keep lists of party supporters or sympathisers. This information is based on responses given by householders to doorstep and/or telephone canvassers. As such, it is not always reliable but it does provide the best available indication of where party voters are likely to be found. Some parties use this information to target future canvassing activities, including direct mail shots, knocking up on election day, offers of transportation to the polling booths as well as membership recruitment activities. It would aid the parties tremendously if party supporters were able to formally identify themselves, effectively presenting themselves as part of a pool of sympathetic voters, open to further communication and keen to develop a relationship of some description with the party.

RECOMMENDATION: A pilot scheme, offering voters the option of formally registering their support for any party – or none – on an annual basis, when they register to vote. This would most likely be done through an optional tick box added to a standard form issued by local authority electoral registration officers.

Possible Ways to Involve Supporters in Party Activities

These suggestions are intended to form a basis for further thought and discussion; they are not a plan of action. We are not recommending that parties necessarily adopt all of them but that they consider using one or two as a way of broadening public participation in politics through the party structure, rather than outside it. Indeed, many are already used by parties either at a national or a local level. Allowing registered party supporters some of the benefits listed below would expand the numbers of people taking an active role in party politics and, by providing a gentle route into parties, would help to boost membership figures.

Use Supporters As A Sounding Board For New Ideas

Whether they wish to subscribe to a party or not, the majority of the electorate want to feel that they are being listened to. Indeed, many of the complaints associated with political disaffection are rooted in a sense of voicelessness. Policy discussions with party supporters would make them feel valued for their opinions, rather than just for their money or their votes. Parties would undoubtedly benefit from the chance to test ideas on a broadly sympathetic swathe of public opinion, giving them the chance to iron out any difficulties before presenting their ideas to the electorate as a whole.

OPTION: Invite supporters to attend policy forums/meetings

It would be particularly beneficial if such meetings were flexible and open to issues suggested by supporters. This would have the additional benefit of alerting activists and elected representatives to the concerns of voters. The Labour Party already invites representatives from relevant professions, such as healthcare, to attend appropriate policy forums.

OPTION: Invite supporters to attend local government policy forums/meetings

As well as discussions on party policy at a general level, registered supporters could make very valuable contributions to forums on local government issues. This could be through Advisory Panels, similar to those already operated by some MPs – or it could be through an opening up of mechanisms such as the Labour Party's Local Government Committees which provide a forum for discussion between party activists and local councillors.

OPTION: Invite supporters to attend party conferences

Involving supporters in the big party event of the year would not only give them a valuable insight into party culture, which may help them decide whether or not to become members; it would also help ensure that conferences remain rooted in issues which affect voters, rather than just political insiders. Ticket prices may be higher for supporters than for members, as an extra incentive to join the party.

Treat Supporters As Potential Members

If supporters feel they have a connection with their local party, they may well feel more inclined to become party members. Treating supporters as potential members not only allows parties to target a section of the community with information about party activities and events, it would also provide them with an additional funding base and help with the demands of election campaigning.

OPTION: Send regular emails and newsletters to supporters

This would assist parties in targeted canvassing and would allow supporters to feel that they had a connection with the party. It may be that they would then feel in a better position to decide to join the party.

OPTION: Invite supporters to attend social events

This could be a good way into the party for the uninitiated. It may be that they later choose to join the party to get additional benefits, such as priority booking for more popular events or subsidised tickets. Equally, they may wish to join in order to undertake more political activities. Either way, it would allow more local voters to connect with party activists, in a less intimidating environment than committee meetings and would strengthen the links which the party has with interested members of the community. Well-attended social events will also generate more funds for the parties.

OPTION: Ask supporters to assist in campaigning activities

Parties could, on the whole, use any help they can get at election time and many supporters may be glad of the chance to see how a campaign operates. Non-member volunteers do already help out in many local parties and a good proportion of them go on to become members. Creating a more formal route into this kind of activity may well substantially increase the numbers involved.

OPTION: Invite supporters to observe a limited number of party meetings

The chance to observe the activities of a party, as a prelude to joining, would be extremely advantageous. It would remove the 'behind-closed-doors' mystique and enable would-be-members to experience party culture before signing themselves up as members. Obviously, this would be restricted to politically non-contentious meetings and observers would not be granted voting rights.

OPTION: Send information about members' training courses to supporters and invite them to attend taster days

Whilst training courses should be restricted to party members, supporters could be made aware of the opportunities available to them, should they wish to become members themselves.

Accept that supporters may wish to have a different relationship with the party than that of membership

In a climate of ever-declining membership numbers, it may be necessary to look at other options. There is no evidence that people are less politically active than they were twenty or thirty years ago, but they are certainly less likely to join a party.

OPTION: Allow supporters to subscribe to specific campaigns

Allowing supporters to subscribe to specific political campaigns, whether this be at a local or a national level, could tap into the energy dedicated to single-issue politics and channel this into the existing party structure. This could prove to be especially popular with younger voters and could provide assistance and support to parties by working with the trend in political activity, rather than fighting against it. Ideally, many of these supporters would come to see that they could expend their political energies within the party system and become members.

Allow Supporters to Participate in Selection Procedures

MODEL ONE: Supporters could take part in surveys, opinion polls or mock-primaries, the results of which would be taken into account by members when selecting candidates but would not necessarily be binding. This would be a way of assessing the electability of potential candidates and giving supporters a stake in the process without undermining the role of paying members.

MODEL TWO: Supporters could be granted voting rights in closed primary elections, alongside existing party members. This would increase the stake given to supporters and would help to ensure that the candidate chosen would be attractive to a far wider section of the local or regional electorate

OPTION: Allow supporters a degree of participation in the selection of parliamentary/local government/European parliamentary and/or mayoral candidates

OPTION: Allow supporters a degree of participation in the selection of the party leader

In a political system increasingly dominated by the personality of party leaders, there would be definite advantages in opening up the selection to a wider section of the public. Voters are just as likely to be swayed by the identity of the party leader as of their parliamentary candidate, it is thus important for parties to get this selection right.

