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Intra-Party Democracy: A Functionalist Account

§1. Introduction

The organization of political parties presents a serious puzzle for democratic theory. On the one hand, nearly everyone recognizes their essential role in supporting collective decision-making and popular accountability. On the other hand, many parties are internally undemocratic, inviting precious little input from ordinary members and supporters. Indeed, political parties have often been accused of entrenching various interests and blocking democratic progress.

In response, many demand the internal democratization of parties. According to "isomorphic" approaches, more specifically, party platforms should reflect the views of their core members and supporters, realizing the same democratic ideals of deliberation, public reason, and participation demanded of the polity itself (Ebeling and Wolkenstein 2018; Teorell 1999; White and Ypi 2016). On this account, indeed, mass-facing forms of intra-party democracy (henceforth IPD) are a clear requirement of democratic legitimacy: the only remaining "puzzle" is how to implement them.

Yet others criticize this isomorphic approach as naïve. If democracy is really about the benefits of inter-party competition—as democratic realists like Schumpeter (1942) have argued—then strong and centralized parties may be its very essence (Schattschneider 1942; Shapiro 2016). From their "systemic" perspective, indeed, democratizing parties could actually weaken democracy writ large, by undermining the ability of party elites to compete effectively against their rivals (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). Properly conceived, in other words, democratic ideals make no demand for mass-facing IPD to begin with—again leaving no genuine puzzle to speak of.

Rejecting both views as overly simplistic, we develop a *functionalist* account of mass-facing IPD. To begin with, we endorse the systemic evaluative approach favored by realist critics, and we share their concern that intra-party conflict could undermine inter-party competition. We also

recognize, however, that certain forms of mass-facing IPD may perform a critical democratic role within certain contexts—namely, preventing wealthy elites from controlling the agenda through influence over the leaders of all viable parties—which actually *enhances* inter-party competition. Rather than offering universal praise or censure, we hold that the democratic value of any mass-facing IPD practice hinges on its tendency to facilitate resistance to oligarchic agenda capture.

Adopting this functionalist account has important consequences for the way we think about intra-party democracy. First, the desirability of inclusionary party reform will vary by context, depending on whether its function is already duplicated by other elements of the political system. In particular, oligarchic capture of any given party is less threatening to broader democratic goals when internal dissenters can relatively easily found new parties. Under more rigid party systems where this is more difficult, by contrast, party reform within existing parties will be more urgent.

No matter the context, second, certain IPD practices will perform this anti-oligarchic function better than others. As certain recent advocates have insisted, not all forms of mass-facing IPD face the same challenges as the aggregative practices criticized by realists. Where these "revisionists" favor deliberative forms of participation, however, our functionalist account suggests a focus on building organized forms of collective countervailing power instead. While this goal overlaps at times with that of enabling deliberative self-expression, our account also diverges from revisionist approaches in several ways. For one, the function of mass-facing IPD might be fulfilled equally well—if not better—by tight integration with external mass organizations such as labor unions, rather than internal practices designed by party elites. Regardless of its institutional location, more broadly, the goal of mass participation should not be individual self-expression but the creation of collective solidarity and organizational capacity through social ties and routine collective action. These, we argue, are the best tools ordinary people have in fighting oligarchic capture of parties.

§2. A functionalist approach to intra-party democracy: preliminary arguments

We define "intra-party democracy" as any practice that limits the centralized discretionary control exercised by top-level party leaders, by opening decision-making processes to input from wider circles of party stakeholders. In this article, more specifically, we focus largely on mass-facing practices that invite participation from ordinary party members and supporters.[1] We also support elite-facing forms of IPD, which constrain *top*-level leaders by empowering *mid*-level elites such as backbenchers, party officials, and local or regional politicians. Since these practices are endorsed by nearly everyone involved (Bonotti 2017, 27), however, we devote most of our attention in what follows to the more contentious questions surrounding mass-facing IPD.

2.1. An isomorphic approach: commonsense arguments for intra-party democracy

Many commonsense arguments for mass-facing IPD share the same basic structure. It is widely believed, first, that the legitimacy of representative democracy hinges on a secure principal-agent relationship between elected officials and ordinary citizens (Beerbohm 2012; Christiano 1996). Yet in practice, politicians often appear to serve wealthy elites and other concentrated interests, rather than the people at large (e.g., Gilens and Page 2014)—and the mediation of political parties has long been blamed for facilitating this process of capture (Michels 1915). In response, reformers have often sought to limit parties' role by enabling people to vote directly on legislation, through mechanisms such as initiatives and referendums (Howe 1912). Yet most recognize that parties are inescapable in modern politics. As a result, many reformers have also sought to democratize parties

[1] Perhaps most commonly, this means *leadership selection* through primary elections open to all supporters (as in the US) or intra-party elections open to dues-paying members (as in the UK Labour Party). Rank-and-file supporters might also participate in *candidate selection* through primaries, open lists and preference rankings, or recall mechanisms between elections (White and Ypi 2020). Finally, ordinary people may contribute to *platform construction* through participation in local branch deliberations or larger party congresses (Biale and Ottonelli 2019; Wolkenstein 2016). As we argue below, the goals of mass-facing IPD can also be served by integrating external mass-membership organizations into party decision-making procedures, and this strategy also belongs in this category.

themselves, through mass-facing IPD, in the hope that broader participation in party governance could restore the principal-agent relationship between ordinary citizens and public officials.

We characterize this normative logic as *isomorphic*, in that it aims to democratize parties in roughly the same ways—and for roughly the same reasons—as the political system writ large. And whenever inclusionary party reforms are proposed, a version of this isomorphic logic is nearly always present. Because it is so widely accepted, meanwhile, many party leaders have also come to see such reforms as a strategic move that will endear them to voters and help them win elections. For instance, primaries became central to leadership selection in both major US parties after the tumultuous 1968 election, when the Democrats concluded that engaging ordinary supporters could heal divisions and renew broad investment in the party in the wake of a devastating loss. (The Republicans, not to be outdone, followed suit—for an overview, see Muirhead 2014, 146–72). As traditional European parties have shed their social base and lost ground to novel challengers in recent years, similarly, they have increasingly turned to various forms of IPD in an effort to regain mass allegiance and investment (Ignazi 2020; Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018).

