

# Party leadership selection and party leaders' powers: Empowered grassroots or leader-centric parties?

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This paper explores whether parties' leadership selection procedures carry broader implications for intraparty power. Prior scholarship has documented an ongoing shift in the ways that parties select their leaders, with a growing tendency to include grassroots supporters in such decisions, sometimes described as 'plebiscitary intraparty democracy'. Some have portrayed moves towards more inclusive leadership selection as part of a more general shift towards the empowerment of individual party members and supporters; others have dismissed it as mere window dressing, and part of a trend towards more leader-centric parties. This study investigates these relationships, asking whether the extent of grassroots involvement in party leadership selection procedures in contemporary democracies relates in any way to the broader distribution of formal powers within parties. Contrary to some sceptics, we find no support for the argument that parties with bottom-up forms of leadership selection generally grant greater formal powers to leaders. Rather, the opposite, in fact: moreover, parties that use inclusive leadership selection procedures also tend to use plebiscitary methods across a wider array of intraparty decision-making procedures. Thus, the highly publicized spread of inclusive leadership contests can be seen as a symptom of wider shifts in the norms and practices of intraparty governance.

**Keywords:** party leadership; party organization; party members; intraparty democracy.

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## Introduction

Over the past two decades, researchers have paid increasing attention to the ways in which parties in parliamentary democracies select their leaders. This enhanced scrutiny has been driven at least in part by the parties themselves, and by the increased frequency with which parties have debated and changed their own rules in these areas. Changes to parties' internal organizations are nothing new, especially in the wake of electoral setbacks (Harmel and Janda 1994; Gauja 2016), but some of the recent changes to leadership selection methods have been distinctive in going so far as to offer rights to participants *outside* the formal memberships, as superior models for doing democracy. Italian and French parties have been in the vanguard of such developments and elected both party leaders and presidential candidates through open primaries (Cross and Pilet 2015; Venturino *et al.*, 2015; Bernardi *et al.*, 2017; Seddone and Sandri 2021; Fabre 2024). The British Labour Party might also have been considered an example between 2015 and 2021 in so far as 'registered supporters' who did not have full membership status had the right to take part in choosing leaders, while the likes of PASOK in Greece and the Irish Greens have taken similar routes.

Such well-publicized changes have naturally raised questions about the consequences (intended or otherwise) of the rules that structure the selection of party leaders. These high-profile cases certainly succeed in attracting media and scholarly attention, but how much do they tell us about how parties work more generally? Can we identify systematic differences in intraparty power distributions associated with different types of leadership selection regimes? Sceptics might argue that differences in leadership selection rules are mainly window dressing, in part or whole because most selection decisions are negotiated solutions, worked out by political elites before the official selection events (Aylott and Bolin 2017, 2021). But even if it is accepted that these rules offer important signals about how parties conduct their business, observers differ (as we show below) as to whether they tend to generally correspond with the empowerment of the voluntary organization or the party leadership.

In this article we contribute to this debate, initially focussing on a single area of potential impact in parties' internal governance: the formal powers that leaders themselves enjoy. We then consider this question from another angle, looking at whether inclusive leadership selection rules tend to be adopted in isolation from other rules (which might be consistent with a narrative of the reforms being made to strengthen party leaders) or whether they tend to be adopted alongside other rules which give members and supporters direct decision-making power (which would be consistent with a narrative of the reforms reflecting greater general grassroots empowerment). Thus, in this paper we revisit this debate, looking for patterns in parties' choices about how they codify intraparty relations, without necessarily assuming that these relations are always unidirectional.

We assess these relations using a large data set that documents the internal functioning of parties in 31 parliamentary and hybrid political systems. Consistent with previous work that has been done using the Political Party Database (PPDB), our empirical work is founded on what parties claim in their own statutes and rule books (the 'official story') about the relationship between party leadership selection methods and the leader's powers and rights within political parties. This means that we cannot capture aspects of *de facto* power that depend on the political season. Instead, we focus on parties' formal rules that govern intraparty decision-making and leadership power, which are relatively stable, and which have the advantage of being comparable across parties. To preview our findings, we show that parties that operate more inclusive ('bottom-up') forms of selection tend to grant their leaders fewer formal intraparty powers. These parties are also more likely to use plebiscitary methods in other intraparty decision-making contexts, such as candidate selection. This leads us to the conclusion that giving members (and occasionally non members) the power to select the leader often seems to reflect a wider organizational philosophy, rather than to be a manoeuvre designed to bypass middle organizational strata on the crucial question of leadership selection. This suggests a broader commitment to a grassroots democratization of party procedures.

