

## Chapter 1

# High-Intensity Participation, Political Parties, and Democratic Politics



THIS BOOK IS ABOUT HIGH-INTENSITY political participation, that is, participation that takes a lot of time and effort on the part of those who are involved in it. By the term “political participation” we mean activities by individuals aimed at influencing the policies or the personnel of the state and government. Thus participation of this type refers to activities such as campaigning, organizing, fund-raising, and attending meetings as well as seeking and achieving elected office.

The task of understanding why some people participate in politics while others do not is perhaps *the* central concern of political science. As is widely recognized in a large body of literature, citizen participation is at the core of democratic politics. A good deal of this literature is about voting, which is of course a fundamentally important means of influencing government. However, the study of voting behavior is not a good arena for understanding wider forms of political participation. This is because voting is a relatively low-cost activity, and consequently individuals’ willingness to vote in an election only throws a limited light on the factors that motivate them to undertake high-intensity forms of participation, which is the focus of our concerns. It is also true that voting turnout has little variance; either people vote or they do not, and this fact gives only modest empirical leverage in understanding the determinants of participation in general (see Aldrich 1993).

Highly active participants are much more important to democratic politics than is often recognized. Individuals who run campaigns of various kinds, undertake voluntary activity in different types of organization,

and, at the high end of the scale, stand for elective office literally run the system. Indeed democratic politics is impossible without them. Thus if explaining political participation is a core issue in political science, then explaining high-intensity participation is arguably the most important concern in this core area.

One of the key features of high-intensity participation is that it takes place both in orthodox institutions—such as interest groups, charities, political parties, and state institutions such as local authorities—and in unorthodox institutions—such as environmental protest groups, new social movements, and utopian communities. These are quite diverse forms, but their common thread is that they involve organizations. These may not be the classic bureaucracies of Weberian theory, but to varying degrees they involve shared values, a collective memory, mechanisms for the socialization of new recruits, mechanisms for enforcing decisions, and, to varying degrees, longevity.

High-intensity participation is impossible without institutions, since individuals acting alone cannot change state policies. To effect this change actors need an institutional framework within which collective action can be organized. Creating the cooperative behavior that underpins collective action requires actors to have a stable set of expectations about each other, and this can only be fostered in institutions.

The institutions that provide the framework for collective action in this study are political parties. Political parties are the most important nonstate institutions in democratic politics, since, unlike other types of organizations such as interest groups, they aim to capture control of the state by running candidates for elective office. For this reason parties are one of the best vehicles for studying high-intensity participation.

If parties are important for democratic politics in general, they are particularly important for the British system, with its uncodified constitution and executive dominance of the legislature. However, it is often forgotten that the Westminster system relies on strong political parties, without which executive dominance would be impossible. The party system is strong because two conditions are met. First, the parties really matter to voters, with partisanship being a strong force in electoral politics. Second, parties themselves are strong, having an active organizational base, adequate funds, and a professional structure that keeps them in existence between elections and that performs the key tasks of campaigning, organizing, and recruiting. If electoral partisanship were to weaken greatly and the party organizations were to wither and die, the Westminster system would collapse.

This might seem like a strong conclusion, but it is supported by work in the social choice literature. If the issue spaces in a society are multidimensional and there is no partisanship with which to anchor voters, then social choice processes become chaotic (McKelvey 1976; Schofield 1978). This means that no party will be able to capture a stable majority of the electorate, since it can always be outflanked by rivals maneuvering along a new issue dimension.

These of course are abstract results in social choice, but they have concrete relevance to the British case. Party loyalty underpins stable government, and this is ultimately enforced by party members and the electorate. If Members of Parliament (MPs) were as loosely attached to their parties as U.S. congressmen are to their own, then the U.K. executive could never develop coherent programs or govern effectively. The final sanction used by governments to whip dissident MPs into line is the fear of deselection by their local parties and the resulting loss of their seats arising from the fact that the electorate will not support independents. In the absence of partisanship in the electorate and effective local party organizations, this ultimate sanction would not work.

In Britain, as in most advanced industrial democracies, it is possible to join a political party by paying an annual membership fee and agreeing to certain rather general principles espoused by the party.<sup>1</sup> Party members vary in their involvement from people who pay their subscriptions and do little else to those who are full-time politicians at the local or national levels. Members at the lower end of the participation scale are very similar to voters in terms of the amount of time they devote to politics. However, at the high end of the scale party members are very different from voters, and it is this type of high-intensity participation that is the focus of this study.

The key question to be addressed in this book is, Why are some individuals high-intensity participants while others are not? Thus most of our effort is spent on trying to explain individual-level behavior within an institutional context. Since understanding the institutional context is vital for explaining high-intensity participation, we begin by examining the British party system. This examination, which is the main focus of the rest of chapter 1, provides the reader with the necessary background for understanding the context in which such participation takes place.

Political participation can only be understood in terms of a theoretical model that explains why some people get involved in politics while others do not. In chapter 2 we review the main alternative theoretical models that have been used to try to explain political participation in

the literature, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective. This leads to a discussion in chapter 3 of how high-intensity participation might be measured and how we should go about testing which of these rival models provides the best explanation of such participation. The aim here is to determine which theory, or combination of theories, provides the best explanation of both low-intensity and high-intensity participation. Chapter 3 uses cross-section surveys of Labour and Conservative party members in Britain to test these alternatives within a static framework.

Chapter 4 extends the analysis of chapter 3 from that of a static cross-sectional perspective to that of a dynamic perspective using panel analysis. As is well known, panel surveys make it possible to investigate the causal dynamics of models with much greater validity than is possible in a cross-section analysis. The analysis in this chapter is focused on identifying an optimal model of high-intensity participation, that is, a model that provides the best explanation of this type of participation.

The evidence in chapter 4 also suggests that high-intensity participation is declining in the British party system. Having developed a model for explaining the dynamics of high-intensity participation, chapter 5 addresses the question of whether the decline can be reversed. The focus in this chapter is on the Labour party, which achieved a remarkable turnaround in its fortunes in the period 1994 to 1997 by reversing a long-term trend decline in membership. The issue examined in chapter 5 is whether this reversal of the decline in membership also implied a reversal of the decline in high-intensity participation.

Chapter 6 continues the theme of declining participation to address the question of why participation fails. This is particularly important given the evidence in chapter 4 that such participation appears to be in decline in the grass roots party organizations. The key issue is to examine whether the model that explains high-intensity participation can be reversed and used to explain why some people give up party politics altogether and drop out.

Chapter 7 changes the focus again, this time from party members to voters. The aim of this chapter is to investigate the extent to which the optimal model examined earlier can be adapted to explain low-intensity partisanship in the form of voting. In other words, we move away from high-intensity participation to examine the dynamics of voting behavior and partisanship over time. Since the evidence in chapter 2 suggests that low-intensity and high-intensity participation within a political party can

be explained by rather similar models, the aim of chapter 7 is to see whether an adapted version of the model can explain voting behavior outside the institutional setting of the political party.

The final chapter examines the implications of these findings for the study of political participation in political science and also for the party system in general and the British party system in particular. As well as speculating about high-intensity participation in the future, this chapter examines some of the implications of the theoretical findings for the Westminster model of parliamentary government. We have suggested that high-intensity participation takes place only within an institutional context; in the rest of this chapter we examine the role of political parties in Britain in order to furnish the institutional context for the study.

### **The Importance of Parties in Britain**



With the emergence of mass, electoral politics in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century, the political party came to be regarded, almost universally, as one of the fundamental institutional features of representative democracy. Parties became the primary means by which opinions were structured into some form of coherent political program that would both guide government and enable the ruled to hold the rulers to account. Arguments might have prevailed at times since then over particular features of the party system—for example, the respective roles of party leaders and party activists in determining party policies (McKenzie 1955; Minkin 1978)—but there was no question of the extensive public support, at both the mass and elite levels, for the party as a significant institution in the political system.

