Bending Michels' 'Iron Law of Oligarchy': can democracy ever be for 'home consumption' in political parties?

Robin T. Pettitt  
Politics  
School of Social Science  
The University of Manchester  
(Robin.T.Pettitt@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk / rtpettitt@yahoo.co.uk)
- Oligarchic Consensus: lack of membership influence on policy
- Michels’ ‘Iron Law of Oligarchy’
- Danish Socialist People’s Party
- SF a ‘deviant case’
• Tony Benn:
‘That is going to be a very short book. At the moment it is zero’
• Oligarchic Consensus
  • Duverger’s Mass party
  • Post-war catch-all/ electoral professional parties
• Problem: Lack of membership influence nothing new

• Michels and the iron law

• Duverger:

‘leaders tend naturally to retain power and increase it, because their members scarcely hinder this tendency and on the contrary even strengthen it by hero-worshipping the leaders: on all these points the analysis of Roberto Michels continues to hold true’ (Duverger 1964: 134)
• The iron law of oligarchy

1. Need for professional leadership in organisations above a certain size

2. Leaders holding on to their positions

3. Laws of tactics

4. Membership gratitude
## Membership gratitude

“The role of party members is to support decisions made by the leadership”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Red Green Alliance</th>
<th>SF</th>
<th>Social Democrats</th>
<th>Social Liberals</th>
<th>Centre Democrats</th>
<th>Christian Democrats</th>
<th>Liberals</th>
<th>Conservatives</th>
<th>Danish People’s Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agree/agree strongly %</strong></td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neither agree/disagree %</strong></td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disagree/disagree strongly %</strong></td>
<td>73.6</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Membership influence when:

- Low government ambitions
- Proportional electoral system
- When the members want it

SF:

- ‘Ungrateful’ members
- Danish list PR
- Low government ambitions
- Membership influence in SF
Conclusions

1. It is possible for members to have influence on party policy
2. Membership influence not a matter of mass party vs catch-all party:
   - Environment (proportionality)
   - Government ambitions of leaders
   - Attitudes of members
Conclusions

• SF only one case
• Need more research, but…
  • Data
• Membership influence does exist and worth taking seriously