

Intra-Party Deliberation, Under-Represented Groups, and Candidate Selection: The Case of Demos in Romania

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Abstract

Intra-party deliberation has the potential to involve groups that are traditionally under-represented in politics. This article aims to identify the conditions that favor and inhibit the inclusion of four under-represented categories in intra-party deliberation. It analyzes how a newly formed Romanian political party engages women, lower social strata, ethnic minorities, and sexual minorities. Deliberation was used to select the candidates for the 2019 European elections. The empirical evidence comes from ethnographic research, and the results indicate that the progressive stance of the party and a stepwise structure of deliberation favor the inclusion of under-represented groups.

Keywords

intra-party deliberation, candidate selection, under-represented groups

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Introduction

Traditional political parties are not favorable settings for deliberation. This happens for two reasons. First, political parties aim to articulate, represent, and aggregate citizens' preferences and interests (Sartori, 1976). They are aggregative institutions that do not often match the principles of deliberation, which involves the formation of preferences and opinions (Cohen, 1989; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004). Second, the organization of political parties relies—at least to some extent—on hierarchical structures. Parties have several units, decisions are taken at several levels, and the intra-party dynamic is competitive (Close and Gherghina, 2019). All these require division of tasks, coordination, and various degrees of members' inclusiveness in the decision-making process.

Some of the newly emerged parties in Europe bring nuances to these views. In practice, the aggregative–deliberative divide is not as sharp as described and the two mechanisms

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can co-exist (Johnson, 2006; Wolkenstein, 2018). In isolation, neither aggregation nor deliberation provide the springboard for democratic decision-making. One way in which the two can co-exist is the application of deliberation to smaller decisions within a political party. Research refers to how deliberation can improve the quality of intra-party democracy in general and that of candidate selection in particular (Fishkin et al., 2008; Teorell, 1999; Wolkenstein, 2018). One of the important benefits that deliberation can bring in political parties is the involvement of groups that are traditionally under-represented in politics.

This article aims to identify the conditions that favor and inhibit the inclusion of four under-represented categories in intra-party deliberation: women, lower social strata, ethnic minorities, and sexual minorities. The article focuses on Demos, a newly emerged party in Romania, which used deliberation for the selection of its candidates for the 2019 European elections. Demos was formed in 2018 from the social movements behind the anti-government street protests in 2017 and 2018 (Gherghina and Stoiciu, 2020). The empirical evidence presented here comes from ethnographic research. One of the authors took part in the deliberation process. The findings indicate that the progressive stance of the party and a specific stepwise structure of deliberation favor the inclusion of under-represented groups. The party has promoted from the very beginning the principles of inclusiveness, deliberation, and equality in its internal decision-making process. These principles, together with the party's political program, contribute to its attractiveness among socially or culturally marginalized categories. The absence of clear positions on salient issues for deliberation and the attempt to replace organizational procedures with deliberation raise obstacles to further inclusion.

The following section briefly introduces the party formation, describes the process of deliberation, and discusses the presence of under-represented groups' process. The third section analyzes how the under-represented groups were involved in deliberation. The final section reflects on the lessons learned from the inclusion of under-represented groups in intra-party deliberation and its relevance for the broader field of deliberative democracy.

The Presence of Under-Represented Groups in Deliberation

Demos has targeted under-represented groups from its formation. It was one of the few political parties who openly opposed the 2018 constitutional referendum for the legal definition of a family as the union between a man and a woman; in essence, the referendum was against same-sex marriage. The referendum required a participation quorum of 30% for validation and abstention could have the meaning as a vote against the proposal. By actively encouraging citizens to boycott the referendum, Demos appealed directly to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual (LGBTQIA) community. Through its political program, the party promotes the agenda of groups facing social or political marginalization: poverty, women, or low-wage earners.

In spite of these efforts, the party was not very successful in attracting many sympathizers or members belonging to those categories. A sympathizer is any citizen who supports the party's values and principles. Sympathizers can get involved in party activities (including the online discussions) as long as they are registered on the party's online platform but do not have the right to vote (Article 12 of the Demos Statute, 2018). Occasionally, sympathizers have the right to vote in some decisions as it was the case for candidate selection covered by this article. The members pay a fee and have a series of

rights (including the right to vote) and responsibilities that are common to many political parties (Articles 13–15 of the Demos Statute, 2018). During the online deliberation for candidate selection, the number of members and registered sympathizers involved in discussions was around 500. The vast majority of these were members since the party had roughly 800 members around its formation (Bogdan, 2018). Most of its ranks-and-file members are young, urban, and highly educated. During the deliberation for candidate selection according to our observation, two-thirds of the online platform members (members plus sympathizers) were male.

