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Introduction

On June 23, 2016, Britons decided to exit the European Union. With 52 percent of voters choosing to “Leave,” the 43-year partnership between the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe would end. This momentous decision immediately prompted national soul searching over the uncertain economic ramifications of the vote. Would Britain and Europe maintain the free trade arrangements enjoyed by so many businesses on both sides of the channel? And what would become of the more than 50,000 EU regulations and directives that had supplanted national policies over the years?

Uncertainty over the nation’s economic future quickly spawned political chaos – all the more so because the leaders of both major political parties had campaigned to “Remain” in the EU. The vote represented a repudiation of leadership for Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, and immediate calls for their resignations resounded across the news media and in the Commons.

Cameron promptly obliged and announced he would step down. The Tory leadership acted quickly to replace him, setting a deadline just days away for contenders to formally announce their candidacy. Boris Johnson, the outspoken former mayor of London who led the “Leave” charge within his party, was the early favorite. But the contest took an immediate turn when one of his closest allies, Michael Gove, shocked the country by throwing his hat in the ring just two hours before Johnson was due to make his official declaration and three hours before the close of nominations. (Later, it would become apparent that the 24 hours leading up to Gove’s announcement were full of backroom negotiations that would ultimately undermine his former ally.) In the wake of Gove’s

announcement, Johnson knew he could no longer secure sufficient support from members of parliament (MPs) to advance his candidacy to the final stage, and he stepped down.¹ Four additional candidates announced bids for the party's highest post in the final days of nominations, and a five-candidate race for party leader ensued.

Conservative leadership selection began with a series of multi-round runoff elections in which only members of parliament voted. Within two days, Tory MPs narrowed the field to two contenders: Andrea Leadsom and Theresa May. Over the coming weeks, the candidates were set to campaign, debate, and attend local hustings, followed by a final vote among all dues-paying members. Within a week, however, Leadsom withdrew, citing a lack of support among MPs. May was appointed party leader immediately and swore in as prime minister the following evening, just 24 days after the Brexit vote. A reluctant "Remain" supporter, May was poised to maintain the party's appeal to moderate Conservatives and independents.

Meanwhile, the UK Labour Party faced its own crisis. Even before the Brexit vote, Corbyn was unpopular with many Labour parliamentarians, who saw his left-wing policy positions as unelectable. But his tepid support and weak campaign to remain in the EU infuriated MPs, and they blamed him for failing to rally supporters. Corbyn refused to step down, and in an unprecedented display of disapproval, a majority of Labour's shadow cabinet resigned within days of the Brexit vote. A week later, Labour MPs overwhelmingly passed an internal no-confidence motion (172–40) on their leader. One former cabinet member declared her party in "complete shambles," and said that staying with Corbyn was "putting the Labour Party's future in jeopardy" (Jowell 2016). The party's deputy leader admitted, "My party is in peril. We are facing an existential crisis" (Watson 2016). Corbyn even had trouble filling a new, smaller shadow cabinet. As a result, the Scottish National Party threatened to replace Labour as the official opposition, citing parliamentary rules mandating that the opposition be "prepared to assume power" (May 2015).

Yet, even as internal divisions among the party elite plunged Labour deep into crisis, Corbyn retained solid support from the party's left-wing membership base. Over 100,000 people joined the party in the month following the Brexit vote, catapulting total membership above 500,000 – the highest in modern history and more than all other UK parties combined.

¹ By his team's count, Johnson had the support of ninety-seven MPs before Gove's announcement and only forty-seven immediately after (Rayner 2016).

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These new members were primarily comprised of Corbyn defenders, prepared to guard his position and the future direction of their party at a break point. In response to losing the confidence vote, Corbyn stated,

I was democratically elected leader of our party for a new kind of politics by 60 percent of Labour members and supporters, and I will not betray them by resigning. Today's vote by MPs has no constitutional legitimacy. We are a democratic party with a clear constitution (Corbyn 2016).

