

Intra-Party Democracy and Democratic Governance: Examining the Nexus of Political Culture, Participation, and Accountability

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between intra-party democracy (IPD) and democratic governance, focusing on how internal party structures shape participation, accountability, and political culture. The study pursues three key objectives: to examine the role of IPD in shaping democratic political culture; to analyse how party organisation and leadership selection influence participation and accountability; and to assess the impact of weak IPD on governance. Drawing from theoretical insights and comparative political analysis, the findings reveal that strong intra-party democracy promotes inclusiveness, transparency, and ethical leadership, thereby strengthening public trust and democratic legitimacy. Conversely, the absence of internal democracy fosters elitism, centralisation, and weak accountability, undermining both representation and governance quality. The study concludes that institutionalising intra-party democracy is crucial for participatory governance, effective policy-making, and the long-term consolidation of democratic systems.

Keywords: *Intra-party democracy, political culture, democratic governance, political party.*

1. Introduction

Democracy thrives not merely through the existence of electoral institutions but through the depth and quality of participation that sustains them. At the heart of any democratic system lie political parties institutions that articulate public interests, recruit leaders, and mediate between citizens and the state. For democracy to be substantive and meaningful, these parties must themselves embody democratic principles in their internal functioning. This concept, known as intra-party democracy (IPD), refers to the extent to which decision-making, leadership selection, and policy formulation within political parties are governed by participatory and transparent processes. Intra-party democracy ensures that leadership is accountable to members rather than self-perpetuating elites. It promotes inclusiveness, transparency, and internal checks and balances, thereby reflecting the democratic ethos expected at the national level. Conversely, when

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parties are centralized, hierarchical, or dynastic, decision-making becomes exclusive, eroding participation and weakening political legitimacy. The health of a democracy, therefore, depends not only on electoral competition between parties but also on how democratically those parties operate internally.

This study addresses three interrelated objectives:

1. To examine the role of intra-party democracy in shaping democratic political culture;
2. To analyse how party structures and leadership selection affect participation and accountability; and
3. To assess the impact of weak intra-party democracy on democratic governance.

Together, these objectives underscore that intra-party democracy is not a peripheral concern but a structural necessity for the deepening of democracy itself.

2. Intra-Party Democracy and the Formation of Democratic Political Culture

A democratic political culture emerges not solely from constitutional design but from the internalisation of democratic values within political and social institutions. Intra-party democracy serves as a crucial mechanism for this internalisation by embedding participatory norms within the very organisations that compete for political power.

When parties conduct internal elections, allow open debate, and involve members in decision-making, they cultivate a spirit of deliberation and inclusiveness that transcends party boundaries and permeates national politics.

2.1 Fostering Democratic Norms and Political Socialisation

Political parties act as schools of democracy. Through their internal functioning, they train members in the practices of negotiation, compromise, and collective decision-making core democratic skills that translate into responsible citizenship and governance. Members who actively engage in intra-party debates, internal polls, and policy discussions develop a deeper appreciation of democratic values such as equality, participation, and accountability. These practices nurture a democratic habitus that strengthens the broader political culture. Conversely, when parties are organised around authoritarian or clientelist structures, they transmit undemocratic norms to society. Members learn to prioritise loyalty over merit, obedience over deliberation, and personal allegiance over institutional responsibility. As a result, the wider political culture becomes characterised by patronage, personality cults, and dependence, rather than participation and meritocracy.



2.2 Building Trust and Legitimacy

Intra-party democracy enhances the legitimacy of political institutions by demonstrating transparency and accountability from within. Parties that allow their members to participate in leadership selection and policy development signal their commitment to fairness and representation. Such internal legitimacy extends outward to the political system, reinforcing public trust in democratic institutions.

Where intra-party democracy is absent, parties often appear as instruments of elite control, detached from citizen concerns. The exclusion of members from key decisions fosters alienation, cynicism, and political apathy. Over time, this weakens public confidence not only in parties but in the democratic process as a whole. Therefore, the democratic culture of a society is deeply intertwined with the degree of democracy practised within its political organisations.

3. Party Structures, Leadership Selection, and the Dynamics of Participation and Accountability

The structure of a political party and its methods of leadership selection fundamentally determine the scope for member participation and internal accountability. A party's organisational framework sets the boundaries of who can participate in decision-making and how power circulates within the system.

3.1 The Role of Party Structures

Decentralised and inclusive party structures allow members from the grassroots to play a meaningful role in shaping the party's direction. Local branches, district committees, and regional councils create institutional pathways for participation, feedback, and upward communication. These structures also provide a mechanism for monitoring leadership performance, ensuring that power is dispersed rather than concentrated. By contrast, centralised party structures often concentrate authority in a small leadership core, limiting the role of ordinary members. Such hierarchies may be efficient in the short term, but they diminish participatory engagement and accountability. Members become passive spectators rather than active participants, weakening the organisational vitality of the party. Over time, this leads to stagnation, internal dissent, and declining legitimacy.