### **Leadership selection processes and intraparty power distributions: Literature and hypotheses**

In parties' own reform debates, proponents of plebiscitary intraparty decision-making tend to take at face value the connection between more inclusive leadership selection procedures and the formal empowerment of grassroots party supporters. For instance, in 2014 the UK Labour Party proposed reducing the role of trade unions in the party's leadership elections by giving a direct vote to individual trade unionists who affiliated to the party at a reduced rate; this change was justified in part by arguing that, 'enabling more trade unionists to have a more direct role in the party is central to realizing one of Labour's founding aims, which was to ensure that voices of ordinary working people are heard in the democratic process' (Labour Party 2014). Similarly, ahead of the party congress at which the Irish Fianna Fáil changed its statutes to give members a direct vote in selecting leaders and approving coalitions, a briefing document on proposed plebiscitary reforms argued that 'individual members must be the driving force of Fianna Fáil and there must be an end to the "top-down" approach,' while asserting that 'members strongly support empowering members through the introduction of one-member, one-vote (OMOV)' (Fianna Fáil 2012). However, academics have tended to be cautious about accepting that changes made in the name of membership empowerment necessarily have such an effect.

The suspicion that supposed democratization within parties is a ruse for elite empowerment is an idea with a long tradition, dating back to some of the earliest exponents of political sociology (Michels 1989; Ostrogorski 1964/1902). A common claim of those who promote more inclusive selection methods is that such changes empower parties' grassroots supporters, thus making party membership more consequential and valuable. Yet many observers find such claims to be disingenuous, or at least misleading, arguing that opening up these processes in fact tends to empower those at the very top of the party for multiple reasons, including that a personal mandate strengthens the position of the party leader vis-a-vis other rivals within the party (Mair 1994; Poguntke and Webb 2005; Passarelli 2015; Lisi 2024). If decisions are removed from the structures provided by party governance organs such as congresses or executives, individual grassroots supporters do gain a more direct say in the ultimate outcome, but compared with party organ delegates and members they may find it difficult to organize, and may be more easily manipulated by leaders who have unequal access to organizational and communications resources. This is a central tenet of the Cartel Party argument, which regards the expansion of plebiscitary decision-making within parties as a Trojan Horse concealing the rise of leadership power (Katz and Mair 1995); 'direct, unmediated, and one-way communication (e.g. via direct mailing or e-mail) from the centre to the members/supporters is a key characteristic' of such power (Katz and Mair 2009: 761). However, an alternative perspective emphasizes that leaders who are selected using more exclusive methods are likely to owe their mandate to a dominant coalition within the party (Panebianco 1988), and that such a coalition may have staying power that can sustain a leader even in politically difficult times. In contrast, a leader who has been elected by the general membership may be more vulnerable to shifting political tides (Ennsler-Jedenastik and Mueller, 2015), and thus may find it more difficult to accrue formal powers.

Suspicious aside, the evidence from recent research on this topic has so far produced rather mixed results. Some studies seem to confirm the relationship between plebiscitary practices and enhanced powers for party leaders (e.g. Niendorf 2022). However, others raise doubts about the universality of such effects, or even find that greater inclusiveness in selection methods may make leaders' positions more precarious, a vulnerability which would seem to be the opposite of leadership strength (Panebianco 1988; Ennsler-Jedenastik and Mueller 2015). It has also been argued that the relationship between inclusiveness and intraparty democracy should not be thought of as having a linear quality, because both high and low inclusiveness may concentrate control in the hands of the party leader, as compared to when decisions are taken by middle-level elites at a party conference (Lisi, 2024).

Past studies have adopted several approaches to assessing connections between leadership selection methods and intraparty power dynamics. One approach assumes there is a connection and incorporates leadership selection methods into its measure of leadership autonomy (Lisi, 2024: 407). However, such an approach is not a useful model for us to follow, as it combines into a single measure both our dependent variable (leadership power) and main independent variable (leadership selection procedure). A second approach to considering the relations between leadership selection rules and a leader's intraparty power focuses on the selection contests directly, taking account of possible links between these rules and the extent to which party elites work out their rivalries during the public phase of the selection process. Processes that allow for public contestation in the form of all-member or all-supporter votes would seem likely to encourage more public airing of different visions for the party (i.e. public displays of internal factionalism). On the other hand, some have noted a tendency for such votes to be used as 'coronations', that is, pseudo-democratic occasions which are more about allowing a single or clearly dominant candidate to demonstrate his or her intraparty popularity than being occasions for real debate about the party's future (Aylott and Bolin 2017). Such differences matter, because for parties needing to sell a clear political vision to potential voters there may be a fine line between allowing enough contestation to demonstrate grassroots responsiveness, and presenting a confused and potentially chaotic vision of a party incapacitated by internal dissent. Thus, a number of studies have assessed whether there is any general tendency for more inclusive selection methods to stifle dissent through careful stage management, or to encourage multiple would-be leaders to publicly promote their contending ambitions. The results of these studies have been mixed. They find plenty of instances of coronation selections, particularly in cases where incumbent leaders are required to stand for reselection at scheduled intervals (Kenig 2009; Pilet and Cross, 2014). However, they also find that real contests are frequent, with some evidence suggesting that real contestation is at least as likely with open selectorates as under selection rules that leave the decision to party congresses (Kenig 2009; Pilet and Cross 2014; Barberà and Rodríguez-Teruel 2021; Küppers 2021; Scarrow et al. 2022).

