

Conceptualisation of intraparty democracy: the case of candidate selection in Belgium in 2014

Abstract

Intra-party democracy entails different meanings. In particular when we consider democratic candidate selection processes, one may think about various elements contributing to the democratic character of the list constitution. By means of a content analysis, this paper aims at contrasting definitions given to intra-party democracy in terms of candidate selection by on the one hand scholars and on the other by political actors. The analysis draws on in-depth interviews with key party actors conducted in the run-up to the 2014 elections in Belgium i.e. during the process of candidate selection. Eleven parties are covered in this paper. Findings confirm that the main dimensions of a democratic candidate selection process are the selectorates, the procedures and the outcome. Nevertheless, the inclusiveness does not appear to be as important as presented in the literature. Overall the paper contributes to the ongoing debate about what intraparty democracy means.

Second draft: Please do not cite this paper without the author's consent.

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Paper presented at the 8th ECPR General Conference, Glasgow, Scotland, UK (3-6 September 2014)
Panel: S026: Elites and Citizens: Leadership, Responsiveness, or Distance?

Introduction

Intraparty democracy is a concept broadly used in the political science literature. It assumes that political parties should be democratic in their internal organisation, on various aspects such as the definition of policy positions or the selection of candidates for parliamentary, cabinet or internal positions. The implications of the democratic character or not of party organisations go beyond the mere party system. Democratic political parties would participate to the democracy in general. Efforts made within political parties would indeed benefit to the whole society thanks to for instance more capable political leaders and representatives or the development of more responsive policies (Scarrow, 2005). The concept has deserved and received remarkable attention from scholars.

The literature often discusses dimensions said to be more democratic than others and tests whether political parties respect these principles. It is however much less frequent that the commonly used democratic criteria are confronted to what the political actors themselves consider to be democratic. This paper proposes to fact check whether definitions presented in the academic literature match the definitions given by practitioners. The analysis is concentrated upon dimensions of intraparty democracy related to the selection of parliamentary candidates. It examines in particular three main dimensions: characteristics of the selectorates – i.e. the degree of inclusiveness and of decentralisation, features of the selection procedures, and questions associated to the outcome of the process, i.e. candidacy requirements and the candidates.

Drawing on original data, the paper contrasts the literature with opinions from key Belgian political actors. In-depth interviews have been conducted with the political secretary of all main political parties in Belgium (eleven parties in total, and thirteen interviews). This particular political actor holds no political mandate but is at the heart of the internal organisation of the party. S/he is in most cases the organizational head of the candidate selection process or is deeply involved in the process.

The paper presents in turn how scholars define intraparty democracy, focusing in particular on candidate selection. Three dimensions are considered: the selectorates, the procedures and the outcome. A section presents then the methodology and the case chosen for this research. Next, a comprehensive analysis of the answers brought by political actors is undertaken along the same three dimensions. The paper further discusses the results of the comparison.

Theoretical perspectives on intraparty democracy

Democratic principles and political parties do not necessarily go hand in hand. The debate is ongoing within the scholarly literature, some scholars arguing that democracy is not to be found in the parties (Schattschneider, 1942) while some others arguing that democracy within parties is thinkable (Pettitt, 2011). All in all there is an interest for the study of intraparty democracy since it may reflect or affect the democratic quality of the political system (Sandri, 2012). Political parties are indeed central to the political system through their role of 'intermediary institutions', linking voters to the state (von dem Berge, Poguntke, Obert, & Tipei, 2013). Thanks to a virtuous circle, internally democratic political parties would contribute to 'the stability and legitimacy of the democracies in which these parties compete for power' (Scarrow, 2005, p. 3).

The selection of parliamentary candidates constitutes a key function of political parties qua linkage between the citizens and the state. Analysing how parties select their candidates helps understanding 'the distribution of intra-party power among different organs and factions' (Norris, 2004, p. 26). The selection of party candidates is indeed one of the three party choices commonly used as criteria for intraparty democracy, next to the selection of party leaders and the definition of policy positions (Sandri, 2012; Scarrow, 2005). Other scholars have broadened the scope of what should be analysed in order to study intraparty democracy through adding next to decision-making, members' rights and the organizational structure of the party (von dem Berge et al., 2013). This article focuses in particular on the crucial decision of candidate selection.