3.2 Leadership Selection and Internal Democracy

Leadership selection processes are the cornerstone of intra-party democracy. Democratic methods such as competitive internal elections, secret ballots, and consultative appointments ensure that leaders derive authority from consent rather than coercion. Transparent leadership contests not only enhance



accountability but also motivate members to participate actively, knowing that merit and support can influence outcomes.

Opaque or hereditary leadership succession, on the other hand, concentrates power within a narrow circle. Such practices discourage capable individuals from engaging in politics, reduce diversity in leadership, and reinforce elite domination. In many political systems, including those of South Asia, leadership positions are frequently passed down within families, creating dynastic politics that undermine both internal democracy and public confidence.

3.3 Participation, Inclusion, and Representation

Democratic party structures and leadership processes also play a vital role in ensuring the representation of marginalised groups, including women, youth, and minorities. When leadership is determined through open and competitive means, it allows for a broader pool of candidates and ideas, thereby making political participation more inclusive. Internal quotas, gender-balanced committees, and youth wings can further democratize participation and expand the representational base of the party. Such inclusiveness strengthens not only intra-party democracy but also the legitimacy of democratic governance as a whole. When citizens see diversity within party leadership, they are more likely to view the political process as fair and representative, enhancing social cohesion and political stability.

4. The Consequences of Weak Intra-Party Democracy for Democratic Governance

The absence or weakness of intra-party democracy has far-reaching consequences for democratic governance. When political parties fail to institutionalise internal democracy, they inadvertently weaken the external institutions of democracy as well.

4.1 Concentration of Power and Decline of Accountability

Weak intra-party democracy often results in the concentration of power in the hands of a few elites or dynastic families. Without transparent internal checks, leaders operate with minimal accountability, making decisions based on personal or factional interests rather than collective deliberation. Such concentration erodes the party's internal legitimacy and, by extension, its responsiveness to citizens' needs. When accountability mechanisms within parties are absent, political corruption becomes more likely. Leaders insulated from internal criticism are less inclined to adhere to ethical standards or respond to grassroots concerns. This undermines public confidence in the political process and contributes to a broader crisis of governance.



4.2 Factionalism and the Erosion of Cohesion

A lack of internal democracy often breeds factionalism. When members are excluded from meaningful participation, they form rival factions in pursuit of influence, thereby destabilising the party. Factional conflicts not only divert attention from public policy but also weaken the party's electoral performance.

Moreover, exclusionary leadership practices marginalise women, youth, and minorities, further reducing inclusivity and innovation within the organisation. Over time, these divisions fracture party unity and diminish the overall quality of governance by promoting competition for power rather than cooperation for policy.

4.3 Policy Distortion and Declining Public Trust

When internal decision-making is monopolised by elites, policy priorities tend to reflect narrow interests rather than the broader public good. Grassroots concerns such as education, employment, or local development are often overlooked in favour of agendas that serve the politically powerful. This disconnect between party elites and ordinary citizens leads to policy inefficiency and growing voter disillusionment. Weak intra-party democracy also correlates with declining electoral participation. Citizens who perceive parties as closed or self-serving are less likely to engage in elections or political activism. Thus, the absence of internal democracy undermines not only governance but the very foundations of participatory politics.

5. Strengthening Intra-Party Democracy for Democratic Consolidation

To enhance the quality of democratic governance, political parties must institutionalise mechanisms that promote transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability. Several strategies are essential:

1. **Institutional Reforms:** Political parties should adopt internal constitutions mandating periodic elections for leadership positions, transparent financial management, and member consultations on key policies.
2. **Decentralisation of Power:** Establishing autonomous local and regional branches can facilitate bottom-up communication and allow grassroots members to influence decision-making.
3. **Leadership Training and Capacity Building:** Developing training programs for emerging leaders can promote merit-based advancement and reduce dependence on dynastic politics.
4. **Gender and Youth Representation:** Quotas and affirmative measures should be implemented to ensure meaningful participation of women and youth in leadership structures.
5. **Regulatory Oversight:** Election commissions and legal frameworks can play a role in ensuring internal democracy through periodic audits, disclosure norms, and compliance requirements.



By institutionalising these reforms, parties can enhance their internal legitimacy and contribute to the long-term stability, inclusiveness, and ethical integrity of democratic governance.

6. Conclusion

Intra-party democracy stands as the cornerstone of a participatory and accountable political system. It shapes democratic political culture by fostering deliberation, inclusiveness, and transparency within political organisations. Party structures and leadership selection mechanisms serve as vital channels for participation and accountability, determining whether members experience genuine empowerment or mere tokenism. Weak intra-party democracy undermines governance by concentrating power, eroding accountability, and alienating citizens from the political process. Conversely, when parties embrace democratic principles internally, they produce leaders who are responsive, ethical, and attuned to public needs.

Ultimately, the strength of a democracy depends on the democratic integrity of its political parties. For democratic governance to thrive, political parties must not only demand democracy from the state but also practice it within their own ranks. The institutionalisation of intra-party democracy is thus not a matter of internal reform alone—it is a prerequisite for sustaining public trust, ensuring effective governance, and realising the full promise of democracy itself.

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