Grassroot activity in the Labour and Conservative Parties

Fig.6

Summary Measures of Activity in Grassroots Parties (percentages)				
	Labour Members 1990	Labour Members 1997	Labour Members 1999	Conservative members 1992
"How much time do you devote to party activities in the average month?"				
None	51	63	65	78
Up to 5 hours	30	25	22	14
From 5 up to 10 hours	10	6	7	4
From 10 up to 20 hours	6	3	3	2
More than 20 hours	4	3	4	2
"How active do you consider yourself to be in the party?"				
Not at all active	-	31	40	48
Not very active	-	42	35	35
Fairly active	-	19	17	12
Very active	-	8	8	5
"Are you more active or less active within the party than you were five years ago (or, for Labour members, when you joined if less than five years ago), or about the same?"				
Less active	43	29	48	25
About the same	38	53	43	58
More active	20	18	9	8
Not a member 5 years ago	-	-	-	10

The Representation Dimension of Activism (percentages)				
Stood for office within the party in the last five years	30	17	19	11
Stood for office outside the party in the last five years	15	11	13	6
Currently hold office in party	14	11	13	8
Currently hold office outside party	15	N/A	N/A	7

The Campaigning Dimension of Activity (percentage of members who frequently or occasionally did the following over the previous five years)				
Displayed an election poster in a window	86	78	76	51
Signed a petition supported by the party	89	65	60	49
Donated money to party funds	66	70	68	85
Helped with party fundraising	-	35	34	-
Delivered party leaflets	77	59	61	39
Attended a party meeting	68	46	48	-
Canvassed door-to-door on behalf of the party	55	31	32	25
Canvassed voters by telephone	-	10	13	

Compiled from: Seyd & Whiteley (2002) & Whiteley, Seyd & Richardson (1995) Reproduced with kind permission

Politics in crisis: a radical response



Paul Richards is Chair of the Fabian Society.

You sometimes still hear the old joke about the person who wanted to join the Labour Party and was told that their branch was full. Those days are long gone – it is very easy to join the Labour Party these days. On the phone, by post, on-line, the process is simple. The problem these days is finding anyone willing to join in the first place, and finding a useful role for members once they sign up.

There is a collapse in Labour Party activity at the local level, a virtual general strike amongst Labour activists, and a falling national membership. The wider political picture is just as dispiriting: a decline in traditional activity, falling electoral turnouts and party memberships, and a deep suspicion towards politicians and traditional electoral politics, particularly amongst the young. This chapter seeks to assess the problems of disengagement, analyse potential solutions such as registered supporter schemes, US-style primary elections, and new streams of state funding for parties, and offer some suggestions for new forms of party activism.

Country club democracy

Politics is in crisis, and it is failing most in the places where it is needed most. Overall turnout at the 2001 general election was 59.4%, the lowest since the introduction of the universal franchise. But this average masks the collapse of turnout in the starkest cases of 'voter strike' in England (see below).

In Scotland all the lowest turnouts, each under 50 per cent, were in inner-city Glasgow constituencies.

The pattern is depressingly clear: in inner-city working-class constituencies, still blighted by joblessness, poverty and failing public services after six years of Labour government, voting is not seen by the majority of local people as the answer to their problems. Old politics has failed the urban poor, and they are rejecting it in record numbers.

At the Ipswich by-election in November 2001 the turnout was 40.2 per cent and in the Ogmere by-election in February 2002

turnout was 35.2 per cent. If this pattern continues, electoral politics in Britain will become the preserve of the propertied middle-classes in the suburbs and the counties. We are witnessing the erosion of the universal franchise and the return to voting being based on property qualifications. The danger is a 'country club democracy' with membership limited to the affluent. In these working class areas parties, and particularly the Labour Party, have often become hollow shells run by elites. It is into this vacuum that small or extreme parties such as the Liberal Democrats or British National Party can step.

But the collapse in turnout is merely the symptom of a deeper malaise. Politics has become so deeply discredited, untrustworthy and unfashionable that for the vast majority of citizens traditional party activity is entirely alien. Political parties, once the bulwark of local democracy, the training ground for civic leaders, and the focal point for the clash of ideas, have become fossilised, invisible, and irrelevant. This must change.

2001 General Election: "Voter Strike in England"

Liverpool Riverside	34.1%	Leeds Central	41.7%
Manchester Central	39.1%	Manchester Gorton	42.7%
Salford	41.6%		

The need to connect

Only a tiny fraction of Labour voters are members of the Labour Party. At the general election in 2001, 10.7 million people voted Labour (fewer than in 1979 and 1992). Labour has about 270,000 members (down from 410,000 in the mid-nineties).

Very approximately, that means that for every 40 Labour Party voters, only one is a Labour Party member. This means that there is a huge dislocation between the Labour Party membership and Labour supporters in the majority of constituencies. But it gets worse. Because of the 270,000 Labour Party members, only a small proportion is active. If we are generous and assume that ten per cent of the party membership are active members – attending meetings, taking part in campaigns and elections – the ratio of Labour activists to Labour voters is one to 400.

The truth is that the Labour Party in most constituencies is a tiny, self-selecting clique, distinct from the mainstream of Labour voters. As the chair of a local Labour party branch, I include myself in this harsh criticism. Our branch, all six of us, meets upstairs in the Southfields Labour Club once a month and discusses schools, Iraq or the NHS. Downstairs, the club members (who represent the ward's Labour vote) chat, drink and watch the match. There is seldom any interaction between the two groups.

At the height of new Labour excess, circa 1996, it was claimed that new Labour was 'the political wing of the British people!' In 2003 such a claim seems laughable.

Labour must be a community-based party, with deep roots in local neighbourhoods, outward-facing and approachable, and engaged in a diverse range of activity. This activity should go beyond monthly meetings. It could include social events, fundraising, campaigns, public meetings, debates, citizenship training, political education, and practical activity to improve local areas such as graffiti clean-ups and litter picks. This vision for a communitarian Labour party, creating local solutions, rather than complaining about the council or government, is outlined in my Fabian Society pamphlet *Is the Party Over?* (2000).

Reconnecting with the people is vital to Labour for two reasons. The first is the obvious electoral one – Labour needs to retain strong levels of electoral support to stay in government and stop Iain Duncan Smith from becoming prime minister. The second is a deeper political rationale – our politics is anchored in the concept of extra-parliamentary activity and active citizenship as well as parliamentary action. We do not believe that progressive and radical change can come by swapping one lot of ministers with another, or by pulling the right combination of levers at the centre. To recast what Antonio Gramsci called 'the common sense of the epoch' we need mass political engagement, bold experiments, popular uprisings, and mass protests, as well as enlightened governance and competent ministers.

Registered supporters

The method most often discussed to reconnect party and voters is a system of 'registered supporters'. These would be people willing to declare themselves as Labour voters, who share Labour values, but who do not want to join the party (yet).