There are several ways of conceptualizing intraparty democracy depending on the organizational model of the party (Sandri, 2012), the parties' circumstances and political outlooks (Scarrow, 2005) or merely the normative perspective adopted by the researcher. Most scholars argue that there is no one-size-fits-all model for how to democratically run a party (Scarrow, 2005). Moreover, the concept entails multiple dimensions (von dem Berge et al., 2013) and on all of them political parties may gradually vary from more to less democratic (Cular, 2005). In short, there is no clear-cut definition and regardless of the definition, intraparty democracy will differ from one political party to the other (Pettitt, 2011).

Conceptualisation of intraparty democracy

For the purpose of this paper, three main areas where a party can prove to be democratic when selecting parliamentary candidates have been chosen. The first relates to the most used criterion for assessing intraparty democracy, i.e. the characteristics of the selectorates (the party body(ies) that select(s) candidates – see Rahat and Hazan (2010)). The second area under study concerns the procedures of decision-making related to candidate selection. The third and last area involves the outcome of the process, i.e. the candidates themselves.

Selectorates

The concept of intraparty democracy entails for many scholars some kind of power distribution. Those in charge of the selection of candidates should be numerous and distributed at different levels of the party organization. Theoretically these dimensions refer to an increased inclusiveness and decentralization of the selectorates.

Intraparty democracy is sometimes reduced to the only dimension of inclusiveness. Scarrow defines the concept as a “very broad term describing a wide range of methods for including party members in intra-party deliberation and decision making” (2005, p.3). The more individual party members are enabled to express their opinion and participate in intra-party decision-making, the more a party is democratic (von dem Berge et al., 2013). The party procedures should provide opportunities for party members to actively participate in the candidate selection processes (Kabasakal, 2012). Selectorates’ widening is a commonly used criterion, most of the time restricted to rank-and-file members (Hazan & Rahat, 2010) but for some including individual citizens (mere voters) as well (Scharrow, 2005). Involving members or voters strengthen their sense of involvement towards the party (Pennings & Hazan, 2001).

Party members are central to the definitions given by scholars. Some point out obviously that looking before the moment when members have a say in the process is relevant. Access to membership is important to analyse next to members’ involvement in the decision-making. Members could indeed be greatly involved in the choices but if membership is restricted to only the happy few, it is not worth saying that the decision is democratically taken (Kabasakal, 2012). A democratic candidate selection processes has therefore to respect the principle of inclusiveness in terms of selectorates and of membership, according to the literature.

A democratic selectorate is also decentralised, or at least the power should be distributed among different party layers. Subnational units should enjoy a certain degree of autonomy *vis-à-vis* the national level and should hold in particular a specific role in candidate selection (von dem Berge et al., 2013). This dimension relates to the degree of freedom of action of the “party on the ground”, conceptualised by Cular as the vertical power sharing (2005). Decentralisation alone does, however, not always mean democratisation because national leaders could merely empower local leaders that would be as oligarchic as the former (Scharrow, 2005; von dem Berge et al., 2013).

In short, a democratic candidate selection process should be undertaken by an inclusive and relatively decentralised selectorate. Scholars ascribe greater importance to the inclusiveness dimension than to decentralisation (Scharrow, 2005; von dem Berge et al., 2013) because the former offers more guarantees of real democratisation, i.e. a lot of individuals decide together. The definition is complemented in the next section by the way the selectorates decide.

Procedures

The procedures used to surround the decision-making processes are at least as important as the actors in charge of the decision although this area is less straightforward pointed out in the literature. Zeuner defines intraparty democracy as “the implementation of a minimum set of norms within the organizations of political parties” (2003). Party rules are central to the definition of a democratic process. Scholars look at the presence of principles in the party statutes (von dem Berge et al., 2013) or in the law (Zeuner, 2003). Scarrow stresses, however, that “high institutionalization does not equal internal democratization” (2005, p. 6). Formalisation only prevents from ad hoc and non-democratic procedures but does not guarantee that the rules in place are democratic. Moreover, an overruled process could curtail the degree of freedom of party selectorates (Sarrow, 2005).