2.2. A systemic perspective: realist objections to the commonsense view

At first blush, these intuitive arguments for IPD appear quite plausible. Empirical support, however, is mixed at best—and many realist critics doubt that they provide a solid justification for mass-facing IPD. According to Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018), for instance, the most important impact of the post-1968 reforms in the United States has been to accelerate polarization. This, in turn, has only amplified distrust of politicians and disaffection with politics—precisely the trends that internal democratization was supposed to reverse. Similarly, they claim, recent democratizing reforms have only accelerated the decline of traditional European parties. Given that we cannot

know what would have happened if these reforms had not been implemented, such causal claims are difficult to evaluate. Nevertheless, these correlations are not encouraging for IPD advocates.

Meanwhile, the principal-agent model of representation that motivates many of their more theoretical claims is widely regarded as empirically inaccurate and normatively misleading. To start with, most of our political opinions appear to reflect our social and partisan identities, rather than a genuinely independent process of reasoning and will-formation (Achen and Bartels 2016; Lodge and Taber 2013; Mason 2018). This is not merely a contingent result of bad policies or a lack of civic virtue: given the vast number of issues parties must address, even the best-informed must rely on cues from specialized elites. Thus, political parties could never serve purely as the "agents" of the voters they purport to represent. Rather, party elites will always have significant discretion in shaping the party platform—and, in turn, many of the views of the "principals" from whom they are supposed to take their orders. As such, few contemporary theorists of representation still uphold a pure principal-agent model as the ideal (Disch 2011; Sabl 2015).

Given a realistic appraisal of the dynamics of mass politics in contemporary democracies, in fact, many political scientists worry that mass-facing IPD is likely to exacerbate the problems of elite capture that it is ostensibly intended to resolve. Katz and Mair (2009, 759), for instance, argue that engaging the broader membership in platform construction only strengthens the power of top-level leaders (see also Hopkin 2001). Compared to mid-level elites, ordinary members typically have less capacity for independent organization, and are less likely to resist the influence of the most visible popular figures. Like nearly all participants in debates about party reform, therefore, Katz and Mair agree that elite-facing IPD is crucial for preventing entrenchment, capture, and "cartelization" among top-level leaders. What they suggest, however, is that mass-facing IPD can undermine these goals; essentially handing power back to the most well-known top-level leaders.

Relatedly, many critics also charge that mass-facing IPD empowers vocal minorities who value "ideological purity" over electoral competitiveness (Katz and Cross 2013, 171). If top-level leaders must cater to the idiosyncratic preferences of the most active and enthusiastic participants in intra-party procedures, party platforms will reliably shift to the extremes. If granted the discretion to maximize their vote share in the general population, by contrast, they are more likely to appeal to the median voter, yielding greater systemic stability and overall responsiveness.

From a systemic perspective, after all, parties' main task is not to enact the preferences of their core supporters, but to pursue and wield power in the public interest. Whether pitching a platform on the campaign, pursuing a coherent agenda in government, or uniting opposition to incumbent abuses, top-level party leaders must maintain a diverse coalition long enough to take collective action in service of common goals. As such, they must articulate a political vision that is at once reasonably specific, broadly attractive, and emotionally salient—a difficult balance to strike. In order to perform their democratic functions effectively, therefore, party leaders need significant discretion over policy, messaging, and strategy. From the voters' perspective, meanwhile, a system of strong and centralized parties simplifies electoral choices, enabling ordinary people without much specialized knowledge to exercise their political agency with maximum reliability.[2]

Rather than broadly enhancing political agency, realists charge, mass-facing IPD benefits highly active and informed voters at the expense of most others. By proliferating ambiguity and complexity within the political system, it fractures the public's limited attention and attenuates its ability to hold leaders accountable. Far from limiting the influence of wealthy elites, Rosenbluth

[2] Some have read skeptical arguments about voter competence—i.e., that voters are largely uninformed and powerfully influenced by social identity—as evidence against Rosenbluth and Shapiro's view (Giraudo 2020). Yet even resolute skeptics like Achen and Bartels (2016) only argue that accountability is *difficult*; not that it is entirely *impossible*: on the margins, incumbent performance and other programmatic factors may still make a difference. If voters really behave as skeptics claim, indeed, that is all the more reason to sharpen the stakes of their choices as much as possible.

and Shapiro surmise, "weakening party control over decisions, candidates, and leadership selection creates only the illusion of more grassroots democracy. In reality, it empowers intense minorities at the expense of most voters, and it promotes the capture, corruption, and lack of responsiveness that lead people to demand decentralizing control in the first place" (2018, 21).

§2.3. A revisionist alternative: rescuing intra-party democracy?

In our view, realist critics are right to be skeptical of the most common arguments for mass-facing IPD. We also endorse their systemic evaluative perspective: whatever intrinsic value there may be in popular control of parties as such, the democratic character of the political system as a whole surely deserves priority over that of its component parts.[3] For two reasons, however, we reject the categorical dismissal of mass-facing IPD by realists like Rosenbluth and Shapiro.

First, their exclusive reliance on inter-party competition to advance democratic goals ignores the possibility of elite collusion across party lines (Chapman 2020). In a common process known as "cartelization," for instance, the "major governing parties" in a polity "agree to maintain state party funding for the opposition when in power" (Hopkin 2004, 635), and lower the costs of competition by adopting a set of "agreed goals" (Mair and Katz 1998, 115). As such, they begin to compete on efficient management of the polity, rather than ideological cleavages, and come to "increasingly resemble one another" (Katz and Mair 2009, 757). And while the specific phenomenon of cartelization has emerged most clearly in certain European party systems over the past few decades, elements of an elite governing consensus can be found in every democracy.