A system of registered supporters could:

- be a half-way house between voters and party
- create a year-round base of supporters for regular contact and feedback on policy issues
- allow direct communication between the party and/or government, and a sizeable proportion of the electorate, free from media distortion
- create a local mailing list for invitations to socials, debates, dinners and speeches
- create a pool of potential donors, election helpers and potential members

A system of registered supporters would recognise that for some people politics is all-consuming, and they are happy to spend three or four evenings a week in political meetings, but for millions of others politics is of interest and importance in their lives, but not at the expense of friends, family, football or Eastenders. The Labour Party structure works well for the former,

but offers little to the latter. Registered supporters could dip in and out of party activity, meet like-minded people, enjoy guest speakers and debates, learn about what the council, housing association, new deal for communities, sure start or NHS trust were up to, and contribute to social events and fundraisers. There could be on-line communities created around common interests. But registered supporters could not be party office holders, candidates, or delegates to the national policy forum or conference, so there would still be an incentive to become a full member to attain a full range of democratic rights. The creation of registered supporters places a huge imperative on local parties to be outward-facing and engaged with local people, and would turn the Labour party inside out.

Primary elections

Is there a role for registered supporters beyond the largely cosmetic ones outlined above? Could such a system allow participation in the choosing of party candidates and the development of primary elections?

Primary elections represent various systems which allow registered party supporters to choose who they want as their party candidate in elections with other parties. Primaries are a unique feature of US politics. They are a way of nominating party candidates by the widest possible franchise, and contrasts markedly with the UK system where parliamentary candidates can be chosen by 30 or 40 party activists (and in safe constituencies, those 40 people are de facto selecting an MP).

In the US there are two basic types of primary elections, a third type that varies, and a fourth type the US Supreme Court declared unconstitutional in 2000. In 'open primaries' voters request a ballot for a particular party regardless of their own party registration but may not cross back and forth to vote for candidates of different parties. In a 'closed primary' voters may choose only among candidates of the party in which they are registered. Those who decline to state a party preference are ineligible to vote in partisan races such as for governor, Congress and the legislature.

Ken Livingstone writing in the Independent on 11 April 2001

“A system of primary elections should be introduced for all incumbent candidates. At present a very small number of local party members have the power to choose the candidate in almost all seats. In many safe seats this power is far more important than the vote itself. A primary would mean that all voters in a constituency would vote from a field of candidates put forward by the incumbent MP’s party. If a candidate in a safe seat resigns in the immediate run-up to an election 500 voters should have the right to delay the election in their constituency until a primary has taken place.”

Frank Field MP, in a lecture at the Reform Club in June 2001

suggested: “we would only have to borrow the American practice of primary elections to be able to break the hold of the party bureaucrats over the selection of candidates. Coupled with increased devolution from Whitehall to the regions, and real proportional representation - rather than the half-baked plans of the Jenkins Commission, which would enhance the powers of the party machines - we might still be able to roll back the inevitable arrogance of governments with compliant majorities.”

Could such a system work in the UK?

In the USA, the primaries are run by the states, not by the parties. Supporters are registered by the state authorities, not the political parties, in a similar way to our own electoral register being organised by local authorities. States can choose different ways of organising their primaries. In Arizona, the 2000 Democrat Primary was conducted entirely on-line, with a third of the registered voters casting their votes.

This means that although parties have access to the information, the act of registering is between the individual and the state. This is both a product and a cause for the US system of parties being so different from the European model. Instead of standing armies of members, active all-year round, the American parties comprise mercenaries, drafted in for specific primaries and stood down once their votes are cast. US parties are sometimes described as ‘empty vessels’ for this reason.

This means that the enthusiasts for ‘US-style primaries’ miss an important point – that for it to work in the UK would involve a massive shift from our political parties being voluntary associations to being agencies of the state. In effect, if we handed registration

over to the authorities we would be nationalising a key feature of our political parties.

Another obvious difference is that we do not elect the British head of state, so the nationwide series of primary elections for president is not something we could copy without becoming a republic.

A strict extrapolation of the US system of primary elections is unfeasible and undesirable. But the idea of a primary election, run as a voluntary system by parties themselves is more attractive. It would also allow the parties which engaged in these democratic practices (presumably left-of-centre parties) to seize the moral high ground and create space between themselves and those parties who choose to remain elitist (presumably right-wing parties).

One supporter, one vote (OSOV)

It is possible to use the primary model to elect party leaders, for example. The Labour Party has made strides towards an enlarged electorate for party leader, moving from a vote amongst the parliamentary Labour party to an electoral college made up of MPs, affiliates including the trade unions, and constituency members.

The party leader could be elected using all registered supporters as the electorate, on the basis of one supporter, one vote (OSOV). This would enfranchise many millions of supporters in a major choice. It would also create the need for candidates for party leader to campaign for votes from the broad mass of Labour supporters. There would be a lively debate between candidates, local hustings, public meetings, email campaigns, direct mail, and even political advertising. The leader who was elected would have a firm mandate from a majority of Labour voters, beyond the

portals of Westminster.

Primary elections work best where the constituency is geographically and numerically large. It is hard to see how the system would work to select local councillors although some have suggested it. For example, John Williams of the new local government network (NLGN) proposed primaries for local elections in Progress magazine in March 2002.

It could be used to select the party’s candidate for council leader. For the new system of directly-elected mayors, primaries would work very well. In areas which elect a mayor, the primary election would revive local politics. It would also work well for selecting the parties candidates for Euro-elections, in Scotland, Wales and for the Greater London Assembly, and in parliamentary elections. For Labour MPs, currently going through the party’s system of re-selection, it would mean that if an open re-selection was triggered, the next stage of the process would be on the basis on one supporter one vote (OSOV) and other candidates could come forward from within the party. The idea of OSOV, broadening out the selection of candidates to a wide franchise of local supporters, would reinvigorate local parties and local politics and ensure that all candidates were in tune with the broad mass of local opinion.

State funding

A corollary benefit of a local system of registered supporters could be a closer link between state funding of parties and local political activity.

State funding is already a fact of British political life. The main parties have their parliamentary activities supported by taxpayers’ cash, through the Short money and Cranbourne money given to opposition parties’ front bench researchers in the

Commons and Lords, through the office cost allowance to MPs, and through support-in-kind such as party election broadcasts, free postage, and free use of public buildings.

The argument now is whether the balance between state funding and private donations to parties should be altered, and how state funding can be used to refresh the front-lines of political parties rather than their central bureaucracies.

On the first, there is a head of steam building for greater state funding, and a cap on private donations, following various embarrassments. John Prescott, Robin Cook, David Blunkett, Peter Mandelson, Charter 88 and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) have joined the growing chorus calling for state funding and an end to large individual donations to parties. Cook told the Commons press gallery "If the electorate want a healthy parliament and independent political parties, then they must be prepared to fund them from the public purse".

John Prescott said in April 2002 "I think the only system under which you can be properly accountable is state financing within set limits of expenditure and advertising."