A third common approach to assessing the relationship between leadership selection methods and intraparty power relations focuses more directly on the leader's domination of the party organization and its resources. Some scholars assert such a link more than they demonstrate it, for instance finding that the rising use of party 'primary' elections to select leaders has contributed to the growing importance of the leaders' personal brands, which in turn increases the leaders' intraparty powers (Passarelli 2015: 12). In one of the most thorough empirical probes of this relationship, Schumacher and Giger ask 'whether variation in

leadership domination can be meaningfully explained by differences in intraparty institutions and party membership size.’ (2017: 163), and whether, therefore, institutional design can be used to curb the powers of the leader. Leadership selection methods are among the intraparty institutions included in their investigation. They posit that there is a linear and negative relationship between the inclusiveness of the selectorate used for choosing the party leader and the leader’s domination over party policy-making. Examining relations in parties in 20 democracies from the 1950s to the early 2000s they find no support for the hypothesized negative relationship between these variables, although they admit to difficulties in patching together the data to test these relations. Taking a slightly different approach, [Ennser-Jedenastik and Müller \(2015\)](#) find a negative relationship between the inclusiveness of the leadership selectorate and the longevity in office of Austrian party leaders. Thus, we have relatively few empirical studies of these relations, and these cover rather limited domains of leadership power, insofar as decisions over policy are only one element of such power, which includes also, among other things, personnel selection and strategic leadership rights over issues such as coalition formation.

In short, while there is a growing trend for parties in parliamentary democracies to offer their grassroots adherents a direct say in selecting party leaders, there has been only limited and still inconclusive investigation of whether the trend carries wider implications for parties’ internal operations. There are strong theoretical arguments on both sides of the question of whether highly inclusive selectorate correspond to more or less formalized leader dominance, and the empirical evidence so far has not yet resolved this. That could be due to a lack of any clear pattern. It also could be the result of measurement issues, for instance, because defining ‘inclusiveness’ solely in terms of the selectorate does not adequately capture the multiple procedural choices involved in intraparty elections ([Scarrow 2021](#)). After all, grassroots ballots involve a different procedural logic from assembly-based decision-making in that they prohibit stable coalition-building (von dem [Berge and Poguntke 2017](#)). This would suggest that membership ballots and open primaries are not just another degree of inclusiveness: they potentially change the logic of decision-making. Arguably, the lack of stable coalition-building that comes with membership ballots may actually prevent the formalization of *de facto* leadership power. Alternatively, it could be argued that a strong mandate base at large can easily be translated in more formal power. Last but not least, past research has looked at only a narrow set of indicators of intraparty power relationships. The research we present here tries to address some of these concerns, offering an additional set of lenses through which to evaluate these relationships.

The question examined here is whether there is any correspondence between the rules parties adopt for selecting their leaders and the formal powers that

leaders enjoy. Based on the literature summarized above, we present two simple and contrasting hypotheses to explore this relationship:

H1: Inclusive leadership selection covaries positively with formal leader powers.

If we find this, it would be consistent with the argument that inclusive leadership ballots are generally devices of top-down leadership control.

H2: Inclusive leadership selection covaries negatively with formal leader powers.

Should we find this, it would be consistent with the argument that inclusive ballots are generally part of a genuine bottom-up democratization of parties.

Our third hypothesis is also based on arguments positing that the adoption of inclusive leadership selection procedures tends to correspond with genuine organizational commitment to intraparty grassroots democratization, and therefore such rules tend to be found in conjunction with a wider array of plebiscitary decision-making procedures. Hence:

H3: Inclusive plebiscitary leadership selection methods are significantly more likely to operate in parties with high levels of general plebiscitary decision-making.