Twenty-five years ago a committee of inquiry established by the British government to examine financial aid to political parties, the Houghton Committee, provided survey evidence of strong public support for parties. In a representative, national survey of the electorate carried out for the committee, 86 percent of respondents agreed that parties “are essential to our form of national government”; 84 percent agreed that “in general, the parties are a good thing for Britain”; and 65 percent agreed that “they are the only way to represent the public’s views” (HMSO 1976: 232–33). In its report, the committee concluded that “the existence of political parties is an essential feature of our system of parliamentary democracy” (19) and outlined various reasons why it believed that parties were essential. These

reasons provide a useful summary of the functions of parties as they have operated in twentieth-century Britain.

First, the committee stated that parties are “the agencies through which the electorate can express its collective will” (18). The committee did not elaborate further upon this, nor on any other of its statements, but clearly what its members had in mind was that parties provided the electorate with alternative policy choices at elections.

Second, the committee argued that parties perform an aggregative role in society. Parties, it stated, provide “the framework within which differing political views can be formulated, debated and translated into practical political programmes, and the many demands and efforts of smaller groups in society can be aggregated and merged into a small number of workable alternative political programmes” (18). In other words, diverse political demands are aggregated by parties into broad political programs that form the basis of legislative behavior. The third point, which follows from this, is that parties provide “the essential basis for stable government in an elected Parliament” (18). Thus, policy outcomes are more predictable because parties oblige individual legislators to take political responsibility for their actions, whether popular or unpopular.

Without parties to enforce loyalty, individual legislators are more likely to seek benefits and avoid costs in their legislative actions, thereby avoiding difficult political decisions and increasing the likelihood of political gridlock. Hence, the weakness of party in the United States makes governing more difficult because members of both Houses of Congress lack the organizational means of sharing the costs as well as the benefits of government (see Arnold 1990).

Fourth, parties provide the means for “selecting and nominating candidates for election to Parliament” (HMSO 1976: 18) and “an orderly framework within which political leaders can emerge, develop, and strive for political office” (18). Parties, therefore, provide a forum in which candidates for public office can be sifted and assessed, and this process continues as would-be leaders make their way up the parties’ organizational hierarchy. Furthermore, would-be leaders develop the arts of bargaining and compromise, both necessary aspects of leadership in liberal democracies. So, parties are arenas for political learning.

Fifth, parties are “the means whereby members of the general public are able to participate in the formulation of policies,” and, finally, parties perform an educative role “to promote and maintain political awareness within society at all levels” (18).

In addition to these six reasons advanced by members of the committee in support of parties, we could add another, namely, that parties help organize disappointment. Defeat in an election or on policy issues is a frequent phenomenon in political life, and a party helps people of similar views to adapt, reorganize, and restructure collectively in the face of such adversity.

Twenty-five years after the Houghton Committee report it is unlikely that a similar committee of inquiry would write such a powerful and positive report on parties.<sup>2</sup> Recently parties in Britain have received a bad press. They have been linked with corruption, with the abuse of patronage, and with the initiation of policies for purely factional advantage. There has been extensive press coverage of illegal activities in local government and of cronyism in appointments to quasi-nongovernmental organizations (or quangos) and in the awarding of political honors, all cases in which parties have inappropriately exploited their powers. There have been numerous stories of financial irregularities in party funding, eventually leading to the establishment of the Committee on Standards in Public Life to examine the whole issue.

Disillusion with parties has developed within the political elite. For example, it was reported that the participants to the 1993 Anglo-German Koenigswinter conference, an annual meeting of a section of both countries' political elites, acknowledged that their parties "had run out of ideas, alienated public opinion, [and] were in need of new inspiration and leaders" (*Guardian*, March 20, 1993). In May 1993 the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) broadcast a radio program, "When the Party's Over," in which many of the contributors criticized parties; again in November 1993 it broadcast a television program in which a prominent journalist, Martin Jacques, asserted that parties were outdated and an outmoded means of political expression. Oxford academic Vernon Bogdanor, a critic of the modern form of parties, wrote an article in the *Times* arguing that the mass party was now outdated (*Times*, September 27, 1993). Finally, Mulgan (1994) claimed that parties were outdated institutions, more appropriate for the nineteenth century than for the twenty-first century.

Whether these doubts among parts of the British political elite regarding the performance of parties are shared by a wider public is debatable. The Houghton Committee's specific survey questions, referred to earlier, have not been repeated, thus certain indirect measures—such as party identification, voter turnout at general elections, and party member-

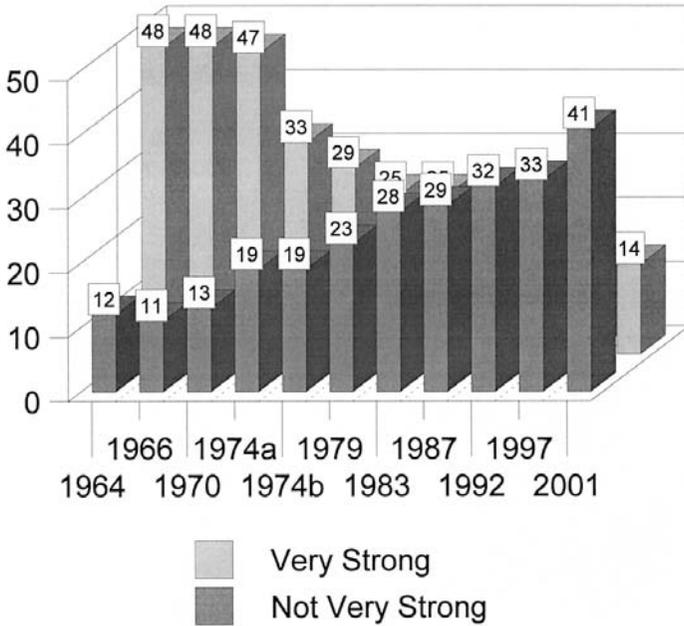


Fig. 1.1. Trends in the strength of party identification in Britain, 1964–2001. (Data from British Election Study Surveys.)

ship—have been used by academics attempting to assess the mass public’s views of parties (Webb 1995). The evidence from these alternative measures, however, is somewhat mixed.

Data from the British Election Studies show that over the past thirty years the majority of people still identify with a political party, but, as figure 1.1 reveals, the intensity of this identification has declined. The number of respondents with a very strong attachment to a party has declined from 48 percent in 1964 to 14 percent in 2001, and those with a not very strong attachment has grown from 12 percent in 1964 to 39 percent in 2001. There is, however, a debate on the validity of the party identification measure, focusing on the extent to which it measures public attitudes about a specific party’s policies and leadership at a particular moment of time rather than about parties in general (Brynin and Sanders 1997; Bartle 1999). Hence, this evidence must be interpreted with care.

Since 1945 electoral turnout has fluctuated from a high of 84 percent in 1951 to a low of 59 percent in 2001, and as is clear from figure 1.2 a

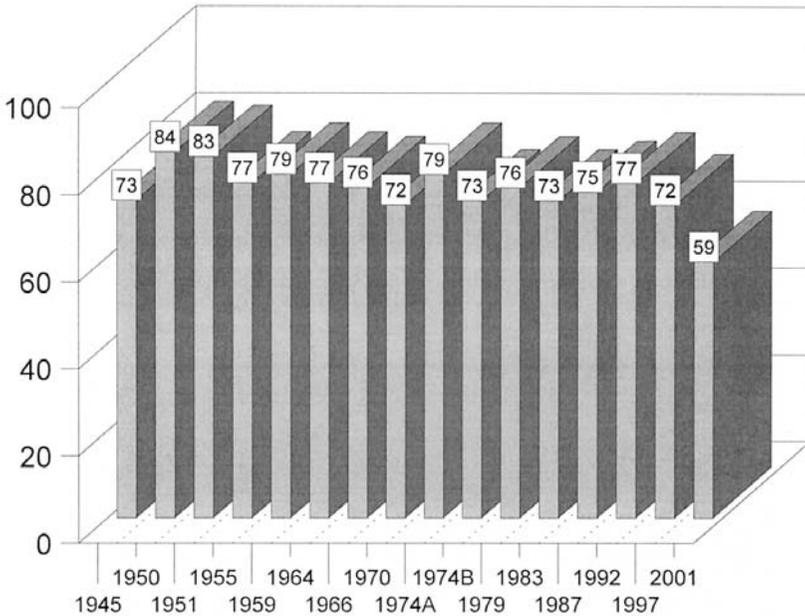


Fig. 1.2. Electoral turnout in general elections, 1945–2001

downward trend is apparent in this baseline measure of political participation. To some extent turnout figures are a reflection of the efficiency and accuracy of the voter registration process.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, the month of the year in which a general election is called will affect the turnout figure.