To Labour MPs' vexation, Corbyn was right – the confidence vote had no formal impact. A Labour Party election can only be triggered by the incumbent leader's death or decision to stand down, or by an official replacement challenge.² Only then is a rank-order election held among party members to choose the leader. Unlike their Conservative rivals, Labour MPs are unable to narrow the playing field to their two most preferred candidates.

When Corbyn finally faced a challenge, members of the Labour elite did everything in their power to prevent him from winning again. Some argued, almost successfully, that the rules required Corbyn himself to receive the support of 20 percent of MPs to stand in a nomination test.³ (It was unclear he could muster sufficient MP support for even this low a bar.) Additionally, Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC) made the unprecedented declaration that only members enlisted for at least six months prior to the call of the election would be eligible to vote.⁴

In the end, efforts to outmaneuver party members were ineffective. Corbyn defeated his rival 62 to 38 percent – two points more than he garnered in his first election. The most unpopular leader among MPs had

² To launch such a challenge, a candidate must secure the support of 20 percent of Labour MPs (10 percent in the case of a vacancy).

³ The party rules in question read: "Where there is no vacancy, nominations may be sought by potential challengers each year prior to the annual session of Party conference. In this case any nomination must be supported by 20 percent of the combined Commons members of the PLP [Parliamentary Labour Party] and members of the EPLP [European Parliamentary Labour Party]. Nominations not attaining this threshold shall be null and void" (Labour Party Rule Book 2013: 15). The National Executive Committee (NEC) ultimately determined, by a vote of 18–14, that the incumbent leader is automatically entitled to renomination.

⁴ Outraged by the NEC's decision, a group of new members filed a lawsuit against the general secretary to appeal the NEC's decision in the High Court of Justice. The High Court overruled the NEC's decision, stating there was no mention in the Labour constitution that a freeze on membership could be retroactive. The Procedures Subcommittee of the NEC appealed that decision, and the Court of Appeal ultimately overturned the High Court's decision, siding with the NEC's claim to be "the guardian of the Constitution" (Elgot 2016).

just won an election with overwhelming member support. With public opinion at an all-time low, Corbyn would stay on as leader and preside over a fractured, deeply unpopular party. The immediate ramifications of Labour's implosion were staggering, and the Tories' lead in early election polls grew by over 10 percentage points in under three months.

What caused these two parties to take such different paths? And what are the implications for voter representation and elections? Many journalists and politicians argue that the leaders' personal styles explain the two parties' divergent trajectories. Indeed, some scholars advocate for a greater focus on individual personalities when explaining pivotal moments in a country's history (Byman and Pollack 2001). Others cite Labour's populist undercurrents (Watts and Bale 2019) or growing internal divisions between the hard left and more moderate voters (Crines, Jeffery, and Heppell 2018, Shaw 2021) as undermining the party's ability to coalesce behind a leader with broad appeal.

This book takes a different approach. I argue that the Conservative and Labour parties' differing strategies reflect less the personalities or skills of their leaders or the threat of internal factions and more the sharp differences in their rules over leadership selection and removal. The British Conservative Party gives MPs significant discretion over deselection: with a simple majority vote, parliamentarians can sack the leader and call a new election in which the previous leader is barred from participating. (Had Cameron decided to stay on, Conservative MPs could, and surely would, have forced him out.) To select a new leader, a group of backbench Conservatives MPs, known as the 1922 Committee, sets both the timing and nomination requirements for candidates before members of parliament narrow the field to two candidates through sequential voting rounds.⁵ Consequently, Conservatives can quickly pivot when a leader becomes unpopular. As one former Conservative official I interviewed shared, "The Conservative Party is known as being regicidal ... they love getting rid of the leader."⁶ Indeed, the party quickly churned

⁵ By finessing the rules, Conservative MPs can at times bypass members altogether, as they did in the race to replace Liz Truss in October 2022. The 1922 Committee set the highest bar in history for nominations, requiring candidates to secure pledged support from 100 MPs in order to advance their candidacy. With 365 sitting MPs, at most three candidates could emerge. (That was unlikely, however, as it would have required MPs to simultaneously coordinate around three fairly evenly split candidates.) In the end, only Rishi Sunak garnered sufficient support, and he was declared leader without a single ballot being cast. Sunak became prime minister just five days after Truss announced her resignation.