## Data and methods

We investigate these relationships using data from the PPDB Round 2, which provides us with a maximum cross-sectional sample of 221 parties in 31 parliamentary and hybrid political systems.<sup>1</sup> The PPDB data have a number of advantages for this sort of cross-national comparative study. First, the dataset has multiple variables that tell us about the ways in which party leaders are selected, and about the wider array of formal rights and powers that leaders and other actors have within parties. This enables us to examine the patterns of association between the two: does the method of leadership selection generally covary with leadership power? Second, PPDB Round 2 (which focuses on data gathered in 2017–8) is more recent and/or includes a wider range of countries and parties than in related leadership selection studies by [Pilet and Cross \(2014\)](#) or [Schumacher and Giger \(2017\)](#). PPDB coding

<sup>1</sup>The valid number of cases analysed in the models reported below is a little lower because of listwise deletion of cases with missing variables. The countries are Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Namibia, Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and UK. Note that some countries from the PPDB data set are excluded because they are not rated as 'fully free' by Freedom House.

is similar (but not identical) to that used in these previous studies. Third, PPDB assesses the formal enumeration of leader powers. Although the ‘official story’ may not always be the real story, using fairly precise indicators based on statutory rules adds some confidence in the comparability of coding across multiple parties in a variety of settings. To be sure, our measure can be criticized for its formalism, but it at least reflects the party’s own narrative of how it operates, a narrative over which the party has a great deal of control. Last but not least, formal rules can be conceptualized as opportunity structures in intraparty power games. While informality is an undeniable element of all political processes, formal rules will be invoked when informal exchanges fail to generate results (Katz and Mair 1992: 7).

We employ several key measures. In terms of methods of leadership selection, we create a variable that distinguishes between parties in terms of the degree of inclusiveness of the selectorate; specifically, our data enable us to distinguish between those operating inclusive ballots that give voting rights to members (and in a handful of cases, to non-members), and those parties which place the leadership decision in the hands of key party organs, whether they are national, regional or local in nature. We gauge the internal distribution of power within parties using a leader powers index (LPI), which is a simple count index of 5 formal rights that leaders might have that are asked about in the PPDB. The scale runs from 0 to 5, with an overall sample mean of 2.65 ( $n = 221$ ; see Appendix for details).

In order to test H3 about the wider use of plebiscitary decision-making ballots within parties we construct a second count index (plebiscitary IPD) in which parties score 1 for each of several other internal decisions which are decided by membership (-plus) ballots, relating to the ratification of election manifestos, intraparty referendums on specific policy questions, and the selection of legislative candidates. Thus, this scale runs from 0 to 5 in principle, but only has a mean of 0.85, with 75 per cent of parties scoring just 0 or 1.

We control for the size of the party in each model (via the membership-electorate ratio, in that larger and more institutionalized parties might be less likely to extend voting rights beyond congresses), the age of the party (on the basis that younger parties might be more likely to adopt internally democratic operating procedures), and the party family (given that we would generally expect right-wing parties to be more ‘top-down’ and leadership dominated) (Schumacher and Giger 2017). Our valid sample of parties in parliamentary and hybrid (semi-presidential) systems breaks down into 94 cases (58.8 per cent) in which the party organization selects the leader, and 66 cases (41.3 per cent) in which the decision is taken by inclusive ballots of members and/or non-members.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Note that there is a small number of parties ( $n = 7$ ) in which leadership selection is in the sole hands of the party leader. However, it proved impractical to retain this category in running models as the number of valid cases was further reduced to just 1 or 2 cases by listwise deletion.

## Results: Does the method of leadership selection make a difference to leadership power within parties?

Deploying the leadership selection method as an independent variable enables us to address the important 'so what?' question: does it matter who selects the party leader? Specifically, does the way in which a leader is selected matter for the amount of formal power the leader has in the party? The first panel in Table 1 reports the results of a Poisson regression model as this is appropriate for a count dependent variable like LPI, in which many cases (48.4 per cent) are clustered in values below the mean, and the variance (2.55) is also lower than the mean. Although the party data are clearly nested within countries, the low number of level 1 cases (i.e. parties

**Table 1** Regression models of the leader powers and plebiscitary intraparty democracy in parliamentary and hybrid political systems