The selection device is a main issue to be mentioned in party rules. First, the process should entail some kind of deliberation prior to the decision (Sarrow, 2005). Different viewpoints have to be presented such that a debate can take place. Secret voting appears also to be a necessary condition according to the democratic norm. Secrecy limits the possibilities of influence and intimidation of non-compliers at the moment of the decision (von dem Berge et al., 2013). The platform should indeed stay neutral (Kabasakal, 2012). Secrecy has however to have an end when votes are counted. Transparency then prevails such that all party members could know precisely what the selection results are (von dem Berge et al., 2013).

Outcome

Definitions of a democratic candidate selection process include the selectorates, the procedures but the outcome as well. In order to get a democratic outcome, i.e. a (list of) candidate(s), parties should avoid restrictions on eligibility as aspirant candidate (Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Lovenduski & Norris, 1993). The pool of potential candidates should be as large as possible (Norris, 2004). At the same time, although scholars recommend inclusive candidacy requirements, they suggest that a democratic process also comprises a balanced outcome. The final slate has to respect fair proportions of the relevant demographic groups of the population. To this end, demographic quotas are often necessary because selectorates can hardly guarantee a representative outcome without rules (Rahat, Hazan, & Katz, 2008; Scarrow, 2005). These rules concern mostly women and minorities (Norris, 2004). The criteria used to assess the democratic character of the outcome are thus paradoxical: there should be no barrier to entry but the outcome should be controlled so as to stay representative.

All in all it seems that the definition of intraparty democracy in terms of candidate selection processes is multi-faceted. Three main areas emerge from the literature review. First, scholars consider that the actors in charge of the selection could play on the democratic character of the decision. In order to be democratic, the selectorates should be inclusive and decentralised (or at least not centralised). A particular attention is paid to membership requirements that have to be flexible. Second, the process should be surrounded by some rules, and provide room for deliberation prior to the decision as

well as secrecy during voting. Third, a democratic outcome is the result of an open call for applications even though some rules could be accepted in order to get a balanced slate.

Method

The paper relies on original data collected in eleven political parties in Belgium. There are five Francophone parties and five Flemish parties, each fitting in one of the following party families: the greens (Ecolo, Groen), the socialists (PS, sp.a), the Christian-democrats (cdH, CD&V), the liberals (MR, Open VLD), and the 'nationalists' (FDF, N-VA). In addition, one party under study does not have an ideological counterpart in the francophone side of Belgium: the Flemish extreme-right party (Vlaams Belang).

Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with the political secretary of each party (sometimes called general director or national secretary). In two parties, another person has been interviewed, as a complement of the first one (one adjunct-political secretary and one party vice-president). The political secretary is the party's head inside the party, next to the party president, i.e. the political head. Most of the time, the political secretary is responsible for the management of the party internal organisation, its remit going from a.o. contacts with all party entities, human resources management, communication management, definition of party strategy. But above all, the political secretary is in charge of the coordination of the candidate selection process to a greater or a lesser extent, depending on parties. In total, 13 interviews have been conducted, between October 2013 and March 2014, i.e. in the run-up to the 'mother of all elections' of May 25, 2014. Processes of candidate selection were at this time in progress. All but one interview were recorded and taped. They lasted on average one hour.

The interviews have been conducted within the framework of my PhD research that analyses the processes of candidate selection. This paper only uses one question, asked almost identically to each respondent, approximately midway through the interview. "How would you describe/define a democratic candidate selection process?" For some interviews, a by-question has been added, in order to get more information. "According to you, is the candidate selection process in your party democratic? How would you improve the process?" Before answering this question, respondents were asked to describe the selection process, to give some insights on the timing and on the more or less formal character of the process.

Practitioners' views on intraparty democracy

There is a growing literature on intraparty democracy but the theory is not so often compared to the reality. This article aims to contrast scholars' views and practitioners' views on the principles of a democratic candidate selection process. The next sections present how key actors within political parties conceptualise intraparty democracy, analysing in turn whether and how they address characteristics of selectorates, procedures and the outcome of the process.