Finally, individual membership of both Conservative and Labour parties has declined since the late 1940s and early 1950s, when they both had large memberships. At that time, membership record keeping was the responsibility of constituency officers, most of whom were volunteers and amateurs, which leads one to doubt the accuracy of the numbers published. Only with the introduction of national membership records by the Labour party in the late 1980s, by the Liberal Democrats from their formation in 1988, and by the Conservative party in the late 1990s can one feel more confident of their greater accuracy. Notwithstanding that point, there is a trend decline in both parties' membership, which can be observed in table 1.1.

The trends in table 1.1 are relatively clear. However, that between 1994 and 1997 the Labour party significantly increased its individual membership suggests that decline is not some inevitable feature of modern society and politics but can be influenced by a party's own recruitment strategies. For much of the postwar period both the Labour and Conservative leaderships displayed only limited interest in their membership. Only after its 1983 election defeat did the Labour party begin to give a higher priority to membership recruitment; but it was under Tony Blair that a more active mobilization-recruitment strategy was initiated. This will be discussed more fully in chapter 5.

Party identification, electoral turnout, and party membership have often been used by those suggesting that parties in Britain are in decline as surrogates for any more specific questions on the public's attitudes about parties per se. We believe, however, for the various reasons given earlier that this evidence is both too limited and too vague. Of greater value is the specific question on the public's attitude about parties asked in the 1997 British Election Study, which asked respondents to grade their feelings on a five-point scale about whether they regarded parties as necessary to make the political system work. We see in table 1.2 that some 76 percent of respondents in the election study were strongly supportive of parties (i.e., graded one or two) and only 5 percent were critical of parties (i.e., graded four or five) (British Election Study 1997). This evidence suggests that mass-level support for parties remains high. We conclude therefore that, although parties should not be complacent about

**TABLE 1.1 Trends in Individual Membership of the Labour, Conservative, and Liberals/Liberal Democrat Parties**

Year	Labour	Conservatives	Liberals/Liberal Democrats <sup>a</sup>
1953	1,005,000	2,805,000	—
1960	790,192	1,750,000	243,000
1974	691,889	1,500,000	190,000
1983	295,344	1,200,000	145,258
1992	279,530	500,000	100,000
1998	387,776	204,000 <sup>b</sup>	—

Source: Labour = Labour Party National Executive Reports; Conservative Party and Liberals/Liberal Democrats = Katz and Mair 1992: 847; Webb 1994: 113; Butler and Butler 1994: 132; Webb and Farrell 1999: 48.

<sup>a</sup>Note that the Liberal Party became the Liberal Democrats in 1988.

<sup>b</sup>The 1998 figure for the Conservatives is based on the numbers participating in the ballot on the party's European strategy.

**TABLE 1.2. Public Attitudes toward Parties in 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?"

<i>Parties are . . .</i>		
Necessary	1	43%
	2	33%
	3	18%
	4	3%
Not necessary	5	2%
	Don't know/No response	
		1%

*Source:* British Election Study 1997.

the public's support for them as institutions and although that support may have diminished over time, they are still recognized as important features of democracy. To that extent parties retain their tenacious hold on political life at both elite and mass levels in Britain.

In 1950 a group of American political scientists produced a report, "Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System" (APSA 1950), in which they argued the need to replace the prevailing American party system—which they described as "two loose associations of state and local organizations with very little national machinery and very little national cohesion" (25)—with a "responsible party" (22) system. They defined "responsible parties" using various criteria. In their view responsible parties are cohesive organizations with national programs "drafted at frequent intervals by a broadly representative convention" (10); a "more program-conscious" (70) national party membership "in which individuals support this program rather than personalities, patronage and local matters" (10); "strong and active campaigning organizations in the constituencies" (21–22); and a "permanent, professional staff" (50). The type of responsible party the APSA committee had in mind was based upon the British, Canadian, and Australian party systems.<sup>4</sup>

Fifty years after the publication of the APSA report it is interesting to examine whether the responsible party model still applies to Britain. The committee examined five key features of this model: programmatic goals, party membership, internal party democracy, party activism, and the professional party bureaucracy. To evaluate British parties in the light of these characteristics a number of different questions must be addressed: First, are the parties still programmatic in the sense of setting out a clearly

defined set of policy alternatives that the electorate can choose between? Second, do they recruit program-conscious members who democratically participate in the formulation of the party programs? Third, do parties have strong and active constituency organizations that support the national structure and ultimately enforce party cohesion? Finally, do their professional bureaucracies provide an institutional memory and sustain the wider organization?

The literature on party organization emerging since the APSA report tends to contradict the responsible party model. The “catch-all” party model stresses the importance of electoral success, which is sought at the expense of programmatic coherence (Kirchheimer 1966). The “cartel” party thesis argues that parties are increasingly becoming agencies of the state, suggesting that parties are no longer autonomous (Katz and Mair 1995). Finally, the “electoral-professional” model with its emphasis on centralized control by the leadership appears inconsistent with internal party democracy (Panebianco 1988). Are these models more appropriate descriptions of the British party system in the twenty-first century than is the responsible party model? Since at the time of the APSA report the Conservative and Labour parties dominated party politics, we intend to concentrate on these two parties in our response to the questions just mentioned, but some references to the Liberal Democrats will be made where appropriate.<sup>5</sup> We examine each of the criteria in the APSA report in turn.

### Parties and Programmatic Goals

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There are two senses of the term “programmatic goals,” one very general and the other more specific. The first refers to party representation of the cleavage between capital and labor, owners and workers. This interpretation is best exemplified by Samuel Beer (1965) in his study of the party system, *Modern British Politics*, in which he argues that the emergence of a “collectivist politics” in the twentieth century produced Tory and Socialist democracy. Beer claims that “party has distilled the interests and aspirations of a class into a comprehensive social philosophy” (87) and that “the voter has a choice of two coherent and distinctive programs” (88). Both party programs and voters’ loyalties reflected the dominant role of class in British politics. However, one must be careful not to exaggerate this form of programmatic cleavage in Britain, because without working-

class electoral support the twentieth century would not have been the “Conservative century” (Seldon and Ball 1994). Furthermore, socioeconomic changes from the 1950s onward have rendered this interpretation increasingly redundant, as parties’ programs and electoral appeals have developed beyond their traditional cleavages.

It was this development in Britain and in other industrialized European states that prompted Kirchheimer (1966: 184) to argue that “mass-integration” parties, such as the Labour party, were becoming “catch-all” parties. He argued that, whereas mass-integration parties had previously limited their electoral appeal to specific sections of the population, catch-all parties were adopting broader societal goals that transcended the interests of one particular class. In addition, Kirchheimer suggested that in this new type of party the powers of the leadership were being strengthened while those of the individual members were being downgraded.

The problem with Kirchheimer’s argument regarding parties’ electoral appeal is that neither Conservative nor Labour parties ever appealed solely to one specific, class-based section of the population. We have already made the point that the Conservative party always required working-class supporters to win elections, the “angels in marble” as they were described by McKenzie and Silver (1968: 74). Similarly, the Labour party’s electoral strategy from 1918 onward avoided appealing solely to one particular class; it aimed to win the support of all workers “by hand or by brain” (Cole: 18).