By employing their outsized leverage to influence the leaders of all viable parties at once, in short, wealthy elites and other groups with concentrated interests and extensive resources can often

[3] To be clear, this broadly instrumentalist approach to IPD does not entail instrumentalism about democracy itself: after all, there are plenty of "intrinsic" reasons we might value accountability and oppose capture by narrow elites.

keep certain threatening issues off the political agenda entirely. In particular, the phenomenon we call "oligarchic agenda capture"—reflected in a governing consensus maintained by all viable parties that protects the interests of extremely concentrated wealth—is strikingly resilient across the democratic world (Piketty 2020; Winters 2011).[4] It thus illustrates a critical weak point of inter-party competition, which appears to face special challenges in contesting this form of capture.

Second, realists like Rosenbluth and Shapiro are too quick to paint all forms of mass-facing IPD with the same brush. Although they accept many realist criticisms of existing IPD practices, for instance, Fabio Wolkenstein and other revisionist advocates of inclusionary party reform point out that mass-facing IPD practices might be designed differently—transcending the simplistic principal-agent model assumed by commonsense views, for instance, and avoiding the tendency of plebiscitary methods to further strengthen top-level leaders (Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein 2017; Ebeling and Wolkenstein 2018; Wolkenstein 2019b). Rather than simply aggregating the unreflective opinions of rank-and-file members via primaries and open lists, more specifically, revisionist IPD advocates demand the proliferation of opportunities for egalitarian, open-ended exchanges of reasons between ordinary people and party elites (Wolkenstein 2018, 2019a).

§2.4. A functionalist approach: beyond realism and revisionism

In our view, revisionists are right to insist that other models of mass-facing IPD may be less vulnerable to certain of the worries realists have raised about practices that are currently in wide use. More specifically, we endorse their emphasis on multi-level organizational structures as a way of avoiding the plebiscitary tendencies of purely aggregative practices. Where revisionists retain

[4] Following Arlen (2019, 394), we understand oligarchs as agents who "retain personal access to massive concentrated wealth" and "deploy their wealth to achieve discretionary influence in the public domain." As a class, oligarchs share "an overriding focus on wealth and income preservation," which cuts across their other interests (398), and which they protect successfully within a range of political systems. In democracies, oligarchs pursue their interests via agenda capture as well as other methods like campaign donations, lobbying, and bureaucratic capture (Winters 2017).

the isomorphic goal of ensuring that party platforms reflect the views of core supporters, however, we focus resolutely on the systemic aims of inter-party competition, and therefore propose a more precise role for mass-facing IPD: i.e., resisting the sort of oligarchic agenda capture that seems especially resilient to the power-neutralizing discipline provided by inter-party competition. While revisionist reforms may occasionally support this narrower goal, their anti-oligarchic tendencies will be limited. Because they foster individual self-expression rather than collective power, indeed, deliberative forums will often favor wealthier and better-organized interests.

What emerges from our discussion, then, is a *functionalist* account of intra-party democracy, which seeks to evaluate mass-facing IPD practices with reference to their performance of a specific role within a broader framework of inter-party competition. In what follows, we first expand on that function: i.e., facilitating resistance to oligarchic agenda capture (§3). We then ask *when* inclusionary party reform is most needed to serve this function—arguing that it is relatively less urgent in more flexible party systems, where dissenters have other ways of challenging a governing consensus (§4). Finally, we ask what *kinds* of inclusionary party reform will fulfill this function most effectively, concluding that the goal of resisting oligarchic agenda capture is best served by practices that generate solidarity and organizational capacity among ordinary people (§5).

§3. The systemic function of mass-facing intra-party democracy: facilitating resistance to oligarchic agenda capture

On the broadly realist view we have accepted here, the key aims of electoral competition are to minimize domination and prevent the capture of state power by any particular faction or elite (Przeworski 2018; Shapiro 2016). To the extent that mass-facing IPD practices threaten these systemic aims by constraining top-level party leaders, then, realist critics are right to be concerned. In dismissing all forms of mass-facing IPD as harmful on balance, however, realists underestimate

the danger that cross-party collusion among wealthy elites will yield oligarchic agenda capture—as well as the potential for certain inclusionary party reforms to obstruct this process. As we argue in this section, indeed, that should be seen as the key democratic function of mass-facing IPD.

Realists like Rosenbluth and Shapiro typically rely on a combination of inter-party competition and elite-facing IPD as the best formula for preventing systemic domination or capture. Most basically, they claim, inter-party competition incentivizes parties to attract a majority coalition by serving the interests of the median voter (Downs 1957; Shapiro 2016)—and in order to pursue this goal effectively, top-level leaders need significant discretion. Some degree of elite-facing IPD is necessary, however, to ensure that backbenchers can replace top-level leaders who turn out to be ineffective, corrupt, or ideologically motivated, and therefore unable to achieve that goal (Shapiro 2020). When these two conditions are met, then, policy convergences can generally be supposed to reflect clear preferences among the electorate at large, rather than the failure of party leaders to identify and cater to a potential majority coalition (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018, 39).

As critics have pointed out, however, Downsian convergence models "exclude the possibility of influence by money or interest groups and maximize the apparent power of ordinary voters, by making a series of highly restrictive and quite implausible assumptions" (Winters and Page 2009, 742). Like the principal-agent model often criticized by realists, for one, such models also presume that party elites primarily *respond* to constituents' pre-existing preferences, when in fact they often have a large role in *shaping* the views of rank-and-file supporters. More broadly, median-voter models also presume that voters are representative of the population, and that they vote based on an accurate understanding of each party's platform. Yet oligarchic elites often wield their outsized material power to shape both the composition of the electorate and the terms of public discourse to their advantage—thereby enabling parties to win elections without serving the median voter.