Demos tries to compensate the under-representation of certain categories among party members through various means. The concrete efforts consist of statute provisions and organizational practices that support the inclusion of under-represented groups. The party statute promotes gender balance at the level of all executive bodies (Articles 21, 23, 24, and 28 of the Demos Statute, 2018). The organizational practices follow these provisions. Unlike any other political party in Romania, Demos has two spokespersons, a man and a woman, and the party's executive committee includes an equal number of men and women (Bogdan, 2018).

The Process of Intra-Party Deliberation

Arguably, the aggregative model of decision-making does not promote the interests of under-represented groups. The main features of the deliberative democracy—equality, inclusion, participation—are clearly attractive to hitherto excluded groups (Wheatley, 2003). The online deliberation initiated by Demos at the end of 2018 to decide on the composition of its electoral list had a double purpose. It was organized according to a stepwise procedure meant to meet these two purposes: the list composition as the first step and ranking of candidates as the second step.

First, it intended to establish if the electoral list follows the vertical parity method (or zipper system), that is, men and women candidates alternate to secure equal representation or if the list includes a majority of two-thirds female candidates at the top of the list, followed by one-third male candidates. The legal status of the party provided for the zipper system formula in all elections and party decisional body, therefore opting for 2/3 women would imply a change in the party status. The final decision on the list structure was voted by party members only. Following the vote, it was decided with a small majority that the electoral list will be formed by a majority of women candidates instead of the zipper system. The proposal of an electoral list composed by two-thirds female candidates came from the general secretary of the party. This proposal had two aims: to make a difference from all other political parties by showing a real commitment to the idea of women representation in politics and to encourage further involvement of women in the internal life of the party. Thus, the idea of an electoral list composed by two-thirds female candidates can be party's strategy to compensate in practice the under-representation of some categories inside the party membership.

Second, the party aimed to decide the order of candidates for the 2019 European elections. The final decision was taken by vote, a process opened to both party members and sympathizers (with the requirement of prior registration on the online platform as voters). Among the most contentious issues that made the subject of deliberations was the candidature of a transgender sexual worker.

It is difficult to assess whether the deliberation over the list structure and the insistence on the importance of women representation in politics influenced the decision of people

belonging to marginalized or under-represented groups, such as feminists or members of LGBTQIA community to submit their candidacies. The two processes—deliberation over the list structure and candidate selection—took place simultaneously, thus facilitating a mutual exchange of ideas and the transfer of arguments and positions from one process to another. For instance, the idea according to which the main role of an electoral list should be to make a clear and radical political statement and only secondarily to fulfill the criteria of eligibility by making it attractive to large masses of voters was extrapolated into the deliberation over the candidates. By sending the signal that the inclusion and representation of specific under-represented groups is a central goal of the party, Demos motivated other under-represented groups such as LGBTQIA community, youth, and women to enter the debate for candidate selection.

The Involvement of Under-Represented Groups

The most visible involvement of the under-represented groups was in the process of candidate selection. A total of 12 women and 4 men submitted applications for candidates in the 2019 European elections. This ratio goes against the trend in Romanian politics where all other political parties are dominated by male candidates. For example, in the 2019 elections for the European Parliament, the main three parliamentary parties nominated very few women on the list positions that were electable. The pre-election polls indicated that all three parties stood a good chance to get between 7 and 10 candidates elected in the European Parliament. The gender distribution for the first 10 seats looked as follows: the National Liberal Party had one woman candidate, the Social Democratic Party had three women on the list, and the electoral alliance between the Save Romania Union and the Freedom, Unity and Solidarity Party had two women candidates. In smaller parties such as the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania or PRO Romania Party, which stood a chance to win a couple of seats, there was only one woman on the top four or five list positions.

Although women are under-represented within Demos, they were over-represented on the party's electoral list. The high level of women representation among candidates is the direct effect of deliberation about the list structure. This was the path followed by Demos to send a message about the importance of women participation in politics and re-affirming the party's commitment to this goal. In spite the high tension that characterized the deliberation, both camps—those supporting the zipper list and those in favor of two-thirds female candidates—shared a common understanding on the necessity of women's representation in party politics. The disagreement occurred on the specific methods and not on the principle itself. Thus, the statutory provisions have directly affected the level of representation of women.

Romania sends 32 members in the European Parliament (33 after Brexit). Usually, political parties suggest lists that cover the full range of seats. In Demos, the initial plan was to have a list of 21 candidates, but only 16 candidates applied. The total number of candidacies was lower than the total number of seats on the list (16 vs 21). As a consequence, there was no real competition among candidates in the sense that the discussions did not evolve around who should be kept and who should be removed from the list. Instead, the deliberation focused on the possibility to include specific candidates on the final list.