⁶ Author Interview. February 22, 2022.

through three more leaders after Cameron's departure, bringing the total to five Conservative prime ministers in under eight years.

By contrast, the Labour Party puts nearly all its power in the hands of members. A leader can only be removed if a majority of members agree on a replacement, and any paid-up member may participate in the leadership vote. Even as Corbyn faced unprecedented and highly vocal opposition within his party's leadership, he retained solid support from its left-wing membership base.

Had the two leading parties' selection rules been reversed, with ordinary Conservative members given the initial choice, the populist Boris Johnson would have been the odds-on favorite to move into 10 Downing Street in 2016.⁷ Conversely, Jeremy Corbyn would have undoubtedly faced the axe had Labour followed the Conservatives' rules. Backroom and late-night deals among MPs made all the difference for the Conservatives but had little influence on the Labour Party's leadership. The rules inside the major parties ultimately determined their electoral fate.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTY RULES

While Brexit shined a light on the internal functioning of the Conservatives and Labour in the UK, party leadership contests take shape in various other forms around the world. In some parties, such as the Australian Liberal Party, the parliamentary group acts alone in selecting the leader. In others, MPs play no formal role. For example, the Belgian Christian Democratic and Flemish party (CD&V) allows sub-national organizations to nominate candidates for an election open to all members. Iceland's Independence Party at times reverses this sequence, allowing any member to self-nominate and turning final selection through a write-in ballot over to party convention delegates. In a few extreme circumstances, parties have no rules prescribing leadership deselection. The long-standing leader of Italy's conservative Forza Italia, Silvio Berlusconi, was never subject to a leadership contest after he assumed office.

Seemingly minor rules often carry significant consequences, and politicians strategically maneuver around the constraints of their parties' institutions to maximize political gain. Consider New Zealand's Labour

⁷ Ironically, three years later, with contentious EU negotiations still causing economic uncertainty, May herself stepped down, and Johnson made it through the parliamentary group's selection on a promise to "get Brexit done" (Johnson 2019).

Party, which selects its leader using an electoral college granting 40 percent of the vote each to members and MPs, with the remaining 20 percent going to unions. The party's constitution includes a clause allowing the national executive to select a replacement if the leadership is vacated within three months of an upcoming national legislative election. This rule was invoked in August 2017, when opposition leader Andrew Little stepped down just 54 days before the election. Jacinda Ardern took over the position, and Labour immediately jumped in the polls. Many pundits and opponents argued Little timed his exit strategically, as Ardern may have failed to garner sufficient support from the party's unions to win the leadership race. She went on to become prime minister following the party's success in the election.⁸

The outgoing leader of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), Erhard Busek, invoked a similarly obscure clause from his party's statutes in 1995. Unhappy with the party's probable direction in selecting the next leader, Busek threatened to run for the position again, citing a rule allowing any individual to compete with the support of only 50 delegates to the party congress. Although Busek would not be able to secure the votes needed to win the leadership race, he could attain this minimum threshold, potentially igniting a protracted debate that ÖVP leaders were eager to avoid. In exchange for sitting out, party executives agreed to back Wolfgang Schüssel, one of Busek's cabinet members and an otherwise unlikely choice for party leader. Schüssel ultimately succeeded in uniting his fractured party, leading them to victory and serving as Austria's Chancellor from 2000 to 2007.⁹

As vital as the leadership selection process is, parties institute many other rules and procedures equally important for their electoral and governing success, including those regulating parliamentary candidate selection and the drafting of election manifestos. By determining who makes important party decisions and at what level they do so, these

⁸ In New Zealand's other major party, the National Party, the parliamentary caucus exclusively selects its leader.