	LPI		Plebiscitary Index	
	B	SE	B	SE
(Intercept)	5.061***	0.0166	0.306	0.2243
Leader_Selection: Inclusive ballot	-0.670**	0.2533	0.493*	0.1994
Leader Selection: Party organization (reference category)	0			
Party_Family: Communists/Far left	-1.801***	0.4734	0.550	0.3667
Party_Family: Social democrats	-1.130***	0.3200	0.177	0.3780
Party_Family: Green	-2.013***	0.2341	1.331***	0.3870
Party_Family: Ethnic	-1.247***	0.2583	-0.111	0.3541
Party_Family: Regionalist	-0.570	0.7929	0.134	0.2818
Party_Family: Liberal	-1.006**	0.3306	0.131	0.3850
Party_Family: Agrarian	-1.158**	0.4398	-0.660*	0.3124
Party_Family: Christian democrat	-1.661***	0.3540	-0.040	0.4300
Party_Family: Conservative	-0.859***	0.2580	-0.305	0.3137
Party_Family: Right populist	-1.413***	0.4284	-0.107	0.3019
Party_Family: Other	-2.720***	0.3447	(reference category)	
Party_Family: Far Right (reference category)	0		-	-
Membership/electorate ratio	0.102	0.1569	0.088	0.1417
Party Age (in years)	-0.015***	0.0024	0.004*	0.0017
	Corrected quasi-likelihood goodness of fit value = 169.791, $n = 123$ .		Corrected quasi-likelihood goodness of fit value = 75.681, $n = 96$ .	

Note: Poisson models with robust standard errors clustered by country. \*\*\* $P < .000$ , \*\* $P < .01$ , \* $P < .05$ . The reference category for party family differs in the two models as listwise deletion of missing cases means that there are no far right parties involved the Plebiscitary IPD model.

themselves) renders multilevel models unnecessary and unwise (Bryan and Jenkins 2013). The same concern applies when it comes to running models with fixed country effects (Bell *et al.* 2008; McNeish and Stapleton 2016; Jenkins and Quintana-Ascencio 2020). We have therefore opted for Poisson models with robust standard errors clustered by country. This reveals that more inclusive parties which give members and non-members voting rights in selecting leaders grant significantly fewer rights to those leaders compared to parties in which leaders are selected by appointed or elected party organizational personnel in congresses, executives or other bodies. This holds irrespective of the various control variables which we include in the analysis. Younger political parties tend to grant leaders more rights, but party size makes no significant difference. There are several significant party family effects as well: indeed, compared to parties of the far right (the reference category), almost all other party families accord their leaders fewer formal rights. Much of this makes intuitive sense: it is not surprising that parties of the far right would believe in strong leaders. But the key thing from our perspective is that our model shows that even allowing for party ideology the more inclusive forms of leadership selection vary inversely with greater leadership power; bottom-up leadership selection tends to correspond with fewer formal leadership powers in the party. On this basis, we can reject H1 (*inclusive leadership selection methods covary positively with formal leader powers*) and confirm H2 (*inclusive leadership selection methods covary negatively with formal leader powers*). This finding is plainly inconsistent with the argument that that inclusive leadership ballots are generally devices of top-down leadership control, and offers greater support for the view that inclusive ballots are largely part of a genuine bottom-up democratization of parties.

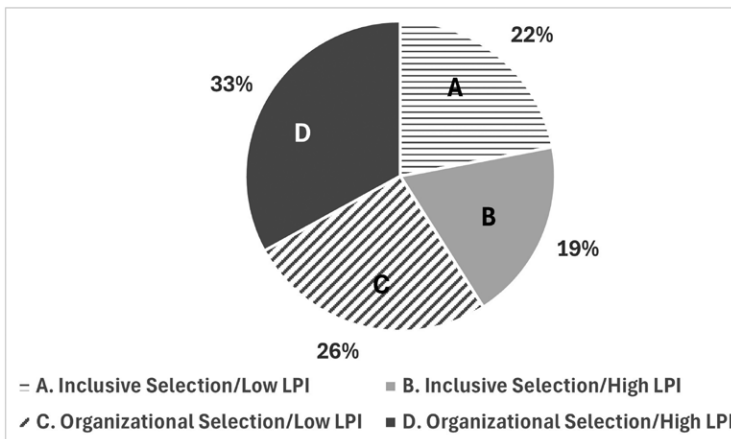
This conclusion is bolstered by the results of the model reported in the second panel of Table 1. This time the dependent variable is a simple count index of plebiscitary decision-making within parties (minus the selection of leaders). The purpose of this model is to test H3 (*inclusive plebiscitary leadership selection methods are significantly more likely to operate in parties with high levels of general plebiscitary decision-making*). The model confirms this hypothesis. Parties that employ inclusive ballots to select their leaders are also likely to operate plebiscitary methods in other areas of decision-making, including the selection of legislative candidates, the ratification of manifestos, and so on.<sup>3</sup> Thus, giving members

<sup>3</sup>Note that principal components analysis suggests that there are actually two factors underlying the plebiscitary intraparty democracy scale: the first is associated with the process of legislative candidate selection, while the second is associated with policy-making. As a robustness check, in the Appendix we divide the components into two separate scales and run these as alternative dependent variables. The results are largely similar to those reported in the second panel of Table 1, although the leadership selection predictor is only statistically significant for the candidate selection index. This is not surprising, since we know that parties are generally less inclined to democratize processes of policy formulation than those of candidate or leadership selection. See Appendix Table A1 for details.

