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The changing face of party policy selection in post-devolution Northern Ireland

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Abstract
This article provides a comparative and longitudinal analysis of the policy selection methods adopted by Northern Ireland's five main parties. Drawing on data from multiple sources it sheds light on an important element of intra-party democracy and party organisation in the region. Accounting for instances of reform, this article reveals the extent to which the parties have altered their procedures following the introduction of devolved power-sharing in 1998. Policy development is revealed to be primarily top-down in nature, with a clear professionalisation of the process in recent times. In a concurrent development, parties have also adopted a more proactive and, typically, consultative approach to policy development, affording ordinary members greater opportunities to register their views. However, such consultation also privileges several actors outside the parties' boundaries, a finding which raises questions concerning both their organisational integrity and the nature and meaning of conventional party membership in Northern Ireland.

Introduction

Policy formulation remains a key function performed by political parties (Dalton *et al* 2011: 224). As vehicles for political expression and collective decision-making, parties bring structure to the political realm, translating mass preferences into policy choices (Gallagher *et al* 2001: 272; Gauja, 2013a). The process of policy selection also has implications for intra-party democracy. Who is involved in the process of formulating policy – and the extent and nature of such involvement – reveals much about the distribution of power and authority within a political party (Gauja, 2013b). A greater understanding of the process of policy selection leads to a better understanding of the dynamic and relationships within parties as purposive organisations.

This article provides an empirical analysis of the policy selection procedures adopted by political parties in Northern Ireland. Students of Northern Irish politics currently lack a systematic account of this crucial area of intra-party organisation. The analysis is exploratory in nature and addresses similar questions raised in other studies of policy selection (see Gauja, 2013a; Pedersen, 2010): what types of policy-related participation do the parties prefer their members to engage in? What mechanisms are available for policy development? Who participates in the process and what is the extent, quality and meaningfulness of such participation? By focusing on how party policy is typically formulated in Northern Ireland this study makes a contribution to what remains an under-researched area of party organisation (Allern and Pedersen, 2007: 20-1).

This article also considers significant changes in each of the party's policy-making structures, situating Northern Ireland's parties in a wider context of contemporary party organisational change. Faced with declining levels of membership participation, increased media coverage of their activities and concerns surrounding the representative nature of those activists who remain involved in the process, many parties have altered the way in which they

develop policy. Branch meetings and conferences are now increasingly regarded as ineffective or unsuitable fora for policy development, with parties engaging their members through alternative means such as direct ballots, policy commissions or wider consultation processes (Scarrow *et al* 2000; Gauja, 2013a). Increasing numbers of parties, including those in Britain, have also moved to embrace web-based technologies when formulating policy, creating online forums and discussion boards (Gibson and Ward, 1998; Margetts, 2006). This trend has even given rise to a new organisational variant in the 'network party' (Heidar and Saglie, 2003).

In a concurrent development, parties have demonstrated an increasing proclivity to afford extra-party actors a role in the policy process. Gauja's (2013a: 14) study of policy development in three Westminster democracies identifies a 'shift towards more consultative forms of participation and the engagement of party supporters and the wider community at the expense of traditional channels of communication that privileged the party membership'. This practice is dubbed 'policy outsourcing', with parties now increasingly likely to 'go beyond' or 'open up' their organisational boundaries to tap the sentiment of private citizens (Gauja, 2013a: Ch. 6). Such outsourcing can involve establishing various strata of membership types, such as 'registered supporters', or conducting public consultations (see Young, 2013; Scarrow, 2014). Parties might also draw on other expert resources when formulating policy. Gauja (2013a: 49) describes the practice of consulting with interest groups and 'think tanks' as 'routine' among parties. In Britain, 'think tanks' play a central role in the policy development process (Webb, 2002; Denham and Garnett, 1999). Elias' (2012) evaluation of party policy-making in Wales also highlights the increased involvement of lobbyists and civil society actors. The extent to which Northern Ireland's parties conform to these wider trends is therefore of potential interest to party scholars in the region.