⁹ It is easy to see just how consequential leadership selection rules are by taking a look at US presidential primaries. Consider what might have played out had the Republican 2016 primaries employed a runoff ballot – either a multi-ballot runoff approach like the British Conservatives or a ranked ballot as in Labour. With three-quarters of Republican voters in March 2015 stating they could not see themselves voting for Donald Trump in the next election (NBC News/Wall Street Journal 2015), Trump would have easily been eliminated in an early round. Instead, the numerous candidates in the race and lack of runoff led the “never-Trump” vote to split, and he won the nomination and subsequent election.

rules have long-term consequences for representation, the quality of governance, and voter participation. Yet the extensive research examining electoral structures and institutions at the country level is not reproduced within parties, and party rules remain largely enigmatic. Referring to candidate selection, Duverger wrote, “Often it is even secret, as parties do not like the odours of the electoral kitchen to spread to the outside world” (1954: 354). British journalist Anthony Howard famously described candidate selection as “the secret garden” of British politics (quoted in Ranney 1965: 3).

INSIDE PARTIES: THE TRADEOFF TO DECENTRALIZATION

Inside Parties opens the gate to this secret garden by introducing and examining the rules governing candidate selection, leadership nominations, and policymaking in competitive parties from modern parliamentary democracies over the past two decades. Research for the book is based on an extensive data collection of party constitutions, as well as in-depth interviews with officials around the world. Drawing on this wealth of information, I argue that a party’s level of *decentralization* – that is, the degree to which party members rather than leaders control decisions – shapes its ability to represent and respond to the electorate.¹⁰ By shifting the balance of power between elites and rank and file members, party organizations fundamentally influence representation, participation, and electoral outcomes.

Decentralized parties invite members to select candidates, nominate leaders, and contribute to the party platform. For example, a party with decentralized candidate selection, such as the Swedish Liberals, grants members the power to nominate and elect their parliamentary candidates without the threat of a veto from the leadership. In contrast, centralized parties put power in the hands of their elite. A party with centralized candidate selection, such as the Austrian Freedom Party, authorizes a single leader or committee to select all of its candidates. In many parties, candidate selection is shared by both members and leaders. Local party members nominate candidates in the Spanish People’s Party, but national leaders hold a veto. In the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA), members choose

¹⁰ Previous authors have also used the terms inclusiveness or internal party democratization to refer to decentralization in the literature (e.g., Hazan and Rahat 2010). Chapter 3 discusses terminology and introduces competing conceptualizations.

a pool of acceptable candidates, and leaders select nominees from among this group.

I argue that decentralization poses a fundamental electoral tradeoff for parties. On the one hand, *decentralized parties are more effective at recruiting members*. By providing opportunities to participate in nominations or policy decisions, decentralized parties strengthen the appeal of membership. Party members are crucial for raising money, working on campaigns, staffing field offices, running for downballot elections, and mobilizing voters. Parties with decentralized organizations are more responsive to the interests of their members and core supporters and may enjoy higher election turnout among their base.

On the other hand, *decentralized parties' members are more extreme*. By delegating control over crucial decisions, decentralized parties' collective decisions and positions are closely tied to the preferences of their members. Yet members in decentralized parties are not representative of all voters, or even their party's own voters. Instead, decentralized parties disproportionately attract members with extreme views, subsequently leading the party to adopt more extreme positions and potentially suffer the electoral consequences.

These predictions are derived from a formal theoretical model of party membership. The model examines how party rules shape the various incentives voters face when considering joining a party. I argue that while some costs or benefits affect all individuals equally (e.g., membership fees, career networking), others are tied to an individual's proximity to their preferred political party (e.g., a sense of community, the ability to select candidates).

The model has the important implication that *members' motivations for joining parties will be different for different types of parties*. Parties offering significant nonpolicy benefits are most attractive to individuals whose positions align closely with their party. In contrast, parties offering instrumental benefits, such as the opportunity to select candidates or vote on party policy, appeal most to supporters positioned farther away. The types of benefits a party offers will alter its set of members, who can subsequently shape the party's position and electoral future.

These two issues at the crux of the tradeoff – one concerning mobilization, the other responsiveness – are familiar in any election campaign. Politicians and political scientists alike acknowledge the tradeoffs in resources needed to motivate a party's base versus convert new voters (e.g., Przeworski and Sprague 1986, Kitschelt 1994, Cox 2010). Yet while previous research assumes all parties face these tradeoffs equally, I

argue that a party's success in mobilizing core supporters or drawing in new voters depends critically on its rules governing decentralization.