(and occasionally non-members) the power to select the leader seems to reflect a wider organizational philosophy, rather than to be a unique manoeuvre designed to bypass middle organizational strata on the crucial question of leadership selection. This suggests a broader commitment to a grassroots democratization of party procedures.

While these models are important in measuring the correlates of intraparty powers at the level of the individual party, it is useful to identify the *most typical patterns of party organization* by leadership selection method and leadership power (our major dependent variable). If we dichotomize the LPI around its mean so that we can identify relatively high and low scores, we can cross-tabulate this dichotomized variable against the method of leadership selection in order to see how many PPDB cases fall into each quadrant of the table. Figure 1 reveals that the data are dispersed quite widely across the four categories, although the most prevalent type is the party in which the national or subnational organization selects the party leader, but grants the leader a relatively high number of formal rights (amounting to about a third of all cases). About two-fifths of PPDB parties use inclusive methods to select leaders, with a small majority of these parties granting them relatively few rights. The least populated category is that in which inclusive leadership electorates give their leaders a high number of powers.

Note that there is an interesting pattern of leader power variation by party family (Table 2). The parties most likely to display the combination of inclusive leadership selection and low leadership power are the social democrats and regionalists (although the latter have an equal tendency to grant leaders a high number of powers). The diametrically contrary pattern of selection by national organization and high leader powers is best exemplified by far right, right populists, conservatives,



**Figure 1** Varieties of intraparty power distribution

Note: LPI = leader powers index

**Table 2** Intraparty power distribution by party family

	Inclusive ballot/low LPI	Inclusive ballot/high LPI	National organization/ low LPI	National organization/ high LPI	Total
Far left	7.7	15.4	61.5	15.4	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 13)
Social Democrat	39.3	21.4	21.4	17.9	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 28)
Green	20.0	40.0	20.0	20.0	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 10)
Ethnic	0.0	0.0	25.0	75.0	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 4)
Regionalist	37.5	37.5	0.0	25.0	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 8)
Liberal	22.7	18.2	13.6	45.5	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 22)
Agrarian	20.0	0.0	20.0	60.0	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 5)
Christian Democrat	14.3	14.3	35.7	35.7	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 14)
Conservative	10.0	30.0	20.0	40.0	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 20)
Right populist	11.8	5.9	29.4	52.9	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 17)
Other	28.6	14.3	57.1	0.0	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 7)
Far right	0.0	50.0	0.0	50.0	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 2)
Total	20.7 ( <i>n</i> = 31)	20.0 ( <i>n</i> = 30)	26.0 ( <i>n</i> = 39)	33.3 ( <i>n</i> = 50)	100.0 ( <i>n</i> = 150)

Note: Cramer's  $V = 0.321$ ,  $P = .060$ . All figures are percentages unless otherwise stated.

Christian democrats, liberals, agrarian and ethnic parties. Parties that opt for selection by party organization while giving their leaders low formal powers include the far left and the amorphous 'other' category, while the combination of membership ballots and high leader powers is the most popular option only among Green parties. To put it another way, in terms of left–right ideology [as measured by the manifesto research group's 'RILE' scale (Volkens *et al.* 2013)], the national organizational selection/high leader powers parties are comfortably the most right-wing on average (mean =  $-4.38$ ), while the other three types are located close to each other in centre-left territory: parties with organizational selection of leaders and low leader powers are by a short distance the most left-wing (mean =  $-12.53$ ), followed by those with inclusive selection of leaders and high formal leadership powers ( $-10.59$ ), and then inclusive selection with low leader powers ( $-8.91$ ). Prominent examples of the first of these types (national organizational selection/high leader powers) include the main parties of the right in Italy (Brothers of Italy, Forza Italia, and Lega) and Austria (Austrian Freedom Party and Austrian People's Party). Examples of parties with inclusive leadership selection and high leader powers include the Canadian Liberals and New Democrats, Poland's Civic Platform, the French Republicans, and the Irish Labour Party. In the category of

leadership selection by party organization and low leaders powers we find most Swedish parties (including Social Democrats, Moderates, Greens, Centre, and Sweden Democrats) and the majority of major German parties (SPD, CDU, FDP), as well as Norwegian Labour, and Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein in Ireland. In the final category (inclusive leadership selection and low leader powers) we find the likes of the Australian Labor Party, the Danish Social Democrats, the French Socialists, Italian Democrats, Dutch Labour and Christian Democratic Appeal parties, and the Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Scottish National parties from the UK.