The second use of the term “programmatic goals” refers to parties’ specific policy commitments, the most significant of which are contained within their election manifestos. Manifestos constitute “an authoritative statement of the policy concerns of the collective leaders of the parties and that defines and guides the presentation of issues in the media, through which party priorities get to the electorate” (Klingemann, Hof-ferbert, and Budge 1994: 26). Manifestos are used by parties to send messages to the voters and also to the government machine.

In recent elections manifestos have grown considerably in size (Topf 1994: 153). However, some claim that they now put more emphasis on glossy images and, as a consequence, have become more bland. Furthermore, the manifesto pledges are ambiguous, often involving political fudges, and there is little relationship between manifestos and election campaigns (Weir and Beetham 1999: 100–110).

Parties clearly avoid taking too precise a position in their manifestos on some issues; nevertheless, the emphasis parties place upon issues

varies, and this indicates their relative priorities. Klingemann and his colleagues argue that their research on election manifestos between 1945 and 1987 confirms that parties adhere to a distinct and consistent left-right agenda, concluding that they “find support for the seemingly naive claim that what was written in these documents *before* elections was a good aid to predicting the actions of governments *after* the elections” (Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994: 20).

Twelve months after the Labour party’s 1997 general election victory, the government published an annual report listing its legislative achievements, and it included the following statement: “This list summarizes the current state of progress on each of the 177 manifesto commitments up to 1 May 1998. Of these, 50 have already been kept or done, 119 are under way and on course, and only 8 have yet to be timetabled” (TSO 1998b: 96). This statement demonstrates the importance that the contemporary Labour party attaches to its election manifesto. The manifesto is regarded as the party’s contract with the voters to deliver on its promises and, as such, is used as a means to overcome bureaucratic inertia or intraparty opposition. When Peter Mandelson stated, after the Labour party’s 1997 general election victory, that “Labour Members of Parliament have been elected to carry out the manifesto for which we have received an overwhelming mandate from the public” (*Guardian*, May 17, 1997), he was suggesting that Labour MPs had contractual obligations to support the government in its implementation strategy.

Labour is no different in this regard from its major party rival. The Conservative party’s origins as a nineteenth-century elite, cadre organization meant that its parliamentarians found the idea of election manifestos, and the accompanying concept of public mandate, an alien form of politics. Nevertheless, the twentieth-century history of the Conservative party is one of adaptation to modern political behavior in order to maintain its electoral hegemony. Election manifestos have been an important aspect of its appeal for popular support. Until 1945 these were issued as personal appeals from the party leader, but after 1950 they were issued in the name of the party.

Clearly parties shift in their programmatic commitments. For much of the 1980s the Conservative and Labour parties contradicted the Downsian (1957) model as they abandoned two-party consensus and developed very distinctive and polarized positions. Norris writes, “One of the most striking trends in British politics is how the major parties were sharply polarised during the early 1980s on classic economic and social issues,

such as public ownership versus privatisation, unilateralism versus multilateralism, and Britain's role within and outside Europe" (1993: 1). The Conservative party's four consecutive electoral successes between 1979 and 1992 forced the Labour party into a steady modification of the program that it had adopted in the early 1980s. After 1983 the Labour party first shifted away from public ownership and then, much more comprehensively, replaced its collectivist commitments with a liberal political economy such that, by the time it fought the 1997 general election, it had abandoned its traditional social democratic attachment to redistribution by means of taxation and public expenditure. At that general election, both major parties occupied a similar political terrain in which they were committed to private enterprise, market principles, and consumer choice. Nevertheless, a careful examination of the parties' 1997 election manifestos (Budge 1999) reveals significant differences along the left-right spectrum between Labour and Conservative parties. What is also revealed is that the Liberal Democrats, for the first time in over thirty years, were no longer positioned between Labour and Conservative parties but were to the left of the Labour party. The point is, however, that although political choices may have been limited for electors the parties remained programmatic rather than pragmatic and catch-all, albeit with a different set of commitments than in the previous decades.

One further point regarding the programmatic nature of British parties is that modification or adaptation of party programs does not happen solely as a result of a leader's sudden shift of opinion. For example, it took Neil Kinnock and his leadership team a considerable time to shift the Labour party away from some of the electorally unpopular policies it had adopted in 1983 (Hughes and Wintour 1990). It was Kinnock's long-term reforms that provided the base from which Blair's reforms between 1994 and 1997 could proceed. Similarly, with the Conservative party, although Margaret Thatcher became leader in 1975, her party only gradually moved toward her distinctive beliefs (Gamble 1994).

A consequence of the programmatic nature of British parties, and of the fusion of executive and legislative powers, has been the disciplined voting behavior of MPs. Their election to the House of Commons as party representatives, and thus as standard-bearers for a party program, has obliged them to sustain or oppose the executive's actions according to whether they are on the government or opposition back benches. Cohesive voting behavior of MPs along party lines has been a prominent feature of the twentieth-century legislature (Norton 1975, 1980). However,

that disciplined voting has been declining as a consequence of various factors, including the styles and capabilities of party leadership, the impact of the issue of British membership in the European Union (EU), and the social and cultural changes occurring among parliamentarians and party activists (Norton 1980). Nevertheless, disciplined party voting remains a significant feature of the responsible British party system as compared with the weaker American party system.

We now turn to a second feature of the responsible party model—membership.

### Party Membership



It might be thought that the APSA committee's attachment to the importance of a participatory, programmatic party membership is outdated. Parties appear to be less interested in recruitment, and some academic research has argued that members are increasingly irrelevant. For example, Mair has suggested that "the party on the ground . . . is becoming less important or . . . is in decline" (1997: 124).

We noted earlier that since the early 1950s party membership has declined. During the 1950s and 1960s Conservative and Labour leaders showed little concern over this trend. Periodic recruitment campaigns initiated from the 1960s onward were more symbolic than real, essentially because both leaderships were largely convinced of the unimportance of members. The development of a new communications technology, television and advertising in particular, meant that, as long as parties could obtain the money for election campaigning, they did not feel the need for human resources. Members were regarded as a less efficient means of communicating with voters than was the television "fireside chat" or the mass advertising campaign. This attitude was strongly influenced by an academic consensus that members were unimportant in influencing electoral outcomes (Butler and King 1966; Epstein 1967; Butler and Kavanagh 1988).

However, after almost forty years of relative party indifference to members, a transformation in attitude has occurred in which both Labour and Conservative party leaderships have openly and publicly committed themselves to the expansion of membership as an important feature of their political strategies. Labour declared a target of half a million members by 2001 (Labour Party 1998), and, similarly, the Conservative's target was one million members by "the Millenium" (Conservative Party

1997: 26). However, after the Labour party expanded membership from 305,000 in 1994 to 405,000 in 1997, recruitment stalled after the 1997 election.<sup>6</sup> It is noticeable, though, that Prime Minister Blair has constantly emphasized the importance of members as part of his long-term governing project (see, for example, *Guardian*, May 1, 1998). Similarly, the Conservative party, after a disastrous hemorrhaging of its membership during the 1990s, attempted to reproduce Labour's recruitment successes. That it did not achieve the ambitious goals for recruitment of new members does not detract from the higher priority attached to this effort in comparison with the past.

The reasons for this switch to a determined membership recruitment strategy are fourfold. First, the electoral benefits of an active membership became more apparent in the 1990s. Research has revealed that locally active members who engage in contacting voters through delivering leaflets and canvassing and who participate in mounting election-day organization to ensure voter turnout produce highly significant effects on constituency outcomes in general elections (Denver and Hands 1997; Johnston and Pattie 1997; Seyd and Whiteley 1992; Whiteley, Seyd, and Richardson 1994). The Labour party took note of the claims that an active membership brought beneficial electoral consequences.<sup>7</sup>

The best example of the electoral benefits of an active membership occurred in the 1997 general election, when the Liberal Democrats more than doubled their number of MPs in the House of Commons while at the same time their share of the national vote declined. This was largely due to targeted, local campaigns in which its local activists played a significant role (Whiteley and Seyd 1999).