Compared to their resilient need to curry favor with wealthy elites, indeed, the incentives of party leaders to serve the diffuse interests of poorly informed, poorly organized, and poorly resourced constituents may be quite weak. On most issues, after all, ordinary people tend to adopt the positions of their preferred party (Achen and Bartels 2016). By contrast, well-informed, well-organized, and well-resourced elites have little trouble discerning and pursuing their interests through pressure on officials. On certain issues, of course, the views of ordinary people may be more recalcitrant, forcing party leaders to disappoint wealthy donors in order to remain electorally competitive (Smith 2000; Vogel 1987). Given the public's finite and fractured attention, however, only a tiny minority of issues can be salient at any time—and on others, wealthy interests remain privileged (Culpepper 2010).[5] In fact, parties may converge on oligarch-friendly positions without any concerted effort by wealthy actors, due simply to leaders' "individual calculations of the vote-producing impact of money" (Winters and Page 2009, 743). To the extent that mid-level elites face these same incentives, meanwhile, they are no more likely to resist oligarchic influence—and where their power lacks independent grounding in a popular base, those who do dissent can easily be disciplined or removed by top-level leaders. While it is a crucial element of multi-level IPD structures, therefore, elite-facing IPD is insufficient on its own to resist oligarchic agenda capture.

We recognize that the extent of oligarchic influence varies across different contexts, and that our account of its prevalence and severity may be somewhat controversial. We note, however, that the general problem of oligarchic capture is a key concern for nearly all contemporary democratic theorists—including all of the major participants in debates about IPD. And while realists like Rosenbluth and Shapiro appear insensitive to the specific threat of *agenda* capture, via influence

[5] Oligarchic capture is especially pronounced—and well-documented—in the US (Bartels 2009; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Winters and Page 2009), but scholars have found similar results across the democratic world (Giger, Rosset, and Bernauer 2012; Lupu and Warner 2020).

over party leaders, this too is a very widespread concern, which has long motivated calls for mass-facing IPD. Given the suggestive evidence already presented, and our broader aims in the paper, then, we assume going forward that collusion across party lines in support of wealthy interests is at least a plausible threat—and one that inter-party competition cannot address on its own.

If that is right, meanwhile, then certain realist concerns about mass-facing IPD are also likely overstated. The demands imposed by ideologically motivated factions certainly limit the flexibility of top-level leaders, and in some cases this will prevent them from satisfying the median voter and appealing to the broadest possible electorate. In other cases, however, these ideological demands may serve to pry those leaders from the clutches of wealthy donors. Indeed, if these demands have hitherto been suppressed because they threaten oligarchic interests, and not because majorities of ordinary people oppose them, the success of such factions could even *broaden* the party's electoral appeal. If so, mass-facing IPD would *advance* systemic democratic goals—and that possibility is what animates our functionalist account of mass-facing IPD. In at least some cases, it seems, party reform that limits the flexibility of top-level leaders carries potential benefits for democracy as well as potential costs—even from the systemic evaluative perspective accepted by realists.

To be clear: we do not claim that *all* mass-facing IPD practices will *always* facilitate resistance to oligarchic agenda capture. On the contrary, we are sympathetic to realist concerns that certain inclusionary party reforms, in certain contexts, may make capture more likely. On a systemic approach that grants priority to the demands of vigorous inter-party competition, indeed, we think that a stance of *pro tanto* caution towards decentralizing party reforms—rather than the *pro tanto* enthusiasm offered by isomorphic approaches—is probably warranted. Our claim, rather, is that *some* forms of mass-facing IPD, in *some* contexts, can facilitate resistance to oligarchic agenda capture—and that because this threat is especially resilient to the effects of inter-party competition,

our *pro tanto* caution may be defeated in those cases. Rather than presenting mass-facing IPD as a generic democratic good, therefore, we see its value as conditioned by the contextual urgency of resisting oligarchic agenda capture, and the effectiveness of particular practices in doing so. We turn now to the two central questions that emerge from this functionalist account: i.e., *when* is party reform most needed, and *what kinds* will best advance the systemic goals of democracy?

§4. When is inclusionary party reform democracy-enhancing? The role of party system rigidity

In brief, our answer to the first of these questions is that the urgency of mass-facing IPD varies with the rigidity of the party system: i.e., the difficulty of pursuing political change through new parties. Many factors affect rigidity—including inequality, polarization (Goff and Lee 2019), and cultural familiarity with party creation—but the most important is surely the electoral system. Briefly, single-member districts with plurality rule (SMD) tend to generate rigid duopolies—or stable, regionally differentiated oligopolies—while multi-member districts with proportional representation (PR) typically yield more flexible multi-party systems (Duverger 1954).[6]

For our purposes, the key point is that parties in a rigid system entrench themselves in various ways; in part by making it difficult for new parties to gain traction.[7] To prevent oligarchs from imposing a favorable governing consensus by capturing the leadership of these entrenched parties, therefore, dissenting factions must be able to contest oligarchic influence within each party. In

[6] Of course, these tendencies are mediated by many other factors (Ferree, Powell, and Scheiner 2014). In the US, for instance, barriers to ballot access reinforce a two-party system, while regional differences produce multiple parties at the national level in Canada and India. Similarly, details like the minimum viable vote share can lead to variation among PR systems (with higher thresholds for entry generating greater rigidity). In addition, many systems employ a hybrid model mixing elements of SMD with elements of PR. For simplicity, we bracket this diversity here.

[7] The existence of many diverse parties gives voters more "exit" options, and is often a sign of a flexible party system. Yet multiparty systems can still become entrenched, making it easier for oligarchs to capture all parties simultaneously. Even in an apparently static duopoly, meanwhile, the credible threat of new party formation could induce party leaders to reject oligarchic demands. As such, the true variable of interest for us is the difficulty of pursuing political change by founding new parties, rather than the number of existing parties as such.

more flexible party systems, by contrast, dissenting factions from outside the existing political elite are better able to contest oligarchic agenda capture by founding *new* parties, so the need for *internal* channels of dissent and contestation is comparatively less urgent.