The article consists of seven sections. The first section addresses the specific context of the Northern Ireland case. As a devolved power-sharing democracy we might expect parties' policy-making processes to be structured and/or to have developed in a certain way. Sections 2 to 6 then provide a detailed overview and analysis of each of the five main Northern Ireland political parties' policy-making processes. This analysis relies on data from a range of sources. A total of 41 interviews with political elites were conducted in 2013-14, with interviewees selected on account of their proximity to or knowledge of the policy development process within their party (e.g. party officials, elected representatives). Historical party documents were also analysed and the author observed proceedings at a number of party conferences from 2011-14. The analysis also integrates findings from a postal survey of candidates in the 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly and local government elections.[3] The final section of the paper draws together the findings from the individual party case-studies to provide an overview of policy-making within Northern Ireland, highlighting the extent to which the trends of professionalisation, increased membership involvement and policy outsourcing have taken hold in the region.

Policy selection in Northern Ireland: a special case?

From a comparative perspective, Northern Ireland represents an especially intriguing case-study of policy selection. As a consociational democracy parties may be incentivised to adopt certain organisational features. The relationship between a party's environment and how it chooses to organise itself is a central theme in the party organisational literature (see Cross and Katz, 2013: 5). Firstly, consociation is an elite-driven approach to conflict resolution (Lijphart, 1977: 53-4; Schneckener, 2002). The theory prioritises a notable degree of leadership security, power and influence vis-à-vis other intra-party actors, including party members. Comparative research on parties in consociational democracies (both past and present), for instance,

identifies an 'oligarchic' tendency for centralised decision-making and 'the predominance of 'vertical' power games, strongly biased in favour of [political party] leaders' (Luther, 1999: 56). Critics of consociation also decry its elitist complexion (see O'Leary, 2005: 6). Such a complexion, therefore, has potential implications for intra-party democracy. It suggests that parties will be incentivised to favour an internal structure which privileges party elites (i.e. the leadership) over ordinary party members in a clear 'top-down' hierarchy in which they enjoy 'considerable independent power' (Lijphart, 1977: 50).

This picture of oligarchy is, however, tempered by another related structural condition of consociation, that of parties with strong organisational presence within their communities. As Nordlinger (1972) posited, only mass parties with extensive organisational capabilities can provide for the 'structured elite predominance' required for a successful consociational venture. Political parties (led by the all-important elites) must boast considerable 'linkage' with civil society, be that through membership or ancillary organisations (see Luther and Deschouwer, 1999; Lijphart, 1977: Ch. 8). Crucially, Nordlinger notes that 'structured elite predominance is usually tempered with a good measure of responsiveness to non-elite wishes and demands' (1972: 73). From an intra-party perspective, therefore, while the ideal consociational scenario will see strong and secure party leaders, such security (likely) depends on clear lines of communication between these elites and non-elites (party members and/or supporters). The question in respect of policy selection in Northern Ireland therefore is: are these channels of communication in place?

Research on coalition formation and bargaining also suggests that consociational power-sharing might prove a hostile environment for a form of intra-party democracy which privileges party members. Bäck (2008: 75) notes the widely-shared view that 'highly democratic decision-making procedures are likely to constrain party leaders in bargaining, which will render parties characterized by such regimes less likely to be in government'.

Pedersen's (2010: 738) study of Danish political parties also demonstrates that parties in which power is located in the national party organization find it more difficult to participate in legislative accommodation than those where the internal balance of power favours parliamentary groups. Gauja (2013b: 131) has also demonstrated that, 'an internally democratic policy process may not be conducive to effective and responsive governance', as parties, 'in which decision-making power is located within the party's membership, will find it more difficult to participate in governing coalitions' (see also Gauja, 2013a: 28).

The issue of intra-party democracy in Northern Ireland is lent further salience when we consider that consociationalism ensures that all major parties are essentially guaranteed governmental status. Northern Ireland's main parties are (typically) always 'in' government and rarely 'out'. This raises the issue of the relationship between intra-party democracy and legislative importance, and the observation that the closer a party comes to power the more likely power is concentrated among a small elite (see Koelble, 1989; Bolleyer, 2009) As Poguntke observed (2001: 8), 'the structural requirements of parliamentary politics' necessitates that the internal balance of power favours party elites over party members (see also Katz, 2001: 124). This process has been dubbed the 'governmentalization' (Müller, 1994: 73) of parties and underpins the cartel party thesis (Katz and Mair, 1995).