Second, members enhance a party's political legitimacy. A large and increasing membership suggests popular support. Recruitment of new members became a major feature of Blair's leadership, enabling him to claim that Labour spoke for a broad community of people, in contrast to the Conservative party's diminishing and narrow constituency. One of the reasons for the former Conservative leader William Hague's wanting to recruit new Conservative members was to provide him and his party with a source of political legitimacy. It was a means by which he could demonstrate that his personal qualities of leadership were attractive, and it enabled him to claim that the Conservative party was attracting a broader and more representative level of support. Similarly, the reemergence of the Liberal Democrats as a significant force in British politics has been closely identified with its claim to have strong links in local communities.

Third, all parties are now keen to demonstrate their democratic cre-

dentials by extending membership participation into party decision making. New structures and procedures have been created to enable members to play a significant role in intraparty affairs. In such circumstances new members are an added attraction if they are more inclined to support the leadership than existing members and activists. Labour's experience between 1979 and 1983, when the party had come under the powerful influence of left activists, and subsequently came very close to electoral collapse, played an important part in Kinnock's, and then John Smith's, commitment to membership recruitment. Their introduction, and subsequent development, of one-member, one-vote procedures emphasized the important role of individual members in reducing the collective role of the trade unions and also in weakening activists' powers. Blair's use of ballots of all individual members on some policy issues is based upon his belief that the inactive members are more likely to support his objectives.

Finally, members are an important source of party funding. An essential feature of the British party system has been its voluntaristic nature, one consequence of which has been that parties have received only limited state aid and have been reliant for the bulk of their income upon donations from corporate bodies, such as companies and trade unions, as well as individuals. The corporate sector has provided the overwhelming proportion of Conservative and Labour party income. However, recent controversies regarding the funding of both parties, and possible corrupt practices, have raised some public concern.

In response to these concerns the government set up the Neill Committee (TSO 1998a) to examine party funding that proposed a greater degree of transparency in party finances, such that from the year 2000 all donations to parties of over five thousand pounds at the national and one thousand pounds at the local level must be publicly declared. Another response by both Conservative and Labour parties has been to place a greater emphasis upon the role of their members as subscribers and fund-raisers, as the Liberal Democrats have been forced to do out of necessity.<sup>8</sup> The ever-rising expense of maintaining the day-to-day activities of a party and the need to mount sophisticated and costly election campaigns require large sums of money, and members as either donors or fund-raisers have assumed a greater significance.

From 1988 onward the Labour party devoted considerable resources to broaden its income base by developing fund-raising efforts, membership initiatives, and financial services. In 1997 its National Executive Committee reported that the party had raised £1.6 million by individual dona-

tions in 1991, rising to £2.0 million in 1992, and to £10.0 million in 1997 (Labour Party 1997).<sup>9</sup> One of the consequences was to reduce the party's dependence upon trade union funding. Whereas, in 1978, 86 percent of the party's gross income had come from trade union affiliation fees, by 1991 the figure had been reduced to 50 percent (HMSO 1993: 87) and to 30 percent by 1997 (TSO 1998a: 32). The party's deputy general secretary claimed in evidence to the Neill Committee that "40 per cent of the party's funding was made up of small donations" and that "some 70,000 members pay a monthly subscription [i.e., a donation]" and "a further 500,000 people make a donation each year" (TSO 1998a: 32). The party's individual members have become an important source of income, as they provide contributions over and above their membership subscriptions.

The Conservative party seemingly has been less dependent upon its members for raising money. However, it is hard to estimate this precisely since the party has not been obliged to publish financial accounts and it has been unwilling to divulge much financial information, even to its own members. Membership subscriptions until 1999 were paid to local Conservative associations rather than to national party headquarters. However, a quota scheme, established in 1948, requires constituency associations to provide funds to central party headquarters, calculated on the basis of the Conservative share of the vote in each constituency. What is clear is that the amount of money raised by local parties and then channeled through to headquarters by means of this quota scheme declined in the 1990s (Pattie and Johnston 1996). In part, this was the consequence of a declining membership (Whiteley, Seyd, and Richardson 1994), but it was also a means by which local associations could show their political displeasure with the party leadership.

In the 1990s the Conservative party's financial problems were acute. Its income and expenditure accounts for the year ended March 1995 revealed liabilities of £19 million, and of these, £11 million was accounted for by a bank overdraft. Its need, therefore, of substantial donations from its supporters was considerable. It transpired that some of its most substantial donors came from overseas. Between 1992 and 1997 the party accepted forty-seven overseas donations worth a total of £16.2 million (TSO 1998a: 33). Nevertheless, the chairman of the Conservative party, Norman Fowler, claimed in evidence given to a House of Commons select committee that the party had raised £26 million in 1992–93, of which £18 million had been raised in the constituencies (HMSO 1993: 51). What was unclear from Fowler's statement was how much of the

money was raised by local members. But it has become clear that local associations are important in providing the national party with interest-free loans. While the total sum is not known, the Neill Committee records a loan figure of £3 million, with £1.2 million being provided by local associations in 1997 (TSO 1998a: 33). Thus even a party that in government was able to attract large corporate donations has revealed its need for members' subscriptions and fund-raising income.

So far we have demonstrated the importance that both party leaderships attach to their members. In this sense these parties continue to fulfill one of the essential requirements of the responsible party model. But the APSA committee went further by stressing the importance of "a program-conscious party membership" to ensure that the influence of personality, patronage, and locality was reduced. Do the parties recruit members committed to distinct principles? And do their principles change over time? Are there differences between inactive and active and newly recruited and long-standing members? Many of these questions will be answered in later chapters, but here we will deal with whether members are in fact program-conscious.

Our research reveals that Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrat members hold distinct opinions and that underlying these are distinctive ideological principles. In 1992 we wrote that Labour members "are critical of the market economy, and prefer more public intervention and the public provision of services; they believe that the bargaining rights of trade unions should be maintained; and, finally, they dislike Britain's possession of nuclear weapons, and want to cut overall spending on defence" (Seyd and Whiteley 1992: 118). Furthermore, Labour members' attitudes are significantly structured around four underlying dimensions—a general left-right dimension, a redistribution dimension, a dimension concerned with political principles, and, finally, one concerned with internal and external democratic reforms (120–24).

Conservative members hold a variety of opinions that do not divide precisely into neatly defined categories, but there are three underlying dimensions to their attitudes. First, there is a traditionalism dimension, which is wary of social and political change; second, an individualistic dimension, characterized by a preference for the market provision of collective goods; and, third, progressivism, in which government accepts responsibility for managing the economy and alleviating poverty (Whiteley, Seyd, and Richardson 1994: 132–42).

Among Liberal Democrat members there is a modest amount of atti-

tude structuring around four underlying, ideological indicators (Seyd and Whiteley 1999). Lifestyle and economic libertarianism are two such factors; the first links attitudes on a wide range of personal issues, such as sexuality, abortion, drugs, and censorship, and the second revolves around limited state intervention in economic and social affairs. Interestingly, the two are not closely correlated, such that support for freedom of the individual on lifestyle issues does not imply support for free-market solutions to economic and social problems. The third element, in contrast to the second, reflects a social democratic commitment to redistribution, expressed in terms of governments raising the level of taxes and spending more money on such public services as health and education. Finally, there is a distinct European element to Liberal Democrats' opinions, articulated in support of various aspects of further EU integration.

We conclude this examination of the second feature of the APSA's report on parties, dealing specifically with membership, by suggesting that individual members remain a vitally important aspect of the British party system.

A third feature of the APSA report was the committee's commitment to internal party democracy. It recommended that the party program "be drafted at frequent intervals by a broadly representative convention," that local party groups should "meet frequently to discuss and initiate policy," and that leaders should maintain contacts with their members. The committee's commitment was to the principle of a bottom-up party in policy-making. To what extent does this prevail?