From the perspective of resisting oligarchic agenda capture, in other words, mass-facing IPD and a flexible party system can be understood as partial substitutes. Wherever it is especially difficult to challenge the governing consensus upheld by all existing parties—*either* by contesting party platforms *or* founding new parties—oligarchic elites with outsized access to covert, back-channel influence will face little institutional opposition in capturing the political agenda. So long as dissenting factions have at least *one* of these institutional avenues available to them, however, the risk of agenda capture will be notably reduced. Where mass-facing IPD gives ordinary voters agency over the agenda through their voice *within* their parties, a flexible party system empowers voters through their choice *between* parties—i.e., through meaningful exit options (Warren 2011). Either way, party leaders have somewhat stronger incentives not to accede to oligarchic demands.

This insight allows us to cast doubt on the model hailed as ideally democratic by Rosenbluth and Shapiro: centralized parties combined with a rigid party system. The closest approximation of this ideal type in real world, they claim, is the Westminster model—especially as it functioned in the mid-20th century UK. And in their view, the UK's high social spending during that period demonstrates that societies employing this model are sufficiently capable of resisting oligarchic domination. As we explore below, however, it is misleading to depict mid-century UK parties as fully centralized. In particular, the Labour Party may have had relatively few channels for directly incorporating popular input, but like many other social democratic parties in that era, it was tightly integrated with strong social organizations that did have such channels for mass engagement: namely, trade unions. Despite their flaws, many unions were at least minimally accountable to a

large base of engaged members with a strong collective identity, which helped them—and the Labour Party whose platform they shaped—resist oligarchic demands.

A better example of the consequences of combining a rigid party system with centralized party control, we claim, is provided by contemporary India. Despite the prevalence of regional parties, for one, the Indian party system is actually quite rigid—comparable to that of other countries with SMD electoral systems.[8] Thanks to extreme anti-defection laws,[9] meanwhile—among many other institutional and cultural factors—the top-level leaders of India's major parties control some of the most centralized party structures in the democratic world (Sridharan 2017).[10] As such, dissenting factions have no viable institutional means—either by reforming existing parties or creating new ones—to contest a governing consensus that increasingly seems to favor the wealthiest elites.[11]

Of course, we can hardly claim to offer a comprehensive account of oligarchic capture in India—or anywhere else, for that matter. After all, wealthy elites have outsized influence in all democracies, including those incorporating mass-facing IPD and flexible party systems. In the first instance, rather, our aim is simply to suggest that oligarchic agenda capture in India could be mitigated by increasing the flexibility of the party system, or—more realistically, perhaps—by implementing certain inclusionary party reforms. More broadly, our aim is to demonstrate that the model preferred by Rosenbluth and Shapiro is not ideally democratic. Given that it features neither

[8] As noted above, India's intense regionalism means that more than two parties are typically competitive at the national level. Yet at the local level, elections are still usually contested between only two or three entrenched parties. As such, subnational units are not fertile ground for the formation of new parties that could challenge existing players.

[9] The 52nd amendment to the Indian Constitution entails that legislators who defy their parties may lose not only their party membership but also their place in parliament.

[10] Although leaders are ostensibly elected by the membership through region-based delegates, this requirement is often bypassed in practice. From 1998 to 2017, for instance, Sonia Gandhi served without opposition as President of the Congress Party, after which she relinquished power to her son, Rahul Gandhi—the fifth member of his family to hold the position. When Rahul resigned in 2019, Sonia Gandhi returned as party leader—again without opposition.

[11] In recent years, for instance, "substantial growth in the power of business groups in Indian politics" has been accompanied by "a noticeable convergence in the economic programs of India's major political parties, the BJP and the Congress" (Jaffrelot, Kohli, and Murali 2019, 284; see also Sinha and Wyatt 2019; Sridharan 2006).

mass-facing IPD nor a flexible party system, dissenting factions within their model have few institutional resources for challenging an oligarch-friendly governing consensus. As in India, therefore, the democratic character of such systems could typically be enhanced—albeit only on the margins—through certain well-designed inclusionary reforms to internal party governance.

It might seem to follow from the preceding discussion that the optimal democratic structure would feature *both* a flexible party system *and* (certain effective forms of) mass-facing IPD. We reject this inference, however. Despite their blind spots, realists like Rosenbluth and Shapiro are right to worry that weaker and more decentralized parties may have more trouble presenting a clear platform, implementing a coherent set of policies, and coordinating opposition to incumbent abuse. Given the vagueness of key terms and the array of other potentially confounding factors involved, such sweeping theoretical claims are difficult to verify empirically, and it is not our aim here to defend them systematically. As noted, however, we find these realist concerns about the systemic effects of inclusionary reforms plausible enough to warrant a stance of *pro tanto* caution.

What we have argued in this section, then, is that this *pro tanto* caution is relatively easier to defeat in rigid party systems. We do not suggest that it is *always* defeated; nor that caution is *never* defeated in flexible systems. Some inclusionary reforms may be generally counterproductive—and therefore unwise to pursue, even in rigid party systems—while others may be quite effective at resisting oligarchic agenda capture across a range of circumstances, and thus democratically valuable even in flexible systems. In the next section, indeed, we examine the differential effects of different kinds of mass-facing IPD practices. Despite our best predictive efforts, however, any proposed reform always carries risks and rewards. Our point in this section is simply that when dissenters have no alternative institutional avenues for challenging a governing consensus that may have been imposed by oligarchs, the urgency of finding a solution is greater, and that may shift

the balance in favor of reform. Because flexible party systems ensure that dissenters have alternative institutional avenues for challenging oligarchic agenda capture, by contrast, proposals for inclusionary party reform must meet a higher bar within such systems.