The party's commitment to include and to represent under-represented and/or marginalized categories was reflected in the final composition of the list. This included 12

candidates (Peneş, 2019) having at the top a Roma woman, coming from a marginalized community and known for her grass roots activism on social housing. She brought together multiple forms of under-representation and marginalization: a woman, member of an ethnic minority subjected to discrimination in the country and as a person experiencing poverty and social exclusion. All three categories to which this top candidate belongs are systemically under-represented in Romanian politics—to different degrees—and even more on the electoral lists of political parties. Her selection at the top of the electoral list came as a surprise for the party members. This has been reflected in the online reactions of many members in the aftermath of deliberation, which were captured through participant observation by one of the authors. Although this candidacy was not controversial during deliberation, the result showed that many members did not expect such an outcome. Her election as the party's top candidate for the European elections reflects Demos' progressive stance toward under-represented ethnic, cultural, and social categories. Demos' political agenda have made the party attractive for members of these categories, who are usually very reluctant to any forms of political participation are rather prone to passivity or absenteeism.

The same is valid in the case of the candidature belonging to the LGBTQIA community: Demos' firm positioning against the constitutional referendum organized in October 2018 and its constant support in favor of LGBTQIA community rights. The party's political message has encouraged members of the community to become active in the deliberation process and to submit their candidacy on the party list. The most sensitive issue during the deliberation was the candidacy of a transgender sexual worker. The party's Ethical Committee ruled that this could damage the party image because the candidate's occupation as a sexual worker is an activity sanctioned by law in Romania. The critics of this decision claimed that the real reason behind the controversy is the candidate's gender and the transphobic attitudes of some party members. In the end, following heated debates, the transgender candidate withdrew her candidacy from the final list, although she was selected among top candidates. Related to this, three more candidates withdrew from the list. Some took this decision as a gesture of solidarity with the candidate, while others had problems with the final ranking. The entire process resulted in 12 candidates on the list for the European elections (Peneş, 2019).

Overall, this intra-party deliberation included several under-represented categories in Romanian politics. Women, members of marginalized ethnic minorities, people experiencing poverty, and sexual minorities could make their voice heard during deliberation and earned positions on Demos' electoral list. The transgender category was not represented in the outcome of deliberation but was at the center of deliberation per se due to the nature of candidate's activity. The party has no clear position on sexual workers being divided among those who are in favor and those who oppose its legalization. This is one reason for which the controversy reached such high levels of tension during the deliberation. Following deliberation, a working group on sexual work was created inside the party aiming to elaborate a programmatic approach on the issue.

Conclusion

This article aimed to identify the conditions that favor and inhibit the inclusion of four under-represented categories in intra-party deliberation. It focused on the decisions regarding the list structure and candidate selection for the 2019 European elections. This real-life example illustrates that the inclusion of under-represented groups in the deliberative

process is possible under several conditions. The progressive stance of the party related to under-representation and its clear programmatic positions about their inclusion favor the presence of such groups in the deliberation. This was the case of women, LGBTQIA community, ethnic minorities, or socially excluded groups. The intra-party deliberation was directed outward as a means of driving social change and including particular categories rather than seeking exclusively to gain electoral success. The stepwise structure of the entire process also helped with the inclusion of under-represented groups. The deliberation agenda was initially about the list composition, which encouraged the over-representation of women and sent a clear message of openness to those involved in deliberation. The second issue on the agenda was the ranking of candidates, which appeared the natural step forward in terms of inclusion.

The absence of a clear party position on some issues inhibits deliberation. For example, the case of the transgender sexual worker led to conflicts, tensions, and ultimately candidate withdrawal. At the same time, deliberation is supposed to complement existing procedures of representative democracy (or in this case party functioning) rather than replace them. When going for the latter, a party risks of creating the dichotomy between aggregation and deliberation that can be very harmful. This is what happened in practice with Demos: deliberation went against the initial party statute about gender parity. The deliberation on the list structure contrasted the parity with a new model in which preponderance is given to women candidates. This generated some tensions that could be kept under control due to the party's stance toward women representation and inclusion.

These scope conditions illustrate that there are opportunities but also limitations in the inclusion of under-represented groups in intra-party deliberation. A programmatic agreement about who and how to better represent the agenda of certain socially, culturally, or ethnically under-represented categories seems to be a necessary pre-condition for the inclusiveness of those categories in the deliberation process and outcome. Intra-party deliberation can be a fruitful avenue for the involvement of many under-represented groups but, as shown by the example of Demos, it can result in the re-exclusion of some when procedures and pre-conditions are not carefully considered.

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