### **Internal Party Democracy**



Five years after the publication of the APSA report McKenzie (1955) concluded his comprehensive study of power within the Conservative and Labour parties with the argument that "the distribution of power within the two parties is overwhelmingly similar" (582) and that although neither leadership could afford to ignore its members both were primarily "the servants of their respective parliamentary parties" (590). In this view the claims by both parties that internal party democracy prevailed were much exaggerated. The APSA committee's idea, therefore, of members initiating or drafting policies was one that McKenzie suggested neither occurred in practice nor should occur.

McKenzie's conclusions have since been challenged by Minkin (1978)

and Kelly (1989), who both argue that he underestimated the role of members as policymakers within the Labour and Conservative parties respectively. Nevertheless, the powerful oligarchical tendencies to which Robert Michels (1902) first drew attention have been reinforced over recent decades both by modern campaigning technologies and by the requirements of policy-making. Both time and specialism are resources at a premium, and both can result in the strengthening of the powers of party leadership.

The proliferation of news outlets, the arrival of twenty-four-hour news stations, and the revolution in news-gathering techniques require immediate political responses that inevitably centralize party decision making and allow for only limited consultation. Flexible and speedy responses are required by party spokespersons, and the time for widespread consultations on anything but the most general aspects of policy is almost impossible. Peter Mandelson, onetime Labour party communications director, has written, "You cannot conduct the campaign through democratic debate and consensus. The judgements are too fine and too quick" (MacIntyre 1999: 135). Kavanagh (1995: 108) writes that "the centralization of decision-making in the hands of the leader and those around him and the adoption of public relations, are interconnected."

The importance of political image has grown. Image requires party unity, strong leadership, and stage management. Political marketing has resulted in the expansion of both the numbers and the influence of the professionals—political consultants, public relations advisers, pollsters, speech writers, and advertisers. Scammell notes:

The tier of specialist communications and marketers has never been greater in British politics, never better-known and arguably never more influential. This is a trend which is unlikely to diminish, despite fluctuations according to the personal taste of party leaders and managers. The consequences appear more far-reaching for Labour than for the Conservatives. The need for clear goals and the demands of disciplined communications imply a stronger leadership grip over the party as a whole and a diminution of the role of party conference. (1995: 19)

There is also an increased premium on specialist knowledge necessary to deal with policy matters. The complexity of policy means a greater reliance upon professionals, whether from the civil service or the think tanks, rather than upon "amateur" members (Denham 1996; Kandiah and Seldon 1996).

Both Labour and Conservative parties have introduced specific party

reforms, which may either strengthen or weaken the powers of their leaders. Perhaps the most significant of these reforms has been the introduction of membership ballots to elect the leaders, a procedure that the Liberal Democrats adopted in 1988. The parties have also introduced leadership-initiated plebiscites on policy proposals and constitutional reforms. For the Labour party this has meant the abandonment of its century-long attachment to delegatory democracy and for the Conservative party an explicit and formal recognition of the role of members within the party. Critics of both the Blair and Hague leaderships argue that these ballots, by empowering all members rather than just activists, strengthen the power of the leaders (e.g., Coates and Kerr 1998; *Charter News* 1998).

Mair supports these critics and claims that the empowerment of individual members bypasses the knowledgeable activists and enfranchises those who “are at once more docile and more likely to endorse the policies (and candidates) proposed by the party leadership” (1997: 149). He suggests that “democratization on paper may . . . actually coexist with powerful elite influence in practice” (150).

The evidence, however, of the impact of this direct democracy on the distribution of power within the parties is mixed. As the leadership desired, membership ballots in the Labour party overwhelmingly approved the reform of clause 4 of the party constitution in 1994, which dealt with the public ownership of industry, and agreed with the proposed general election manifesto in 1996. But on the other hand, notwithstanding the leadership’s powerful campaign against Ken Livingstone, members in London voted overwhelmingly for him to be the party’s candidate for mayor of London. They have also endorsed other leadership critics by voting for them in the elections for the National Executive Committee of the party. Furthermore, our survey evidence reveals that inactive Labour members’ opinions are not that different from those of active members, and therefore they may not be automatically more supportive of the leadership, as Mair claims (see Seyd and Whiteley 1992; Whiteley, Seyd, and Richardson 1994). Hence whether these members are likely to be more docile and supportive of the leadership than the activists is doubtful.

Up to this point the Conservative party has conducted four ballots, the first confirming Hague as party leader and approving the principles of party reform in 1997, the second approving party reform in 1998, and the third approving the principle of an anti-European strategy in 1998. In these three, members supported their former leader. The fourth ballot was to elect their new leader, Iain Duncan Smith, in September 2001.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the introduction of membership ballots, the Labour and Conservative parties have modified their internal procedures and practices in such a way as to affect the balance of power within their respective organizations. The Labour party's loss of four consecutive general elections encouraged an "office at any price" mentality, particularly after 1992. Part of the leadership's explanation of Labour's poor electoral record was intraparty divisions; it believed that unity at all levels was necessary, and in this objective it was supported by the majority of the party's parliamentarians and individual members as well as by most leaders of the affiliated trade unions. The leadership acquired the powers to expel members deemed to have brought the party into disrepute, to determine short lists for the selection of by-election candidates, and to appoint rather than elect the chief whip. None of this occurred without some dissent, but, by its sophisticated use of political communication techniques, the leadership was able to undermine its critics and even to restrict the number of outlets for them to express their dissenting opinions.

During the years when Labour was in opposition—first under Kinnock's leadership and then more so under Blair's—control of party policy was increasingly centered around the parliamentary party and the shadow cabinet, at the expense of the National Executive Committee. Even the collective participation of the shadow cabinet tended to diminish as, after 1994, the Tony Blair–Gordon Brown axis developed in importance.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, the formal role of the annual conference in policy-making has been downgraded, although it retains ultimate sovereign authority. A new structural framework has been established, as can be seen in figure 1.3, with a joint policy committee, charged with the "strategic oversight of policy development" (Labour Party 1997b: 8); a national policy forum, charged "with overseeing the development of a comprehensive policy programme from which will be drawn the manifesto for the next election" (14); and eight commissions to develop specific areas of policy.<sup>12</sup>

The reasons for introducing a more continuous, discursive form of policy-making were, first, that the conference as a public arena needed to be used by the newly elected Labour government more as a forum to publicize its achievements than as a place where party divisions might gain publicity and, second, that the previous policy-making process was felt to be deeply flawed. The reform document, "Partnership in Power," explicitly acknowledged this latter fact because "very few of the party's members participate in the party's policy discussions" (Labour Party 1997b: 5), and, furthermore, because "complex issues are given very little time for debate,

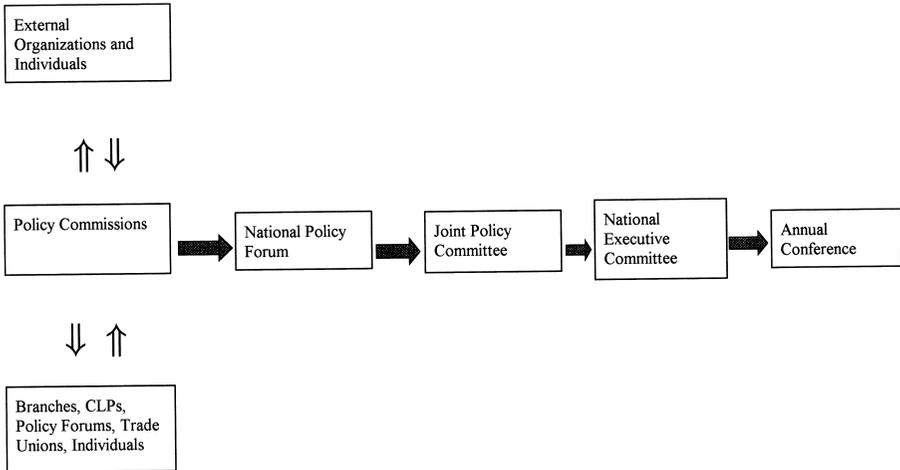


Fig. 1.3. Labour's new policy-making system

there is a tendency for Conference to have the same debates year in year out, very few delegates have the opportunity to participate directly in debates, the debates are focused around composite resolutions which delegates see for the first time on the Monday of Conference, and there is little interaction with party spokespersons" (7).