§5. What kinds of inclusionary party reform are democracy-enhancing? The importance of organized collective power

The second major consequence of adopting a functionalist approach is to shift the *kinds* of mass-facing IPD practices we understand as most likely to enhance democracy. Like revisionists, to begin with, we think that party leaders may be held accountable through broad participation by rank-and-file supporters in local institutions that are linked to the decisions of top-level leaders through multiple levels of organization. Beyond that, however, the orientation to inclusionary party reform that we propose diverges in several key respects from revisionists' deliberative approach.

§5.1. Revisionist and functionalist approaches: key differences

Given the systemic evaluative perspective we adopt, for one, the point of including a wider group of stakeholders is not to ensure that the party platform reflects their views in any general sense. If the primary role of parties is to compete for votes from diverse groups of citizens in inter-party elections, then each party's top-level leaders must enjoy significant discretion in shaping its platform—and its strongest supporters are not the only constituency whose views are appropriately considered in that process. In our view, therefore, the relatively narrow aim of mass-facing IPD is simply to provide some degree of resistance against a specific threat that inter-party competition is distinctively ill-equipped to address—i.e., oligarchic agenda capture—by ensuring that dissenters have at least some tools at their disposal for contesting the influence of wealthy elites.

Similarly, the reason to engage large numbers of ordinary citizens—in addition to various mid-level elites and other stakeholder representatives—is not that this will satisfy their postmaterialist

demands for individualized self-expression, and thereby strengthen their commitment to the collective aims of the party as such. Mass participation is necessary, rather, because it protects the integrity of *elite*-facing IPD, which in practice carries much of the burden of resisting oligarchic agenda capture. One the one hand, it ensures that some mid-level elites have independent sources of power in a mass base, such that dissenters cannot simply be replaced by top-level leaders. In the absence of any dissenting mid-level elites, on the other hand, its role is again to ensure that dissenters among the broader population of members and supporters have at least some institutional channels through which to oppose oligarchic agenda capture.

Beyond simply providing institutional forums within which citizens *might* contest oligarchic influence, finally, we argue that mass-facing IPD practices must be designed to maximize the *likelihood* that oligarchs will actually encounter significant resistance in their attempts to influence the party's agenda. On our account of the mechanisms of oligarchic agenda capture, recall, its pervasiveness is largely attributable to wealthy elites' superior ability to coordinate in defense of shared interests. A key realist criticism of aggregative IPD practices, meanwhile, is that they weaken the complex forms of intermediation and organization provided by many mid-level elites—instead fostering direct, plebiscitary connections between disorganized individuals and prominent top-level leaders. As such, we argue that inclusionary party reform must aim to facilitate potent forms of *countervailing organization* among ordinary people, which could counterbalance the pressures that are reliably exerted on party leaders by well-organized and wealthy elites.

Assuming that the most effective strategies will vary substantially by context, we stop short of prescribing any particular practices as optimally democratic or universally required for this anti-oligarchic end. Drawing on the experience of social democratic parties tightly integrated with the labor movement, however, this final section illustrates the limitations of deliberative approaches

and outlines a more promising orientation for inclusionary party reform. Although revisionists' emphasis on layered, multi-level organizational structures is a step in the right direction, we argue that their exclusive reliance on deliberative modes of engagement between party elites and rank-and-file members or supporters fails to address underlying problems of disorganization and individualization. Instead of proliferating opportunities for individual self-expression within the party, we conclude that efforts to democratize political parties should aim to strengthen social ties, solidarity, and habits of collective action among ordinary people—and that these imperatives need not be pursued entirely within existing party hierarchies.

§5.2. Organized collective power: achievements and challenges

Our point of departure is the widespread historical observation that many of the parties which have consistently resisted oligarchic agenda capture have been integrated with independent mass-membership organizations such as labor unions (Ahlquist 2017; Crouch 2004; Freeman and Medoff 1984; McAlevey 2020; Streeck and Hassel 2003). Of course, revisionists' turn to deliberation is at least partly motivated by their pessimism about the prospects of reviving this kind of organized collective power, given the declining strength of labor and related trends, and we acknowledge that contemporary conditions present serious challenges for this model. In our view, however, the resurgence of *some* such countervailing organizations—albeit, perhaps, in novel or unfamiliar forms—is both possible and urgently necessary. As Steven Klein (2021) has recently argued in this journal, that is, democracy *requires* organized collective power.

In brief, the key challenge is that the alliance between labor unions and social democratic parties—once a robust source of opposition to oligarchic interests—has disintegrated along with the labor movement itself (Berman and Snegovaya 2019; Hacker and Pierson 2011; Mudge 2018). For one, globalization and other changes have gradually eroded the "cohesive social environments

that helped structure the original growth of mass parties" (Streeck 2014, 123)—including trade unions, social clubs, and so on—as well as the collective class-based identities that were once supported by these organizations (see also Winant 2020). Relatedly, the left-right dimension that once reliably structured political contestation around economic issues has increasingly been complicated by a cross-cutting "cosmopolitan–communitarian" dimension, further obstructing the organization of parties around consistent opposition to oligarchic interests (Bornschier 2010; Chhibber and Verma 2018; Zürn and Wilde 2016).

At least partly in response to this marked decline in class consciousness and conflict over issues of economic redistribution, revisionist advocates of mass-facing IPD have argued that our efforts to deepen democracy should pivot to more individualized and deliberative forms of inclusionary party reform. In particular, Wolkenstein and Invernizzi-Accetti (2017) take their cue from recent claims that citizens of advanced democracies are increasingly motivated to participate in politics by the opportunities for self-expression it affords (e.g., Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Norris 2002). Unfortunately, they observe, these "postmaterialist" demands cannot be satisfied by aggregative procedures, whose appeal is grounded rather in collective identification and the pursuit of common aims. To secure wider participation, therefore, contemporary political parties must institutionalize discussion within local branches and other empowered deliberative forums.