Selectorates

Most scholars consider inclusiveness as the most prevailing feature of a democratic candidate selection process. A great majority of respondents also assert that a large selectorate is a democratic sign. In eight out of eleven parties, respondents talk about the participation of party rank-and-file members. It is the case even for respondents whose party does not call on members to select the candidates. "Members have the first and the last word" notes a political secretary. The democratic character of the process is justified in another party through an increased role of the rank-and-file. "The procedure [by which we select candidates] is approved by the affiliated members". Another respondent insists upon the importance of a very inclusive selectorate: "If the decision is taken by too few people, she loses her legitimacy." A quorum guaranteeing that a minimum number of members attend the selection meeting is also put forward as a democratic feature. Interestingly, no respondent makes the point that voters' participation to the selection process could be a democratic feature. No party in Belgium uses open primaries, what could explain the absence of this characteristic in their definition.

Despite the fact that an inclusive selectorate is noticed when talking about intraparty democracy, five respondents nuance the assertion. They argue that direct democracy is not per se democratic. They highlight the negative effect of a large and open assembly. Two of them relate the story of the "bus democracy" whereby a candidate hires a bus to take party members to the meeting where s/he offers them foods and drinks in exchange of votes. Another respondent asks the following question: "Can you say that this is direct democracy when two-thirds of the party members do not show up? This is the ultimate form of democracy, but is it the ideal model?" Those respondents justify then why their party does not fully respect the principles of direct democracy while still considering that their model is democratic. "This is not because we do not organise a party congress that there is no democracy."

Five respondents consider that representative democracy is a good principle to respect for candidate selection. There is then a delegation of power from the rank-and-file to their representatives. "The final choice belongs to people that have the legitimacy." Political secretaries argue that the basis of the party is well represented in the selectorate, what makes the process democratic.

A more exclusive selectorate is not seen by all as undemocratic. One respondent stresses that a smaller group could be democratic because pluralism is guaranteed from the moment several people decide together. A threat to the democratic character of the selection process in the case of a small selectorate is according to another respondent having an individual with big leadership that could influence other selectors. This political secretary emphasizes the advantage of having some intermediary bodies deciding altogether. "It feeds and enlightens the debate". Two respondents though assert that an exclusive selectorate is definitely not democratic.

Scholars define intraparty democracy thanks to inclusiveness of the selectorates but also through decentralisation. When giving their own definition, fewer party actors mention decentralisation compared to inclusiveness. Six respondents point out the

involvement of several levels of power in the process, four in positive terms and two in negative terms. At the positive side, a political secretary justifies the democratic character by the freedom given to the local level, both to decide on candidates but also to decide on the procedures. According to another respondent, the association between party actors from the national and the local level is positively correlated to the degree of democracy. He sees confidently the external look that national leaders can have on the choices that have to be made. At the negative side, a respondent highlights that decentralisation leads to a lack of global strategy in terms of who will be part of the future parliamentary fraction. Each constituency decides on its own top candidates without thinking beyond. A democratic candidate selection process should take according to him this strategy into account. Another political secretary whose party does not use a decentralised process argues that it is more democratic to decide together than to split the decision in each constituency.

In short, practitioners give a definition that look like these given by scholars but it still differs on some points. They agree on the democratic character of the involvement of rank-and-file members although some point out the risks linked to the organisation of 'polls'. Interestingly no respondent makes the point of inclusive membership requirements whereas scholars put it forward. Almost the half of the respondents mentions that representative democracy is also democratic, and that a process involving a quite exclusive selectorate can be supported. This point is hardly made in the literature on intraparty democracy related to candidate selection. Similar to scholars, few respondents define a democratic process thanks to the principles of power distribution. Some do even prefer centralisation. The next section compares again definitions of both sources, but in terms of the procedures.

Procedures

More than the half of the respondents emphasizes the importance of rules surrounding the process of selection. Two political secretaries recognize that candidates democratically chosen cannot be selected according to a back-of-the-envelope process. Clarity is central to the definitions given by respondents. Three of them use in particular the word "explain". All actors have to understand what happens and why this happens. A respondent even agrees on infringing party rules on condition that the reasons are well explained.