The IPPR's proposed system would cap individual donations at £5,000, cap parties' annual expenditure at £20 million (falling to £15 million over five years), and introduce tax relief whereby the state would match small donations to parties. The New Politics Network has added its support in its publication *Strong Parties, Clean Politics* in 2003, stressing the need for state funding to be linked to systems of local party renewal, such as registered supporter schemes. Charter 88 wants the amount allocated to be according to the percentage of the vote won at the previous general election and the number of members in the party. The group wants 25 per cent of state funding to be spent on political education and policy research. Parties should have to demonstrate a commitment to increasing the representation of women and minority groups in the political process. The spending limit during a general election should be reduced, to a maximum of £10m, according to Charter 88.

Those against state funding include

the Tories (who are mostly against the state funding anything) and some on the Labour left such as the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) and Catalyst who believe state funding would undermine the party-union links and divorce the party's leaders from the broad mass of its members.

State funding should be, not merely a reflection of parties existing levels of activity, but an incentive for increased activity. The state should expect its money to work hard in pursuit of democratic renewal. For it to be more than an exercise in eradicating embarrassing individual donations, state funding must be:

- linked to political activity and an incentive for parties to do things differently
- distributed at a regional and/or local level.

State funding for parties' elections, campaigns, and administration could be allocated on the basis of numbers of registered supporters. If lists of registered supporters are held at a city, county or regional level, then funds can be distributed to fairly reflect local levels of support for parties. This system only works if all political parties have comparable registered supporter schemes, and if they are independently evaluated by, say, the Electoral Commission. As such, this may be some way down the road.

If state funding is to be increased, as surely it must, it should not be perceived as taxpayers' cash being spent on central party machines, advertising campaigns, and ministers' and shadow ministers' offices. Instead we need to debate new ways to match state funding against a combination of criteria, for example:-

- number of registered supporters
- number of party members
- proportion of black and minority ethnic members and candidates
- proportion of women members and candidates
- share of the vote
- number of candidates fielded
- political education initiatives
- political campaigning.

Parties could be independently scored on the basis of a range of criteria such as this, and allocated funds accordingly.

The amount of money needed to properly fund UK parties is a tiny proportion of overall government spending. But state funding must be seen as an investment in democracy, not a hand-out to a dying and discredited system.

Conclusion

Parties are remarkably resilient forms of political organisation. In democratic systems where there is a need to reflect broad values-based coalitions, aggregate different political views, organise local election campaigns, identify and select leaders, and organise local supporters, then political parties have proved the best form of organisation. In newly emergent democracies, from South Africa to the former Eastern block countries, parties have quickly sprung up. In older democracies, despite all the pressures and challenges, they have survived and maintained their predominance.

If we are to organise our politics through parties, then the parties need to change. Some of the changes outlined above – registered supporters, primary elections, state funding, and re-invented activism – could revive political parties and start to rebuild legitimacy, trust and support. It is not merely parties' futures at stake, but the future of democracy.

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The Conservative Party pilots



Stephen Gilbert is
Director of Campaigning
and Organisation at the
Conservative Party

The responsibility for increasing public involvement in politics lies with parties. External bodies cannot shoulder this responsibility. It is up to all political parties to make themselves relevant. Only when that happens will we see greater public participation.

One of the first things we have to do is accept that society has recently undergone a fundamental change. People today are busier and want to be involved in politics in different ways, perhaps not as actively or for as long. We should allow them to come in and out of politics at different points in their lives. There is also a growing number of people who would like to be involved in certain campaigns and issues, but who do not immediately want to be a member of a political party.

People join parties because they want to be involved in the traditional activist sense, maybe even because they would like to be candidates. This is incredibly important and our members will always remain our main focus; indeed, they are our fund-raising base. Like all parties, we would like to be able to rely on small donations from a larger and larger group of people and membership is the key to that. Yet we also wish to evolve new structures to run alongside membership.

One way of doing this would be to develop campaigns which members of the public can subscribe to and be a part of. We have been taking a good look at what the Americans do. Whilst there are some people who see themselves as part of the Republican and Democrat parties, there are many others who subscribe to their campaigns but do not want to be directly involved in the parties themselves.

Whilst doing everything we can to protect the status of members, I would like the Conservative Party to develop in a similar way. This means attaching subscriptions to some of our campaigns and involving people in issues which they feel strongly about. We hope this will trigger levels of activism. They might just want to talk to their friends, write to a local newspaper or even sign up five other people to one very specific campaign. Of course, a lot of this could be done online and for young people that would be a very important part of what we do.

Rather than relying on ideological instincts, this is about showing people that we are on their side on a whole range of issues. By highlighting these things and giving people an opportunity to have a stake in campaigns which interest them, we hope to show them that party politics is a respectable thing to be

involved with and to talk about. What we need to do is find a way of engaging people in our campaigns. That means information. Young people are information-driven, that is the way they work and that is what we have to cater for. We are moving towards issue-driven politics, consumer politics, and the exciting part of our job is adapting ourselves to meet that challenge.

Alongside this idea of subscribing to specific campaigns, we are also beginning to explore new ways of involving people in the actual mechanics of the party, particularly the selection process. Conservative Party Chairman, Theresa May, is determined to challenge the way the party works at this level and to make our selection processes more open and more representative.

Candidates are currently appointed by a selection committee within each association, after discussion with the membership. We are making progress in terms of selecting more women and the party is much more aware of the political importance of being seen to be representative; what we have to do now is put in place good mechanisms and structures to re-enforce this progress.

We are currently looking at a range of ideas to widen the scope of the selection process and we expect to

see some of them used in selections for the remainder of this Parliament. We do not want to force the pace of change and dictate to our associations the procedures that they should follow in detail, but we do hope to set up various structures which they can choose to use.

Our approach is to say to constituency associations that we are interested in collecting new ideas and ways of doing things and that we would like them to experiment with some of the ideas we are developing. We have given them half a dozen options and we will try to get maybe three or four in place, see how they go and then we will be able to lay out a defined procedure within the party for doing these things. I suspect that the selections for the remainder of this Parliament will take place in a variety of different ways, some just using the existing structure and some using the various ideas put forward by the Chairman, of which the most exciting is primary elections.

We are giving associations the option of either open or closed primaries. I think most of them will go for closed, which has the benefit of starting off the campaign by bringing people in as registered Conservatives. The overwhelming reaction has been positive - people like the fact that the selection process will actually be a part of the campaign and are very excited about the prospect of getting more people involved. We can really use this to get as many people signed up as committed Conservatives as possible. We should also be able to generate a great deal of publicity through local newspapers which are sure to be absolutely fascinated with the process.

Our members want the party to be successful and they want to select candidates who are going to win. They appreciate the campaigning value of closed primaries and the increased chance of electoral success which it will give us. We do however have to respect our activists and reassure them that none of this is about doing away with activism and creating central procedures in which there is no room for local organisations. In fact, there is more of a role for activists than ever.