Given these tradeoffs, which type of organization is most competitive? The answer depends on features of the electoral environment, including a party's size and location, as well as the nonpolicy costs and benefits it offers members. For large, competitive parties, decentralization may pull leaders and policies too far away from the general electorate (as was the case with Labour under Corbyn). But new, small parties often need decentralization to grow their base and increase voter support. Moreover, the electoral costs of decentralization are far lower for centrist parties because their voters, and thus potential members, are less extreme.

I test the model's implications using various data sources, including aggregate membership numbers, cross-national surveys, party member studies, survey experiments, and computational simulations of projected vote shares. The findings reveal that among likely supporters, membership is higher for decentralized than centralized parties, but this effect is driven by voters who are more extreme than the party (relative to government). Moreover, I find that voters respond to rules granting them actual control over party decisions rather than simply the symbolic opportunity to participate in party votes. Finally, in line with the model's expectations, decentralized parties are shown to be farther from the vote-maximizing position than their centralized competitors.

Thus, *Inside Parties* suggests a need to revisit longstanding theories of democracy. Although powerful leaders of centralized parties are generally considered antithetical to democracy, I argue that it is democratically organized parties that often circumvent the interests of the general public. By subjugating the interests of all voters to those of an active minority, parties may become more polarized and less responsive to their electorate.

COMPETING PERSPECTIVES ON PARTY ORGANIZATION

Scholars have long appreciated the importance of stable political parties in providing the groundwork for successful democratic governance (e.g., Downs 1957, Key 1958, Schattschneider 1942). Parties provide voters with important informational cues, solve politicians' collective action problems, recruit candidates, run election campaigns, and form governments. In most democracies today, voters predominantly identify with parties, rather than individual candidates, when casting their ballots (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002, Rosema 2006).

Their crucial roles as principal intermediaries between voters and politicians also grant parties the power to intrude upon the representative process itself. Over a century ago, two prominent scholars warned of parties' potential to divert democracy. Moisei Ostrogorski argued that political parties infallibly turn into permanent professional organizations, headed by entrenched bureaucrats bent on preserving control. A party "tends inevitably towards power ... its master passion is to maintain itself against all opposition, with no scruple as to means" (Ostrogorski [1902] 1964: 355). A decade later, Roberto Michels echoed this belief: "This politically necessary principle of organization ... brings other dangers in its train" (Michels [1911] 1962: 62). Political leaders, focused on self-preservation, exploit their informational advantage to build aggrandizing party institutions. "Who says organization, says oligarchy" (Michels [1911] 1962: 365).¹¹

Many scholars since then have offered different characterizations, if not cautions, concerning party organization. Kirchheimer (1966) argued that by moving away from their class-based origins, parties no longer offer voters distinct ideological choices. Instead, they operate as catchall electoral firms, emphasizing leadership, while blurring policy differences. Panebianco (1988) observed a move from representational bureaucracies to professional organizations, akin to polling or marketing agencies, obsessed with the bottom line (in their case, the number of votes). Katz and Mair (1995) argued that as parties institutionalize, their membership wanes, party-society linkages focus almost singularly on votes, and organizations converge to exploit state resources, similar to a cartel.

Although many authors depict parties as entrenched bureaucratic organizations tied to the state and removed from their class or societal roots, other scholars warn of the opposite possibility – parties too closely reliant on their base. Leaders may not be able to swiftly and effectively respond to the demands of their voters if they are hamstrung by members who control the party platform and selection of candidates. Drawing on Duverger (1954) and McKenzie (1955), May (1973) proposed a "law of curvilinear disparity," in which party activists are assumed to be more radical than both party leaders and regular voters. By controlling key decisions, extreme members obstruct responsiveness, making the party representative of the few but not the whole.¹²

¹¹ Rejecting the possibility for representative democracy, Michels believed that because democracy requires organization, and organization necessitates oligarchy, democratic governance is unachievable.

¹² See also Hirschman (1970) and Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018).