## Conclusions

What do our empirical investigations suggest in terms of theoretical debates? As we have seen, the findings are somewhat mixed: the pattern of high leadership powers and plebiscitary selection methods anticipated by Katz and Mair only fits about one-fifth of the PPDB cases (the smallest category in our sample), as Fig. 1 shows. The diametric opposite pattern of leaders chosen by the national organization who are then limited in terms of their formal power accounts for about a quarter of parties. A further fifth of PPDB parties use inclusive leader selections but then limit leadership power, which suggests that the use of plebiscitary ballots is not always a cynical device of elite manipulation. These more authentically 'bottom-up' organizations are often on the centre-left of the political spectrum—labour, socialist, and social democratic parties, for instance. The most populous category, accounting for nearly one-third of our cases, links relatively high leadership powers with selection by party organizational bodies. As so often, then, the theory and the empirical reality of political science only partly match up.

Why might it be that we do not find a stronger association between plebiscitary leadership selection and strong leader powers? After all, those who are elected by broader constituencies might reasonably claim stronger mandates and greater powers. Furthermore, disempowering the middle-level elites (i.e. the party as an organization) means that more power should—over time—accrue to the leader because the membership is an atomized body which cannot retain steering powers for itself. It is only capable of acting when it is called to the polls. It cannot really act collectively in the sense of running a party. On some accounts at least, this would seem to be the very essence of plebiscitary intraparty democracy, and an unwelcome one at that. As Arthur Lipow and Patrick Seyd once put it (1996: 284), 'We would suggest that it is not a democratic politics but its opposite: the populistic politics of demobilization, disaggregation and atomization in which intermediate institutions become instruments of elite manipulation from above rather than associations through which ordinary people can exercise power from below' (see also Seyd 2019).

One possibility is that the answer to this conundrum simply lies in the relative novelty of plebiscitary procedures. Party organizations are rather static and path-dependent, which suggests that a change in elite selection rules may not be followed immediately by a corresponding adjustment of other statutory regulations. In other words, a party may decide to give the rank-and-file the final say in the leadership election without changing anything else. Plebiscitary leaders may be less durable and hence have simply less time to formalize their power. Subject to volatile political seasons they may exert strong *de facto* leadership for a while but be incapable of solidifying their power. To be sure, an alternative trajectory is also plausible: the introduction of party plebiscites may simply be a way out of a passing political stalemate and a party may revert to its previous rules soon after—as the example the 2021 leadership elections of the German CDU and SPD show, where we saw a reversion to assembly-based leadership selection procedures (Höhne 2024). Essentially, both parties chose membership ballots in a situation of leadership crisis and reverted to the conventional method of electing the leader at congress once a new leadership had established itself. At the level of the state as a whole, Israel went through a similar experience when it reverted to orthodox parliamentary practice after a short and unsuccessful experiment with directly elected prime ministers in the 1990s (Hazan 2005: 295–7). As this suggests, whether or not the use of party plebiscites is followed by corresponding rule changes will also depend on the actual experience with the new selection rule.

Hence, the fact that inclusive leadership selection often goes together with stronger formal leader powers across parliamentary and hybrid regimes may simply be an indication of party organizational inertia. Some parties may have followed the ‘fashion’ of introducing membership ballots without yet going all the way of turning themselves into fully plebiscitary parties by extending membership powers beyond the more conventional model of membership parties with an active intraorganizational life. Whether it is simply a matter of time before these indicators align as predicted is something that researchers should be able to better answer if they revisit this question a decade from now.

In sum, there is evidence for the suggestion that plebiscitary measures tend to go together with a wider dispersion of intraparty power but there are several possible constellations that may work in another direction. Besides organizational inertia, leadership or electoral crises may shift the internal balance of power temporarily in favour of the grassroots but the leadership may be able to regain control. Another scenario might be that parties with a strong bottom-up tradition of leadership selection will be pushed by the constraints of party competition to grant their leadership more powers to steer the party especially if they become governing parties. Hence, we would need more detailed sequential analyses to establish the conditions under which parties embark on the various combinations of leadership selection and leadership power set out in this article.

## Conflict of Interest

None declared.

## Appendix: Variables used in analysis

*Leader powers index:* To calculate the formal position of party leaders, we compute a 6-point index of party leader strength based on responses to various PPDB variables about the rights and responsibilities of leaders, as explicitly recognized by party statutes. These are:

- C13LDREEXC: The right to attend a meeting of the party executive.
- C14LDRCON: The right to attend the party congress.
- C15LDRSUM1: The right to summon party officials.
- C16LDRSUM2: The right to summon the party congress.
- C17LDRROLE1: The right to represent the party externally.