These reforms are all about local

campaigning and recruiting more people on the ground. We expect that a good proportion of the people who have registered as supporters will become members of the party. We very much hope that if we recruit, say, 2000 people in a constituency to take part in a primary, we would be able to convert a proportion into members, a further number to make a contribution to a campaign which they feel strongly about and a further number to become politically active. The more activists we have, the better our local campaigns will be. All the evidence of recent elections is that local campaigns are the most effective election tool, so that is the first thing we have got to get right and participation will be greatly enhanced if people feel that they have a stake in the candidate being selected.

The way we see it working is that the local association representatives will create a shortlist of three candidates. Those people would have to be on the Parliamentary candidates list, just as they have to be at the moment. This means that all three potential candidates going forward to a primary election would have been approved for having the level of competence required and be considered suitable for the post. In an open primary this would be important, as it would insure us against any attempts at entryism or malicious activities by other political parties.

One of the other ideas we are trying out relates to the selection committee itself. It could be that this runs alongside a primary election or it could be used in isolation. We are suggesting that associations think more broadly when setting up their committees. Rather than simply choosing one person from every branch, they should make sure that their selection committee is representative. This does not just mean socially representative but actually representative of the skills necessary for selecting candidates. If there is not anyone in the association with business experience of personnel issues, why not look outside?

Community leaders could also be very usefully involved in the selection process. The actual voting for the shortlist would continue to be restricted to party members but we

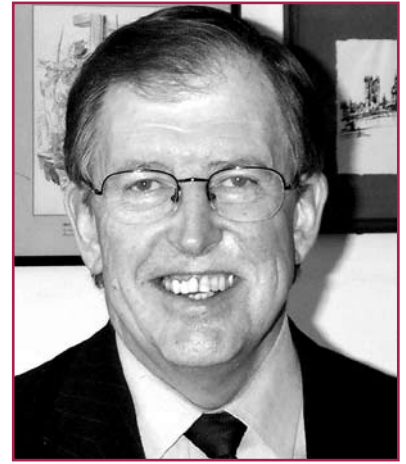
would like to see non-members with essential skills and experience included in the process. We are also looking into using competence tests and providing more of a personnel service from Conservative Central Office. Rather than simply handing over a pile of 300 CVs to selection committees, we would like to take a profile of the constituency, talk to voters, find out what they are most interested in and then pick out the potential candidates who most closely match the profile of the constituency.

We have put procedures in place for all of these ideas and I hope that we will see the most enthusiastic associations putting them into practice during this Parliament. We were keen to start in this way because we do need people who are enthusiastic about our ideas in order to make them work. We will choose the first few carefully and as we go on to the next election, other associations will see that it has worked and we will be able to move towards some of these ideas in a more structured way.

Once we have decided on the constituencies which will be taking part in the trials, we will be able to speak to voters in those areas and gauge their reactions and I am very confident that they will be positive. All of the feedback we have had from more general research suggests that voters feel there is a lack of opportunity for them to participate in politics and we are trying to directly address that concern.

I am extremely excited by all of these proposals and believe that primary elections in particular really have the potential to transform the way our party works, making it stronger at a local level and increasing public participation in an unprecedented way. Conservative Party membership is rising – unlike Labour or the Liberal Democrats, but it is a matter of fact that all parties' memberships are lower than they historically have been decades ago. It is up to us to rise to the challenge being thrown at us and adapt our organisation, not only to allow for but to positively embrace non-member participation.

Introducing: 'politics-lite'!



Tom (Lord) McNally is Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords

Democracy needs democrats to make it work. It also needs political parties with the structure and responsiveness to reflect and channel the beliefs and principles of its members and supporters. All too often the beliefs and priorities of activists fall out of kilter with the broader mass of the electorate: the electorate it needs to win elections. On the other hand, a party which tries to by-pass its activists in the quest for the middle ground may find itself in the position of a general without an army when the nitty gritty and hard slog of an election has to be faced.

Is it possible to combine true party democracy - in which the active membership contribute to policy decisions - with the electability which comes from the party being able to appeal to the wider public? If we accept that it is: that it must be possible, it may become necessary to contemplate some significant party reforms. The harsh reality is that declining levels of membership and activism are affecting all our parties. In 1950, individual membership of the Labour Party stood above 900,000 and the Conservatives peaked close to 3 million. Those kind of numbers are unlikely to ever return. If parties are to survive at all they must adapt their structures, means of involvement and methods of consulting so as to become better able to reflect

the realities of modern life, and the electorate's opinions.

The biggest hurdle to expanding party membership is that party activism can be a rather particular and peculiar kind of joy. The Individuals involved in the running of a local party often find it difficult to accept that what they are doing is a minority pursuit about which the vast majority of their fellow citizens remain resolutely unmoved. Whilst it is important to remember that none of the political parties could work without the sheer muscle power and foot power of their activists and I would not disparage them, there is a sense in which going for the first time to a local party meeting is like stepping into an organisation operating to the rules of some exclusive secret society. There is a language, a jargon and a willingness to talk trivia that makes a lot of first visits to local parties into last visits. The fervent party activist can drag out meetings, for example, in a way that is unacceptable to those with other lives to live.

Narrow membership means that policy making and selection come from a rather exclusive brethren or sisterhood and all three parties have faced that difficulty at various times. I have been at many a stormy meeting in which it has been incredibly difficult to convince those who believe

absolutely fervently in what they are saying that it is they who are the minority and that there is a vast opinion out there which disagrees with them. The true believers do believe and it is this belief that gives them the motivation to become activists. The problem lies in finding a way to combine their dedication with a broad base of support.

The reforms that Tony Blair tried to bring into the Labour Party and the kind of structure that the SDP attempted to create were designed to work towards this. Both the SDP and the first flush of New Labour brought tens of thousands of people into politics. They proved that if politics does appear fresh and new, then there is a sizeable group of society who can be recruited as members. The SDP was an interesting case in point as it showed that, given the right kind of presentation, the market for party activists is much larger than we actually ever usually reach. Nevertheless, recruitment drives can be limited, especially in the kind of 'dead' political period we are now in. A Labour government with a massive majority, coupled with a period of prosperity, has created a political climate in which the kind of missionary zeal that attracts large numbers of members is simply not there.

Even if parties were able to recruit

a few more members, they would be unlikely to be terribly representative of today's society. The Conservatives Party's historically broad membership was based on low subscription rates and an active social life; in an age of ever widening leisure possibilities, that is no longer the draw it once was. The trade unions gave the Labour Party its ballast and the Liberals, in the direst days, were kept afloat by fervent activism. In order to re-build party support in a form suited to modern lives, we need to re-shape our models of participation.