In our view, however, revisionists' acquiescence to perceived demands for individualized self-expression is premature, and their exclusive focus on deliberative solutions is at best a distraction. Collective forms of anti-oligarchic power *can* be revived, we insist—both by fostering new solidarities, along new lines, and by contesting the policies that undermined labor's strength in the first place. Indeed, we claim, they *must* be: individualized forms of deliberative participation will always be inadequate to address oligarchic agenda capture, and in some cases may be harmful.

§5.3. Deliberative forums and organized collective power

Let us begin by considering the best-case scenario for deliberative party reforms. On the model proposed by Wolkenstein and other revisionists, intra-party forums would have substantial power, rather than playing a merely consultative role. They would also be structured in egalitarian ways—using facilitation techniques that can minimize the dominance of privileged voices, for instance—rather than being manipulated by party elites to serve their own ends. In such ideal conditions, we concede, deliberative reforms would likely advance certain democratic goals—giving participants a greater sense of political efficacy, for instance, and even enabling contestation of the agenda.

Still, deliberative forums could realistically engage only a tiny minority of the party's voters, and participants would almost certainly be unrepresentative of that larger group. The power given to any particular branch or forum, meanwhile, will necessarily be bounded by their small scale and local scope—constraints imposed by the demand to remain both deliberative and inclusive. In order to initiate party-wide changes in a coherent anti-oligarchic direction, therefore—rather than a cacophony of conflicting local imperatives that party elites could readily ignore—ordinary party members would need to unify around a specific set of demands, and successfully advance them over the objections of party leaders in a multitude of different branches and forums.

It is not impossible to imagine groups of ordinary people taking just this kind of coordinated collective action in opposition to oligarchic agenda capture, and revisionists might therefore claim that their model can accommodate the sort of countervailing power we recommend. On the one hand, however, such a concerted strategic effort would seem to betray the open-ended spirit that is central to most justifications of deliberation. On the other hand, it would also rely on substantial solidarity and collective organization: i.e., precisely those elements of countervailing power that revisionists have notably failed to discuss. To the extent that deliberative forums can accommodate or even encourage coordinated collective action by organized groups of rank-and-file members,

therefore, we conclude that they *can* facilitate resistance to oligarchic agenda capture. Given that other intra-party decision-making procedures could also accommodate such coordinated action, however, deliberative forums are less essential to anti-oligarchic resistance than the organizations through which collective action is coordinated in the first place. Even in the best-case scenario, it seems, revisionists' exclusive focus on the former over the latter is misplaced.

Once we relax the idealizing assumption that party elites will act in good faith, meanwhile—rather than using their control over the structure of deliberative forums to insulate their agenda from serious challenges—there is even less cause for enthusiasm about deliberative approaches. Revisionists often rely on a largely undefended assumption that deliberative exchanges between citizens and elites are "likely to be a much more effective mechanism to check the power of the leadership over the base than merely voting on their proposals" (Wolkenstein and Invernizzi-Accetti 2017, 103). In doing so, they ignore the substantial evidence that elites often employ the tools of participatory inclusion very strategically, in ways that entrench and legitimize their power (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2016; Dhillon 2017; Lee 2014; Weale 2018)—and neglect the strong possibility that opportunistic party leaders would use intra-party deliberation in similar ways.

§5.4. Organized collective power: contemporary prospects

For all these reasons, then, we think revisionists are overly optimistic about deliberative party reforms. At the same time, we argue, they are also overly *pessimistic* about the prospects of more organized and collectively-oriented forms of participation. Though Wolkenstein and Invernizzi-Accetti are right to reckon with the declining salience of class conflict and the apparent increase in demand for individualized forms of participation, for instance, they are wrong to see these trends as inevitable and irreversible. Their account frames the transition from collective solidarity to individualized self-expression as a natural consequence of growing material security and other

global economic trends, rather than as a contingent result of specific political choices. It therefore obscures the very deliberate efforts of oligarchic elites to dismantle the socio-legal foundations of labor unions and other sources of countervailing power (e.g., Harvey 2005)

The declining power of labor cannot be attributed *solely* to government policies aimed directly at that result. Yet even many apparently unrelated economic trends—including the expansion of "workplace fissuring" and the "gig economy," as well as broader forces such as globalization and automation—have thrived at least partly because they undermine workers' organizational capacity, and thus serve the shared interests of elites around the globe (McAlevey 2020; Slobodian 2018). And if the declining power of unions and other organs of countervailing power is partly a result of policy choices, then a more "promotive stance" could mitigate this decline, thereby reviving our capacity to resist oligarchic capture (O'Neill and White 2018, see also Andrias and Sachs 2020).

Even absent state support, meanwhile, shifts in the strategic orientation of union leaders and party elites—amidst changing economic and cultural conditions—could also initiate a revival of working-class movements. Clearly, there is no consensus about which organizing tactics are most effective, and no strategy is appropriate for every context. Nevertheless, several recent analyses have converged on the insight that, despite their relatively high costs to members, confrontational and participatory approaches often yield the most enduring increases in membership (McAlevey 2016; Stout 2012; Woodly Forthcoming). As many effective organizers have long argued, in short, the experience of achieving concrete victories through collective struggle can be transformative—especially when it involves participation in mass collective action such as a strike (Alinsky 1971; Moses et al. 1989; Payne 1995). In particular, successful collective struggles can exert a powerful influence on participants' identities, generating the sort of solidarity and sustained commitment to collective action that is necessary to support lasting, effective institutions of countervailing power.