Each of these variables is coded 1 if the statutes explicitly give these rights to the party leader; otherwise, they are coded 0. A zero coding does not preclude the possibility that leaders might have the rights by custom; it just means that these rights are not recognized in the statutes. This produces an index that runs from 0 to 5, with higher values denoting statutes that ascribe more powers to the party leader. The Cronbach's alpha of 0.736 ( $n = 221$ ) indicates that these items reliably tap a similar underlying construct. This is further confirmed by principal components analysis, which shows all components loading onto a single factor with the following loadings:

	<b>Factor 1</b>
C13LDREEXC	0.620
C14LDRCON	0.654
C15LDRSUM1	0.770
C16LDRSUM2	0.697
C17LDRROLE1	0.739

The index of plebiscitary intraparty decision-making (plebiscitary IPD) is constructed in a similar fashion from the following PPDB items:

- B22CANSELC: Individual members play a role in selecting/deciding legislative candidates.
- B27CANSELC: Non-members play a role in selecting/deciding legislative candidates.
- C105MAN6: Members have a right to vote on the election manifesto.
- C106MAN7: Non-members have a right to vote on the election manifesto.

C8REF8: Members/other registered supporters/eligible voters are eligible to vote in intraparty policy ballots.

The index runs from 0 to 5. Cronbach's alpha ( $= 0.511$ ) is a little low, although we believe that the index is still justifiable in terms of face validity and is therefore useful for testing H3. That said, principal components analysis of these five components suggests two underlying dimensions, one relating to matters of legislative candidate selection, and the other to questions of party policy formation. The details of factor loadings onto these dimensions are:

	Factor 1	Factor 2
B22CANSELC	0.345	<b>0.671</b>
B27CANSELC	0.103	<b>0.727</b>
C8REF8	<b>0.790</b>	0.172
C105MAN6	<b>0.827</b>	-0.231
C106MAN7	<b>0.633</b>	-0.398

As a robustness check, we divided the components into two separate scales, one for matters of candidate selection (comprising B22CANSELC and B27CANSELC) and one for questions of policy formation (C8REF8, C105MAN6, and C105MAN7), and then ran models of these as alternative dependent variables. The results are largely similar to those reported in the second panel of Table 1, although the leadership selection predictor is only statistically significant for the candidate selection index. Details of these models are as follows:

**Table A.1** Regression models of the candidate selection and policy formation in parliamentary and hybrid political systems

	Candidate selection		Policy formation	
	B	SE	B	SE
(Intercept)	-0.009	0.0106	-0.031	0.0163
Leader_Selection: Inclusive ballot	0.329**	0.1149	0.089	0.2052
Leader Selection: Party organization (reference category)	0			
Party_Family: Communists/Far left	0.272	0.1577	0.792**	0.2948
Party_Family: Social democrats	0.139	0.1763	0.547*	0.2411
Party_Family: Green	0.772***	0.2298	1.059***	0.1718
Party_Family: Ethnic	0.147	0.1628	-0.073	0.0655
Party_Family: Regionalist	-0.024	0.0753	0.386	0.2923
Party_Family: Liberal	0.084	0.0921	0.351*	0.1501

Table A.1 Continued

	Candidate selection		Policy formation	
	B	SE	B	SE
Party_Family: Agrarian	-0.034	0.0915	-0.064	0.2367
Party_Family: Christian democrat	0.097	0.1841	0.235	0.2653
Party_Family: Conservative	0.051	0.1000	0.006	0.2026
Party_Family: Right populist	0.063	0.0965	0.107	0.1979
Party_Family: Other	-0.056	0.1145	0.588	
Party_Family: Far Right (reference category)	0		0	
Membership/electorate ratio	-0.053	0.0814	0.206	0.1506
Party Age (in years)	0.003*	0.0013	0.001	0.0017
	Corrected quasi-likelihood goodness of fit value = 53.676, $n = 123$ .		Corrected quasi-likelihood goodness of fit value = 82.945, $n = 123$	

Note: Poisson models with robust standard errors clustered by country. \*\*\* $P < .000$ , \*\* $P < .01$ , \* $P < .05$ .

Descriptive statistics of interval scales employed in analysis

	Number	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Variance
Leader powers index (5 item)	221	0.00	5.00	2.6516	1.59569	2.546
Plebiscitary intraparty democracy	150	0.00	3.00	0.8667	0.84874	0.720
Party Age (2017)	200	0	183	39.83	38.213	1460.202
Membership/electorate percentage	183	0.00	5.57	0.4432	0.63417	0.402
Candidate selection index	221	0.00	2.00	0.3122	0.50207	0.252
Policy formation index	221	0.00	3.00	0.4118	0.74933	0.561

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