One way of doing this is through a form of registered supporter involvement or 'politics-lite'. The idea of an affiliation which would allow people a degree of participation, tied to their registering as a party supporter, is a most attractive one. Parties will be able to appeal to natural sympathisers and involve them in the system without demanding an unreasonable amount of time or dedication in return.

Such a system will, of course, be resisted, and resisted strongly. There is an argument that the further away from the activist core we allow decisions to be made; the more party ideology will be diluted. That is no doubt true, but it is happening anyway. Here in Britain, we see the continual search for the elusive middle ground or Middle England and the Americans are always talking about the need to genuflect to the hard work of the middle classes. That is a necessary outcome of the need to appeal to as broad a section of the electorate as possible.

Any proposal to allow registered supporters control over selection will also be attacked by party activists who will, with a certain justification, say "I deliver the leaflets, I knock on the doors and I do the canvassing. Why should these armchair politicians, who do nothing beyond a simple act of registration, have the power to select candidates?" They will also

point out that because they are not active, supporters do not know the personalities involved and are likely to pick a TV celebrity in preference to a hard-working activist. Yet, however well-grounded their arguments, party activists are a dying breed and we cannot rely upon them to keep parties alive forever. Their dedication is to be applauded but at the same time has to be recognised for the minority occupation it has become.

There is no choice but to look outwards. This does not mean that we should give up on party membership altogether but that more must be done to take the mystique out of it. If more people could be shown how parties work and the jobs that can be done within them, they might be enticed into activism. This could be done through television programmes which actually tell people what happens if they join the Labour Party or the Liberal Democrats or the Conservatives. It could also be done through a lighter form of political engagement. I am strongly in favour of this proposal and believe that it could be brought into being through the incentive of state funding. If funds were allocated according to the numbers of supporters each party were able to attract, it is hard to see the parties resisting for long. A particularly useful side effect would be that the funding could also be tied to conditions of internal democracy. Recipient parties could then be obliged to follow model rules in terms of decision-making transparency and one member one vote participation in all key decisions.

The other way to reform present membership structures is through electronic membership. It should be that parties are now able to involve members in a way they have never done before. It is easy to imagine a party entirely linked by email and chat-rooms in which, rather than going to some dingy hall, the broader membership will be consulted electronically. That is a

very exciting vision and one which I am sure will be realised in the near future. We must however, beware the kind of push-button democracy that suggests war or peace decisions can be made with the ease of a television poll. That would be a very dangerous kind of democracy indeed. A balance must be found between the level of involvement, consultation and delivery of service that can reasonably be done electronically and the ever-present need to keep parties vibrant and members actively involved in policy making and campaigning. Even so, any move towards large-scale electronic consultation would be opposed by activists because, although on the one hand they claim to be representative of a broad mass, they are, in actual fact, loath to expose their thinking to mass democracy.

It is time to accept that our old models will not continue to serve us in the way they have in the past. Parties have got to adapt to new structures of participation. My guess is that electronic membership will be one means of doing this and registered supporter affiliation will be the other. Both reforms could be underpinned by state funding. I realize that in proposing such reforms I will be accused of bypassing the sheer physical effort of party activists prepared to attend lengthy meetings in draughty halls. Yet, in the end, such reforms become necessary for precisely that reason. This is the only way to reconnect our political parties with the people they seek to represent and the working democracy they underpin.

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Participation or Moderation: should Primary Elections be used in the UK?



Dr Adrian Shepherd is Survey Research Officer at the Oxford Internet Institute

In November of next year, there will be general elections in the USA for the presidency, the House of Representatives, a portion of the Senate, and positions in the state governments. Overwhelmingly, the general elections will be contests between candidates from the Republican and Democratic parties. Prior to this election, between January and September of next year, the candidates who stand in the general election will have won the nomination of their party in what is known as a primary election.

A primary election, the public is invited to choose between a number of candidates who all belong to the same party. The winner goes on to represent that party in the general election. The rules deciding which members of the public can vote vary between states: in some states you must have been registered as a supporter of that party for a considerable time in advance; in some states you have to register as a supporter of that party just that day; in other states you can register as a supporter of the party or as an Independent. In a small number of states a person can vote both in the Republican and Democratic primary on the same day.

As such, in the US there is really no such thing as party membership as it is understood in Britain. To vote in a

primary election one does not have to pay membership dues, attend party functions, or carry a membership card. The very most one must do is register as a supporter of a party in advance. As a result, participation in the primaries is widespread. Over 35 million people voted in the Republican and Democratic primaries to choose their party's candidate for president in 2000, compared to about 105 million people who voted in the general election. Whilst the presidential primary elections garner most publicity, both here and in the States, the vast majority of elected officials have to participate in and win both primary and general elections.

The move to primary elections in the States (and no other country uses this system of nominating the party candidate) came in two waves, as a response to the weaknesses of the pre-existing circumstances. These flaws are worth reviewing because they have considerable relevance to current British circumstances. Primary elections were introduced at the start of the twentieth century when both the Republican and Democratic parties had very strong regional bases. This meant that whilst the two parties were competitive nationally most localities were dominated by a particular party. Consequently, the candidate who was nominated by the dominant party was almost guaranteed a seat, leaving the public

little opportunity to hold the elected official accountable for their policies or personal behaviour. This has obvious parallels in Britain, where a large percentage of seats are safe for a particular party. As such, much of the public is represented without a reasonable alternative having been offered to them. This system of safe seats in most localities also had an impact upon turnout. Voting turnout had been high in general elections in the nineteenth century but fell dramatically at the beginning of the twentieth. This decline in turnout is ascribed to the feeling that voting was largely a formality in these safe seats. Again, this has parallels in the UK. Turnout was only 59% in the last general election, partly because there was little point in voting - everyone knew Labour was going to win nationally, and, at the local level, most seats were very unlikely to change hands.

The answer American reformers found was to introduce competitive elections for the party nomination that were open to at least a portion of the public. That way, the public decided on the individual who was to represent them, even in seats that were safe for a particular party. In safe seats, the primary election offered a reasonable chance of replacing the incumbent, giving the people a reason to vote and boosting turnout.

In fact, in the Southern states in the first half of the twentieth century the Democratic Party dominated most elections, meaning the important election for deciding which candidate would win office became the Democratic primary. During this period, more Southerners voted in the Democratic primary than in the fairly meaningless general election. If primary elections were introduced in Britain we might see a similar spectacle. In safe Conservative seats in the Southern English Shires or in safe Labour seats in urban areas, we might see people participating in the primary elections of those parties who currently see little point in voting.

Yet, primary elections were not used in all states in this period, and their popularity actually declined in the middle third of the twentieth century. However, this downward trend was dramatically reversed the early 'seventies, so that their use is now almost ubiquitous for nominating candidates at the congressional level. The event that triggered this upsurge in use was the 1968 presidential election.