There are features of the new policy-making structures that tilt the balance of power away from the individual member, for example, the leadership's greater control of the proceedings at the annual conference. On the other hand, there is also potential for member involvement and influence in the network of local and national policy forums. Only after years of practice and the production of election manifestos will a more definitive judgment on the balance of power between leadership and members be possible.

By contrast, the Conservative party has traditionally accorded considerably more formal power to its leaders than has the Labour party (McKenzie 1955). The party's roots as a nineteenth-century cadre organization (Duverger 1954) have meant that during the 1980s and 1990s the combination of a party in government for eighteen years, a historic ethos of grass roots deference to leadership, and a structure that legally gave sole responsibility for the party and its finances to the leader resulted in the Conservative party's remaining overwhelmingly a top-down orga-

nization. A simple illustration of this point is that until 1997 it was the only British parliamentary party in which individual members were accorded no formal, direct role in the election of the leader.

But the Conservative party became increasingly divided during its eighteen-year period in office, and leadership became a more difficult task over time. To some extent the divisions were contained during Thatcher's early electoral successes, but during her period as leader, and more so after John Major succeeded her, the party became divided from top to bottom. Major's lack of authority within the party eventually forced him in 1994 into the extraordinary tactic of resigning as leader and challenging his critics to run against him, that is, to "put up or shut up." However, the leadership's lack of formal powers to discipline critics within both the parliamentary party and the extraparliamentary party made its task of maintaining party unity almost impossible (Whiteley and Seyd 1998).<sup>13</sup>

Less than a year after the Conservatives' comprehensive election defeat in 1997, and the subsequent election of Hague as leader, the party agreed to "a leap in the dark" as significant as Disraeli's acceptance of an expansion of the electorate in 1867 (Blake 1966). In March 1998 the party's Central Council approved the most far-reaching reforms of the twentieth century. For the first time in its history the Conservative party now exists in a constitutionally defined manner. The three previously distinct elements of the party—parliamentary, national union, and central office—have now been merged. The National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations has been abolished. For over one hundred years the party's principle organizational feature had been to allow members to select parliamentary candidates but then to isolate the parliamentary party and the party leadership from their pressures. Now, however, the new constitution specifically states that "the Party shall consist of its members" (Conservative Party 1998: 4) and that these members have been given the right to elect their party leader if and when she or he resigns or if 15 percent of the parliamentary party succeeds in a no-confidence motion.

As with the Labour party's recent reforms, Conservative reforms are too recent for a definitive judgment to be made about whether they strengthen the powers of a Conservative leader. Only close observation of the practice over the next few years will resolve this issue. Nevertheless, the formal recognition that the membership is the party, and the ceding of the right to elect the leader to these members, must shift power away from the parliamentarians to some extent. Whether this power goes to

the members or to the leader is open to debate. The Conservative Charter Movement, a longtime campaigning organization for greater democracy within the party, has no doubts that the reforms will strengthen the powers of the leader. It argues that “the essence” of the reform is “absolute control from the top, unencumbered to the views of those beneath” (Charter News 1998: 1). On the other hand, there are claims that both efficiency and democracy have been strengthened by these reforms.

A fourth feature of the responsible party model, according to the APSA committee, was “strong and active campaigning organizations in the constituencies.” Constituency-based organizations have been a significant part of the structure of all parties since the emergence of the mass electorate in the late nineteenth century. Parties have required human resources to fight elections, and, as a reward for their campaigning, members have been given the powers within their constituency parties to select parliamentary candidates and to send resolutions to party conferences.

### **Party Activism**



Local parties have played a major role in sustaining the cohesion of Britain’s two major parties. Leaders have depended upon the collaboration of constituency parties in imposing sanctions upon critics and rebels, in particular by refusing to re-adopt such people as the party’s representatives in future elections. With few exceptions, constituency parties have performed this cohesion-sustaining role (Ranney 1965). The notable exceptions include local parties’ support for some prominent Labour left rebels in the 1950s and Conservative Euro-skeptic rebels in the 1990s. What is apparent is that the autonomy of local parties is being curtailed and that the power of the parties at the center is increasing relative to the locality. Here we provide four examples of this increasing power.

First, membership recruitment used to be a local responsibility, but the establishment of a national membership by Labour in 1989 and by the Conservatives in 1998 has strengthened both parties at the center. It enables leaders to deal directly with members rather than to rely upon local intermediaries who may not be efficient or share the leaders’ opinions and objectives. Furthermore, it means that membership income now comes directly to the center, part of which is then redistributed to constituencies, enabling the leadership to use the distribution of money as both a carrot and a stick in their dealings with local parties.

Local Labour parties have historically been more bound to the center

by party rules compared with local Conservative associations. The historic right of local Conservative associations to manage their own affairs has made them a significant force in intraparty politics. Their ability to retain money at the local level and to conduct election campaigns as they felt appropriate caused the Conservative central office a good deal of concern. But the approval of a new constitution in 1998 that created a national membership, authorized the national collection of members' subscriptions, and introduced annual efficiency audits of all associations, with the threat of suspension and central control of those deemed to be inefficient, will transform intraparty relations. The Charter Movement claims that constituency associations will be placed under "unfriendly and draconian rule" (Charter News 1998: 3).

Second, central parties are now intervening more in the choice of by-election candidates because of the considerable media interest in the campaigns and their outcomes. Some recent local by-election disasters have persuaded party leaders of the need to ensure that their message will be well and efficiently communicated.<sup>14</sup> In 1988 Labour's National Executive Committee assumed the powers to draw up the short list of candidates for selection by the local party in by-elections and thus to exclude any possible problem candidates. In 1990 its powers were further increased with a rule change that enabled it, in the event of a by-election, to depose an already selected candidate it judged unsuitable and to impose a new one. Similar such powers have now been acquired by the Conservative leadership.

As we have already noted, the selection of parliamentary candidates has always been the most significant reward for local members. Their powers of selection, however, have always been to some extent limited by the center's establishing some parameters to their choice. The compilation by party headquarters of "an approved candidates list" and the power of final endorsement have given the centers some control over this locally exercised power. Labour has used these powers more extensively than have the Conservatives to determine the outcome of some selections. For example, prominent left-wing candidates were not endorsed prior to both the 1992 and 1997 general elections.<sup>15</sup> Critics of the current Blair leadership argue that it has increased its control over candidate selection in two ways: first, by establishing a system whereby the chief whip reports to local parties on the behavior of all Labour MPs during the lifetime of a Parliament; and, second, by establishing panels of approved personnel from

whom local parties can choose their candidates for the Scottish and Welsh devolved assembly elections in 1999. It also refused to allow members to rank order the lists of party candidates for the elections to the European Parliament in 1999 and to allow members the sole choice of the candidate for the election of the city mayor in London.

Third, in general elections, party headquarters are now targeting potentially winnable constituencies and concentrating the bulk of their efforts in these areas (Butler and Kavanagh 1998: 210). Additional resources, such as finance, training, literature, and personnel, are provided for these constituencies, which then have to perform to centrally determined objectives. However, legal restrictions on local campaign expenditure and the limited number of professional staff at party headquarters mean that such a strategy still relies to a great extent upon local party activists.