Almost all respondents mention the device used to select candidates when defining intraparty democracy. Four note that the democratic character passes through the mere possibility of voting against the proposition made. Mechanisms are foreseen if the model list is not approved by the selectorates. There is then some kind of a paradox in the definitions given by political secretaries. Two respondents use the word "transparency" to call their party's selection process. Right to privacy is, however, noted twice. If too many people are aware of the content of the discussions prior to the final decision, the risk is growing that everything gets public. "This is not good for the party, and maybe for politics in general as well." They try to keep the discussions behind closed doors. On the one hand some define a democratic process thanks to transparency while others reckon

that full openness may not be good for intraparty democracy. Additionally, secret voting is specified as a democratic feature by two interviewees. One highlights that “sometimes the vote does not match the debate”. Such surprises show that secrecy guarantees a fair voting procedure. In two parties, they prefer not to vote because “there is no more discussions about which candidate has been selected by 51% or by 95%. The former candidate is already demotivated before beginning the campaign.”

Six respondents tackle the issue of deliberation. A democratic process should entail at some point a discussion among the selectors “although it is not worth talking hours if it is not constructive because discussions have to land somewhere.” Deliberations sometimes directly involve candidates that get the possibility to defend themselves in front of the selectorates. “[The selection meeting] is a highlight of free speech.”

All but one respondent take on board in his/her definition one or more criteria related to the selection procedures. Having rules and respecting principles of transparency, secrecy, or privacy are among the criteria put forward by practitioners. But they also touch on the mere outcome of the process, as discussed in the next section.

Outcome

In their definition of intraparty democracy, scholars refer to inclusive candidacy requirements and at the same time to some guarantees of a balanced outcome. Quite few respondents point to an open race among aspirant candidates. One notes that everybody can apply, and the two others restrict it to party members. “There is no screening at departure like ‘you should have been there for at least five years’, or ‘you should already have done an election’. There is a large openness.” Three respondents spontaneously bring to notice some selection criteria such as the electoral potential of a candidate. “It is the voter that decides who ends up where.”

Surprisingly, only four political secretaries specify something about a balanced outcome, although gender quota mechanisms for instance are well established (Meier, 2012). One respondent suggests that the list should take into account the number of men and women, and of ‘external’ candidates. Another states that the ideal choice should start from the desired parliamentary fraction in terms of profiles. “What are the qualities and the capabilities of a good fraction? Not of a good MP. A fraction has to be complementary.”

Even though this was not asked at this point of the interview, three respondents refer in particular to other political parties when defining a democratic selection process. “There are people envying us in other parties.” “Some colleagues from other parties were not able to get over it when I told them [how we are selecting candidates].” All three criticise at some point the other parties. “There is the hardliner democracy like the Greens [...] with all excesses and slides that it drags along.” Another respondent also points to the Greens. “They have the image of party that functions the most democratically [...] but they cannot take a decision.” One green interviewee also compares his/her party to the other parties. “We have the feeling that the other parties are way less democratic than us.”

Three respondents conclude that the ideal candidate selection process does not exist. "It is always possible to make it more democratic." "Our system is the less bad one." Only one respondent sees his/her process as the best one: "I do not see how we could function more democratically than now". Two other respondents then concede that a democratic process is not the panacea because political parties need to be pragmatic and realist. "This is not a fairy-tale world."

Discussion

The definitions of a democratic candidate selection process given by political secretaries taken altogether match to a good extent the definitions given by scholars although some insist upon certain issues while others on other dimensions. In six parties the respondent(s) has/have mentioned all three main dimensions of intraparty democracy. Only one respondent has not pointed out the inclusiveness and the degree of centralisation of the selectorates. The same situation applies to the procedures, which are brought up by all but one respondent. Three respondents have however not raised the issue of the outcome. The overall result is therefore consistent between both types of definitions. Practitioners are not that far from the idea of democracy developed by scholars, and *vice versa*.