In 1968, Lyndon Johnson was the President, he was a Democrat, and he was responsible for the build-up of American troops in Vietnam and committed to fighting there until victory over North Vietnam was achieved. He ran for re-nomination as Democratic candidate for president and was defeated in New Hampshire (the first primary election in the calendar) by Eugene McCarthy, who was sceptical about American involvement in Vietnam. In light of this defeat, Johnson decided he would not run for president. Instead, he pushed for his vice-president, Hubert Humphrey to achieve the nomination, also on a platform of support for the conflict in Vietnam. Humphrey relied on support from party elites to achieve the nomination, and did not contest any primary elections, which were all won by candidates opposed to the war, primarily McCarthy and

Bobby Kennedy.

Thus, a strange situation occurred where the candidate representing the Democratic Party had won the nomination without popular support and whose position on the key issue of the day was directly opposite to that of the candidates who had won popular support. During Humphrey's nomination at the Democratic Convention in Chicago there were riots in the city between hippy anti-Vietnam Democratic activists, and police under the orders of the Democratic mayor of Chicago, Richard Daley. During the campaign, Humphrey was followed by activists and routinely mocked and attacked by Democrats angered at his policy on Vietnam. Not surprisingly, Humphrey lost the general election.

Afterwards, Democrat politicians decided it was necessary that the party's nominee have the legitimacy and support from the party's base that comes from contesting and winning a competitive election. Again, we can see parallels in Britain where the prime-minister has followed a policy on a key issue that is very different from the desires of party supporters, and paid a price in legitimacy. John Major supported the Maastricht treaty and was troubled with parliamentary rebellions throughout the rest of his administration. Tony Blair ignored general Labour sentiment over Iraq, and has had rough weeks since. Primary elections in Britain would have a two-fold impact. They would either encourage prime-ministers to pay more attention to their base or, if they decided to diverge from the wishes of the core of their party, the mandate they had achieved by winning the primary might bolster their position when challenging their base.

To summarize, primary elections mean that candidates are accountable to the public even in safe seats, boost turnout in elections, give the winning

candidate a legitimate mandate from the public, and ensure that the winning candidate has the support of the party's base that is necessary for candidates to compete effectively in the general election. However, political scientists and politicians in America have a number of concerns about primary elections as a way of nominating candidates.

Concerns

It is more difficult for voters to make an informed decision in a primary election than in a general election. In a general election, most people vote according to party label. The majority of voters do not know much about the individual candidate, instead their vote is based upon their perception of the policies and competence of the national party. The media heavily covers the national political scene, so that the public is bombarded with information about the parties' positions on the issues, especially during the pre-election campaign. In England, there are likely to be only three credible candidates (Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat). In the rest of the UK they are likely to be no more than four contending parties. This means a voter has to engage in only a limited amount of learning about each candidate or party. None of these things is likely to be true in a primary election to decide a constituency candidate for MP.

In a primary election, all candidates would be from the same party, so voters could not use their party loyalties or their impressions of the national parties to decide which candidate to vote for. The local press would be responsible for informing the voters about the candidates in the primary. There might be several candidates for each party, several parties having a primary in a given constituency, and a particular media's catchment area might cover several different constituencies. For primary elections to function well the media

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would be obliged to cover all of these contests in a reasonable amount of detail. It is hard to know, in advance, how well the local media would rise to that challenge, but the level of information they would provide about each candidate is likely to be low. In America, candidates solve this problem through the purchase of television time to communicate directly to voters, but that is unlikely to happen in Britain. Moreover, even if the media did provide detailed information about each candidate, it is questionable whether any but the most determined voter would make the effort to learn enough to make an informed vote in such a low-information environment.

In America, the lack of sufficient information in congressional primaries, at least information that is readily available, has three effects. First, many voters essentially guess which is their preferred candidate. Second, most voters do not take advantage of their opportunity to vote in primary elections because they do not want to do the requisite homework involved. As a result, turnout in congressional primary elections is much lower than in general elections. Third, those voters who are willing to do the research involved to find out about the candidates' positions tend to be very highly politically motivated. The combination of low turnout and

very politically involved voters merge to have significant consequences.

In general, people who are motivated to participate in congressional primary elections are more ideological than those who do not. As a result, primary elections strengthen the committed wing of the party at the expense of the moderate wing. The last 25 years in American politics have seen a weakening of the centrist parts of the Democratic and Republican parties, with the result that hostility between the parties has intensified. The most obvious recent example is the attempted impeachment of Bill Clinton, which was executed almost exclusively on party lines. If British people welcome conviction politics, where a Thatcherite Conservative party fights an Old Labour party, then primary elections would be a useful development. For people who wish for an end to the “tribalism” of British politics, primary elections to choose MP's are probably to be avoided.

Single-issue groups who are motivated to vote by their passion for one subject can often dominate primary elections because of the low turnout. Examples from Republican primaries would be people who wish to protect the rights of gun-owners or those who oppose abortion. Examples from Democratic primaries

might be those representing unions, racial minorities, or who support abortion rights. As a result, candidates are forced to take positions advocated by these single-issue groups in order to win the nomination of their party, even when the majority of the public disagree with those positions. Again, we can imagine possible single-issue groups using primary elections in Britain to force MP's to take extreme positions. For example, people who want Britain to pull out of the EU completely could use Conservative primaries to force that commitment from the Tory party, even though polls show the majority of the public would like to stay in the EU. Alternatively, people who want nuclear disarmament could flood Labour primaries to make MP's sign on to that policy, despite the public being generally in agreement with Britain having an independent nuclear deterrent.

Moreover, if one party adopted primary elections and other parties did not, then the party that did so would risk being pulled to the wings by their own activists. That would place that particular party at a disadvantage when trying to win the support of those all-important floating voters. Adopting primary elections unilaterally could be, if not suicidal, at least unhelpful in trying to win power.

Thumbs up or thumbs down?

So, on the one hand, primary elections provide candidate legitimacy, choice, and greater turnout, but on the other hand they empower ideologues and the committed at the expense of the middle-of-the-road majority. Are primary elections worth it? Most American political scientists would say no. However, in polls the American public much prefer primary elections as a way of nominating the party candidate over any other means of doing so.