Even if labor unions, social democratic parties, and the class-based identities that support them are indeed in terminal decline, finally, other sources of countervailing power can be grounded in other forms of collective identity, among other disempowered groups with shared interests. Efforts to organize communities around common local concerns, for instance, have sometimes generated enduring organizations with substantial countervailing power (Phulwani 2016; Stout 2012)—as have the efforts of disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups to contest their shared oppression (Payne 1995; Woodly Forthcoming). While efforts to organize tenants, debtors, and welfare beneficiaries have fewer successful models to draw upon, shifting conditions may present new opportunities for building countervailing power among these groups as well (Andrias and Sachs 2020). Like labor unions, these other countervailing organizations most often achieve broader political success by extracting concessions from left-leaning parties, thereby forcing certain issues onto the agenda for inter-party competition. Yet that is not the *only* way to resist oligarchic agenda capture: in some contexts, at least, well-organized groups of ordinary people could also pry open certain features of an oligarch-friendly governing consensus via internal pressure on centrist or right-leaning parties.

§5.5. Implications of the functionalist approach

As we have emphasized, it is beyond our scope to evaluate the prospects of any particular approach to building organized collective power in any particular context—and we are especially mindful to avoid universalizing the model adopted by 20th-century social democratic parties. One important concrete implication of our approach does emerge quite clearly from our examination of this historical model, however: namely, that the layers of organization linking mass participation to top-level party leaders need not be located *within* the party structure. As with labor unions in the social democratic party model, rather, a party might successfully resist oligarchic capture by integrating independent organizations into its decision-making at certain critical junctures. As long

as those external organizations are accountable to a mass base of some kind, their democratic role is functionally similar to that played by more paradigmatic IPD practices, and thus belongs to the same category of democratic tools. Indeed, it may have advantages over internal party reforms.

Because they remain independent, for one, external organizations are both less likely to be co-opted by top-level leaders, and better positioned to challenge those leaders without damaging their ability to present and execute a coherent platform. Meanwhile, organizations with a social or economic purpose other than partisan competition will likely attract more consistent participation, outside of election campaigns, from a wider range of people. Even in an era of growing demand for political self-expression, opportunities to debate finer points of policy and strategy are unlikely to appeal quite as broadly as the social bonds and other intrinsic benefits offered by organizations with a more immediate social purpose, such as labor unions and community groups—not to mention the social clubs and religious groups with which they are often intertwined.

That said, the advantages of entrusting some or all IPD functions to external organizations are hardly decisive, and will vary by context. As such, we do not claim that mass-facing IPD *must* take this form. Regardless of where it happens, the crucial point is to design mass-facing IPD practices that generate regular, organized engagement—which, as we noted above, is the most reliable way to generate the solidarity, social ties, and habits of collective action that can actually sustain countervailing sources of power among ordinary people (Ahlquist and Levi 2013; Han 2014, 2016; McAlevey 2016; Speer and Han 2018). And it is certainly conceivable that this sort of engagement could be generated within the party. Given that nearly all contemporary discussion centers on such internally-focused reforms, however, our insistence that external mass-membership organizations could also fulfill the most important democratic function of mass-facing IPD—so long as they are adequately integrated into party decision-making—represents an important intervention. Indeed,

including this latter strategy in the category of mass-facing IPD allows us to considerably shrink the apparent distance between realist critics and revisionist advocates.

On the one hand, realists like Rosenbluth and Shapiro often point to the "centralized" parties that created social democracy in postwar Europe as evidence that mass-facing IPD is unnecessary for resisting oligarchic capture. Because it ignores their integration with external organizations, however, this description is misleading. Most crucially, we have argued, it was their affiliation with mass-membership trade unions that allowed the UK Labour Party and other European social democratic parties to resist certain forms of agenda capture during that period. On the other hand, revisionists like Wolkenstein are clearly concerned with oligarchic influence on party leaders, and would likely welcome the growth of organized collective power, among ordinary people, as a counterweight. Yet their deliberative solutions are not well-suited to fostering such countervailing power, and in limiting their horizon to internal party structures, they ignore the strategies that have enjoyed the most success historically. By highlighting that certain external organizations can fulfill the most crucial anti-oligarchic function of mass-facing IPD, our functionalist account thus opens space for convergence among realists who are skeptical of internal party reforms, and revisionists who insist that resisting oligarchic capture of party elites requires *some* form of mass engagement.

§6. Conclusion

This paper has articulated a functionalist account of intra-party democracy. To begin with, we have adopted the systemic evaluative approach preferred by realist critics—insisting that mass-facing IPD practices be evaluated on the basis of whether they facilitate resistance to domination and capture at the level of the polity as a whole. In rejecting such practices altogether, however, realists put too much faith in the tendency of inter-party competition to realize those goals—in particular neglecting the possibility that wealthy interests could control the political agenda by

capturing all viable parties simultaneously. As revisionist advocates have insisted, meanwhile, some forms of mass-facing IPD may hold more democratic promise than the plebiscitary practices criticized by realists. Where revisionists press for deliberative reforms, however—as a way of ensuring that parties reflect the views of rank-and-file members—our functionalist account suggests a more specific aim, and a more targeted set of practices.

The key role of mass-facing IPD within a broader democratic system, we have argued, is to counter the specific threat of oligarchic agenda capture. Our first conclusion, then, is that inclusionary party reform is less urgent in more flexible party systems, where dissenters are better able to resist this threat from *within* the framework of inter-party competition—i.e., by founding new parties. Whatever the context, second, we conclude that mass-facing IPD practices should aim at enabling ordinary members and supporters of a party to resist agenda capture by oligarchic interests. Though we stop short of defending any particular set of reforms, we reject revisionists' emphasis on individualized forms of deliberative participation, in favor of a more oppositional and collectively-oriented approach—on the grounds that the latter is more likely to encourage the development of effective institutions of countervailing power. Organizing collective power and subsequently linking it to parties' decision-making processes is undoubtedly a tall order. If we hope to address oligarchic threats to democracy, however, there are no shortcuts to be found.

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