The fourth, and final, example of the relative increase in the powers of the center at the expense of the locality is Labour's increasing intervention in Labour-controlled local authorities to curb what it perceives as left-wing extremism. The traditional autonomy of parties in local government (Gyford 1983) has been steadily eroded. Liverpool was the first local authority in which the leadership intervened to change local policies and practices by the Marxist-dominated leadership. Similar interventions have occurred in Lambeth, Islington, and Stoke. Often the leadership has accused Labour councillors of bringing the party into disrepute as the means of forcing them from office.

### **Professional Staff**



The final feature of the APSA committee's responsible party model was the "need for permanent, professional staff" (APSA 1950: 50). As we pointed out earlier, British parties are voluntary organizations funded primarily by donations. Maintaining a professional staff is expensive, and the size of these staffs reflects the fact that for much of the postwar period the Conservative party has been the richest of the parties. Hence it employed more staff both at the center and in the regions and constituencies than did the Labour party (Katz and Mair 1992).

As table 1.3 indicates, there has been an overall decline in the number of professional staff employed by the parties over time. The Conservative

TABLE 1.3. Party Staffing in Britain

Year	Conservatives		Labour		Liberal Democrats	
	Central	Subnational	Central	Subnational	Central	Subnational
1964	97	580	50	248	19	74
1970	95	431	50	167	12	22
1979	—	350	—	128	17	—
1983	—	—	—	104	20	11
1987	100	291	71	95	25	8
1993	148	240	90	—	—	—
1998	167	221	179	150	35	5

*Source:* Conservative Central Office; Labour Party Personnel Department; Labour Party NEC Organization Committee minutes; Liberal Party Annual Reports; Liberal Democrats' Information and Personnel Offices. For further details see Webb 2000.

*Note:* Subnational staff includes both regional office staff (employed by national party headquarters) and party agents (usually paid for by local party organizations).

party, as noted earlier, has traditionally been able to afford most staff, but it has not been immune to financial cuts and has been forced to reduce its full-time staff in the same way as the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties have done. It is also apparent in all three parties that staff are increasingly employed at the headquarters rather in the constituencies.

One further point is that the introduction in 1974 of limited state funding of the parliamentary activities of opposition parties has concentrated staff in the parliamentary parties. This concentration of party staff at the parliamentary level has been further reinforced by the growth in MPs' salaries, which has enabled them to employ full-time researchers and thus to help strengthen their powers relative to the grass roots members.

## Discussion



To sum up, considerable changes have taken place within both the Conservative and Labour parties since the APSA report was first published fifty years ago. Nevertheless, the parties remain programmatic organizations, albeit within an altered set of policy parameters; they remain relatively cohesive organizations whose members are attached to certain basic principles; and they remain voluntary organizations dependent upon the commitment of their members, even if there are differences in the powers given to members and, therefore, in the scope for internal democracy.

As we mentioned earlier some researchers have argued that the responsible model of parties has been replaced by the cartel or the electoral-professional parties. Mair in particular takes the view that parties have become “semi-state agencies” (1997: 106). Thus ostensible competitors collude and cooperate, in a similar way to economic cartels, in sharing state resources. They have become increasingly reliant upon the state for communications, staffing, finance, and patronage. Their goals are limited to effective management, and their campaigns are capital-intensive, professional, and centralized. Furthermore, they distinguish less between members and nonmembers, so that party supporters are involved in decision making. This type of party is vertically, rather than horizontally, organized such that members belong to a national rather than a local party. Finally, there is more of an atomistic sense of politics in such a party, and members exercise their rights as individuals rather than as delegates (Mair 1997: 108–14).

Mair notes the paradoxical role of the individual members in the cartel party. They are an important provider of party funds and of personnel for state bodies, a general legitimizer for the party in the community, and election campaigners. Yet their powers are weakening as democratization coexists with powerful centralizing tendencies. The atomized individual member has been given increased powers, for example, by leadership ballots, yet he or she is offered only limited choice. Mair claims that members, therefore, are “increasingly involved in legitimizing the choices of the party in public office” (1997: 149).

It is doubtful whether this cartel party model is wholly appropriate to Britain, as Mair himself acknowledges. In Britain state resources, such as finance, communication facilities, personnel, and patronage, are not extensive, and the relative absence of state funding means that parties remain essentially voluntary bodies. Nevertheless, centralizing tendencies have occurred that may well affect the incentives for high-intensity participation.

Panbianco (1988) claims that parties have become electoral-professional organizations, increasingly dominated by campaign, marketing, and policy professionals. Professional opinion pollsters, fund-raisers, advertisers, and journalists, all located in party headquarters, have become key personnel in any party. The introduction of the term “spin doctor” in our vocabulary is a recognition of this fact. Parties have always been concerned with managing public opinion in as favorable a manner as possible (Windlesham 1966; Kavanagh 1995). But parties now put

greater resources into the use of such professionals, and the consequence is that the campaigning role of party activists has diminished. Kavanagh (1998: 42) suggests that "the targeting of key voters in marginal seats is increasingly conducted from the centre, via direct mail or telephone canvassing, rather than by local activists. . . . What matters less than ever to each political party is its strong partisans." Weir and Beetham (1999: 66–67) argue in similar fashion, claiming that "high-tech has replaced the 'poor bloody military' of local activists delivering leaflets and canvassing door-to-door in the old hit-and-miss way," and they go on to assert that campaigns "are now prepared, disciplined and systematic, guided by marketing and media professionals and governed by more and more centralized decision-making."

But the nature of election campaigning in Britain is more complex than that suggested by Panebianco and others who claim the emergence of the electoral-professional party. It is important to distinguish three features of an election campaign. First, there are the national campaigns directed and run by the central party headquarters that include the press conferences, leaders' speeches, party election broadcasts, and advertising. Second, there are the attempts by central party headquarters to direct local campaigns by targeting specific marginal constituencies. Third, there are the purely local campaigns mounted by the parties in the constituencies across the length and breadth of the United Kingdom that are organized and run by local activists. It is certainly the case that electioneering in constituencies now involves a wide range of labor-saving devices, including opinion polling, telephone canvassing, direct mail shots, and electronic mail communications. The computer has revolutionized the constituency campaign. Nevertheless, the role of local activists remains important, even in the case of the nationally targeted marginal constituency campaigns, because their skills cannot be entirely purchased. If a local party wishes to contact a significant proportion of its electors, averaging seventy thousand in a British constituency, in order to identify supporters, it will require local activists to carry out these tasks. Some of this work can be done by paid volunteers working either at the center or in the localities, but the bulk of the work still remains at the local level to be undertaken by devoted amateurs.

Reference has already been made to the extensive targeting strategies of all parties at the 1997 general election. But party headquarters still have to persuade local activists to come out and work and then to work where required. There is evidence that members will not work on elec-

tions unless both political and structural incentives are provided, and, furthermore, members have their own local attachments and priorities and are unwilling to be redirected in the manner that targeting assumes. Analyses of the 1997 general election suggest that the Liberal Democrats benefitted most, the Labour party less so, and the Conservatives least from their targeting efforts (Denver, Hands, and Henig 1998; Whiteley and Seyd 1999).

Rather than the “cartel” or the “electoral-professional party” being the appropriate term to describe the British party system in the twenty-first century, the “plebiscitarian party” may be more apt. In such a party the pattern of communication is often vertical rather than horizontal and has less to do with debate and discussion and more to do with marketing. Often communication between leaders and their members and supporters takes place outside of the established party structures, primarily through sympathetic newspapers. The structure of such a party is one in which the rally replaces the conference. In such a party the number of identifiers is important for legitimation reasons, but more emphasis is placed upon supporters rather than on members.<sup>16</sup> As a consequence, the barriers to membership are lowered to encourage supporters.

The discussion in this chapter provides the institutional background against which we can examine high-intensity participation. We will return to these topics again in chapter 8, where we examine the future of the party system. But for the moment it is sufficient to note that these developments in the party organizations since the APSA report have important implications for high-intensity political participation within the parties. The picture is complex, but on balance internal party democracy and thus the incentives for political action have declined. In the rest of the book we will examine the implications of this for high-intensity participation.