As a final note, it is important to point out that there are fewer problems with presidential primary elections than with congressional primary elections. Presidential primaries receive heavy attention from the national media, and are sufficiently interesting that participation is broad, which dilutes the impact of single-issue groups and ideologues. Congressional primaries by contrast, receive limited attention

from the local media, and have lower participation, enhancing the influence of dedicated activists. The equivalent in Britain would be the distinction between nominating the leader of the party, and nominating a candidate for MP. As discussed above, a primary election to nominate the candidate for MP would probably be a low-information, low turnout-election. By contrast, a primary election to choose the party leader would receive intense coverage from the national media and would attract broad involvement from the public. The leaders of all the main British parties are now chosen by the entire membership of the party, a few hundred thousand people at most, whereas a primary election could involve several million people choosing the party leader. This would give the party leader greater legitimacy, and give millions of people a direct and meaningful say in choosing the person who governs their country.

Appendixes

Developments in Membership Participation - The Labour Party

Members' Rights in 1950

Members who attend ward meetings and stand as delegates can control constituency party affairs through sitting on General Management Committee (GMC).

Each constituency can send a resolution to be scrutinized by the Conference Arrangements Committee.

Leader elected by MPs with no input from members.

Policy and Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) controlled by the Party Conference, but only a small minority of local members voted for constituency representatives for the Conference.

Year	Individual Membership	Developments in Membership Participation
1950	908,161	Some inner-city ward meetings attract barely more than 3% of members.
1955		Chair of Victory For Socialism suggests that in order for Labour to win elections, it had to give "the man who knocks on the doors a voice in deciding policy" as this would give members more enthusiasm to campaign.
1960	790,192	
1970	680,191	
1979		Conference voted for the automatic reselection of MPs by GMCs, forcing the PLP to reflect the views of active individual members.
1980	480,156	
1981		Electoral college to elect Leader and Deputy Leader established. MPs retained 30% of the votes, constituencies and trade unions were awarded 30% and 40%, respectively.
1983	295,344	
1984	323,292	Proposal to introduce OMOV to the selection of parliamentary candidates defeated.
1985	313,099	
1986	297,364	
1987	288,829	
1988	265,927	Promise to recruit 500,000 members by mid-1990s and 1,000,000 by 2000. NEC assumes the power to draw up a shortlist of candidates by the local party in by-elections and thus to exclude any possible problem candidates.
1989	293,723	National membership established
1990	311,152	NEC now able to depose an already selected by-election candidate if judged unsuitable and impose a new one.
1991	261,233	
1992	279,530	"Active Labour" recruitment drive launched. National Policy Forum created.
1993	266,270	Affiliated trade union members no longer able to participate in selection of parliamentary candidates. New party rules introduced, obliging both trade unions and constituency parties to ballot both their political levy payers and their membership in leadership elections and then to divide the votes between these groups. Individual members given the power to elect constituency and women's representatives to the NEC.
1994	305,189	OMOV used to elect Blair and Prescott.
1995	365,110	Blair ballots individual members on the proposal to reform Clause IV. It is passed by 85% of voters but with only a 27% turnout.
1996	400,465	Blair ballots individual members to approve 1997 manifesto.
1997	405,238	NEC Report, Partnership in Power: attempt to integrate members into policy-making and create a genuine, non-antagonistic, partnership between members and leaders.
1998	387,776	NEC ceases to make policy and becomes a purely administrative body. Unions lose majority on NEC, retaining 12 out of 33 seats. The directly elected representatives of individual members have 6 seats.
2001	311,000	
2003	c 250,000	

Table compiled by The New Politics Network, drawing heavily on work by Whitely & Seyd (1995),(2000)& (2002);& Fielding (2003)

Appendixes

Developments in Membership Participation - The Conservative Party

Members' Rights in 1953		
Members elect parliamentary candidates but have no influence over the parliamentary party or the party leadership.		
Elaborate consultative network organised by Conservative Policy Centre enables all individual members to participate in a regular process of constituency based discussion which is fed back to HQ and circulated to the party leader, ministers or shadow ministers, the National Union and Central Office officials.		
Year	Individual Membership	Developments in Membership Participation
1953	2,805,000	
1970	1,750,000	
1983	1,200,000	
1987	1,000,000	
1988	1,000,000	
1989	750,000	
1992	500,000	
1997	400,000	OMOV ballot used to appoint Hague as leader and approve the principles of party reform, as set out in the Blueprint for Change consultation paper.
1998	204,000*	Blueprint for Change approved by membership. This states that "the Party shall consist of its members". Members are now able to elect party leaders. National membership established. The principle of an anti-European strategy approved by a ballot of the party membership
2001	318,000	OMOV used to elect Duncan Smith as party leader
2003		

* estimated on the basis of numbers participating in the ballot on the party's European strategy

Developments in Membership Participation - The Liberal Party, The Social Democratic Party & The Liberal Democrats

Liberal Party			Social Democratic Party	
Members' Rights in 1970			Members' Rights in 1981	
Determined by local constituency parties.			Balloted individually to elect the Party Leader, President, parliamentary candidates and National Executive.	
Able to elect local officers, conference representatives and candidates at constituency meetings.				
Party council and executive elected by Conference.				
Year	Individual Members	Developments in Participation	Indiv. Members	Developments in Participation
1970	234,345			
1976		Constituency based OMOV used to elect David Steel as party Leader		
1981				
1983	145,258			
1984	100,000			
1987	79,500		58,000	
1988	Members of both parties balloted on proposal to merge.			

Liberal Democrat Party		
Members' Rights in 1988		
Balloted individually to elect Party Leader and President. Parliamentary candidates and Conference Representatives elected by OMOV at hustings meetings.		
Federal Executive, Policy and Conference Committees elected by Conference Representatives.		
Year	Individual Members	Developments in Participation
1988	58,000*	Postal OMOV used to elect Leader, President, parliamentary candidates and Conference representatives.
1989	82,000	Party name change decided by postal OMOV.
1992	100,000	
1997	100,000	
1999		Introduction of OMOV postal ballots for European, Scottish, Welsh & GLA selections.
2000		Constitutional review including proposal to elect Federal Executive, Policy and Conference Committee by OMOV suspended by the Federal Executive following a non-binding consultation of membership.
2001	73,276	
2002	71,636	
2003	71,791	

* estimated on the basis of numbers voting to elect a new leader

Table compiled by The New Politics Network, drawing heavily on work by Whitely & Seyd (1992), & (2000); Fielding (2003), &

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Acknowledgements:

The New Politics Network would like to express its thanks to:

Rt Hon Ian McCartney MP
Dr Tim Bale
Paul Richards
Stephen Gilbert
Lord McNally
Dr Adrian Shepherd
Professor Patrick Seyd
Professor Paul Whiteley
Professor Gerald Pomper
Rachelle Jaller Valladares
Paul Simpson
Edward Vaizey
David Allworthy

The New Politics Network is a not for profit, independent, political and campaigning think tank, concerned with issues relating to democratic renewal and popular participation in politics. We work with all political parties as well as a wide range of groups and individuals to provide an independent and innovative debate on the future of politics.

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