The most surprising finding though is the relatively low support towards the need for a very inclusive selectorate in order to be democratic. Many respondents criticize the poll system where all party members decide together. The literature is not unanimous about whether political actors do support inclusive selectorates. On the one hand, Saglie and Heidar (2004) have proved that the higher the level of party involvement, the less support for an inclusive selectorate. Political secretaries would thus be expected not to defend members' involvement – as quite some of the actors interviewed. On the other hand, Kabasakal (2012) recalls survey results where 40 percent of the surveyed local party leaders chose all party members as best actor to nominate candidates. Self-interested reasons could justify this position. Pragmatic leaders would plead for inclusiveness in order to retain public support, and at the end of the day to win elections (Scarrow, 2005). But at the same time, Hazan and Rahat (2010) argue that parties should not be too internally democratic for other pragmatic reasons. A too open selection process would prevent parties from maintaining control over their candidates and legislators. This idea fits within the competitive democracy trend (Saglie & Heidar, 2004): parties' main objective should be "to be cohesive and disciplined in order to maximise their capacities to compete successfully and efficiently in elections" (Sandri, 2012, p. 68). A political secretary fits perfectly into this vision when she says that in order to avoid internal conflicts, they decided to have a more exclusive selectorate as "safeguard". Conversely another political secretary fits into the 'participatory democracy' vision where "intraparty democracy is a value as such" (Sandri, 2012, p. 72). "According to our internal culture, it is more democratic when it comes close to direct democracy. [...] If it were not democratic, it would be bad for us.", he reported.

Instead of an unconditional plea for inclusiveness, respondents were more keen to highlight the legitimacy of their process. It is democratic because it is legitimate.

“Members have entrusted the committee with the candidate selection. The more the choice is legitimate, the more it is accepted.” “Their legitimacy is sufficient because [candidate selection] is part of their missions.” Another respondent directly makes the link between the lack of need for inclusiveness within the selectorate and legitimacy. “The committee has to be legitimate in order to be accepted by the party members.” Other respondents do not specifically use the word “legitimacy” but use “support” instead. “Our process is democratic because there were lots of mechanisms and equilibriums aiming at a large support for the lists.”

Conclusion

Scholars underpin that intraparty democracy is a multi-faceted concept. No proper definition could reduce the concept to one dimension. A literature review shows though that three main dimensions are present in most definitions. The paper has outlined in detail why these dimensions contribute to the democratic character of a political process within a party, in particular the process of selection of parliamentary candidates.

Both scholars and practitioners consider the actors in charge of the selection to be influential on its democratic character. An inclusive selectorate is of course an often-mentioned criterion although practitioners do not all agree on the absolute necessity of a large group of selectors. They argue that representative democracy is respectable as well. Smaller selectorates are democratic according to some respondents if rank-and-file members entrust them. Legitimacy in general is central to several definitions. Fewer practitioners address the issue of decentralisation and, moreover, there is no consensus on the democratic character of a decentralised process. Almost all definitions comprise the necessity of some rules surrounding the process for reasons of clarity and transparency. Secret voting and room for deliberation prior to the decision are brought up as democratic rules. Finally, the outcome of the process is less often raised. Only some respondents highlight the criterion of open candidacy requirements and of mechanisms guaranteeing a representative outcome.

Interestingly, some respondents compare their own process to those of another political party. The comparison is often made with the Greens – that are said to be the most internally democratic parties – but always with the aim of justifying why their own process is more democratic than the Greens’ process. It seems that practitioners have pride in their party’s internal organisation and all consider their party to be democratic, although some qualify their sentiments. Almost all respondents indeed define intraparty democracy according to the process at work in their own party.

Few researches directly address the discussion on the theoretical aspects of intraparty democracy, as pointed by Sandri (2012). The purpose of this paper was to contrast what can be read in the political science literature and what real-world actors think about the concept. As such the comparison is enriching. I come to the conclusion that scholars are not disconnected from the real world and that practitioners highlight more or less the same issues than scholars. But even though the definitions from both sides do not totally

differ, the emphasis is put on different issues. All in all, practitioners are more pragmatic and think beyond the mere democratic advantage of a device by looking already at feasibility and potential negative effects.

Future research could ask other types of actors, be it within political parties or in the civil society. It could be interesting to test whether the (party) position influences the definition. Other research might also delve deeper into the question of the link between the actual process and the way actors conceptualise intraparty democracy. Based on this research, it seems that actors would be by definition convinced by the way their own party functions and would therefore consider its features to be democratic.

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