As well as being a power-sharing democracy, Northern Ireland is one of the regions of the United Kingdom to which power has been devolved from Westminster. This article will therefore consider the extent to which devolution has resulted in organisational change within Northern Ireland's parties. The introduction of devolved power-sharing in 1998 transformed the environment in which the parties operated. Such environmental change, as Katz (1997: 31-2) notes, 'may […] lead to changes in the internal life of parties, as well as to changes in the balance among parties'. Elias' (2012) study of the effects of devolution on policy development in Wales, for example, identified a professionalisation of the process and increased

involvement of external stakeholders. One question worth posing, therefore, is to what extent can similar trends and changes be observed in Northern Ireland?

Democratic Unionist Party

The Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) policy process is choreographed by a central 'Policy Unit'. This unit has no counterpart in the party's structures and enjoys significant latitude when formulating policy. All policy generated by the Policy Unit is subject to approval by the Party Officer team and ratified by the 'Central Executive Committee' (CEC), a delegate body which affords representation to a cross-section of the party (see Table 2). While a vehicle for grassroots involvement the CEC is not a particularly effective forum for policy development and policies brought before it are usually 'rubber-stamped' following brief discussion in the vast majority of cases (interview, 3 May 2013).

DUP policy is primarily initiated at leadership level or by those within the parliamentary party (MLAs and MPs). DUP ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive or the party's spokespeople have primacy in their issue area and work closely with the Policy Unit to develop policy (interview, 16 April 2013). DUP interviewees stressed the 'top-down' nature of policy development within the party:

> We are certainly not a bottom-up party. Our policies tend to trickle down.
> … Both the leader and deputy leader would be very involved in setting party
> policy. The DUP has always been built on a certain amount of trust in its
> leadership and very much the culture has always been if the leadership are
> saying 'go for it' then the party will go with that (interview, 12 May 2014).

While the DUP holds an annual conference it does not perform an explicit policy-making function. Rather than afford the extra-parliamentary party an opportunity to ratify or propose policy this forum consists of keynote speeches and panel discussions on specific policy areas.

DUP officials downplayed conference's deliberative capacity, emphasising instead its importance as a 'social gathering' and public relations exercise (interview, 8 May 2013). This approach is reflective of the DUP's origins and long-held organisational culture as a 'protest' party (Tonge *et al* 2014) with conference primarily a means for the leadership to galvanise the grassroots.

Results from our survey of DUP candidates reveals the extent to which policy development within the party is a top-down enterprise (see Table 1). Of the various actors involved in the process the party leader is regarded as the most important, with 92 per cent of respondents describing them as 'very' or 'extremely' influential. The DUP's parliamentary group (MLAs and MPs) and party officers are ranked as the next most influential actors in setting policy direction.[2] Tellingly, the extra-parliamentary party is attributed a comparatively low degree of influence. Close to 80 per cent of respondents attribute local associations and members negligible influence. Conference, as discussed, is also deemed largely uninfluential. And while the Party Executive (CEC) is accorded a reasonably high degree of influence, this is most likely a reflection of its formal ratification role.

Table 1.   DUP candidates' perceptions of the influence of party organs on party's
            general policy direction

	Not very influential	Fairly influential	Very influential	Extremely influential	Total %	n
Party leader	4	4	28	64	100	69
Party executive	7	23	43	26	100	69
Party officers	4	25	49	21	100	67
Party council	10	33	45	12	100	58
Parliamentary team (MPs)	6	22	51	22	100	69
Assembly team (MLAs)	1	28	52	19	100	69
Local councillors	36	35	26	3	100	69
Party conference/AGM	28	41	20	10	100	68
Local party associations	30	49	16	3	100	68
Ordinary party members	35	43	19	1	100	68

Source: Northern Ireland Candidates Survey 2011 (Assembly and local government)

The top-down nature of policy development within the DUP perhaps comes as little surprise to those conversant with popular perceptions of the party's general organisational culture. However, in an interesting development the DUP has adopted a more consultative approach to policy selection since the advent of devolved power-sharing in 1998 and the party's entry into government with Sinn Féin in 2007 especially. While policy tends to originate at leadership level the DUP now utilizes several mechanisms designed to tap the sentiment of ordinary members as well as DUP supporters in the wider populace. Since 2011 the DUP has established 'Policy Development Forums' (PDFs) to disseminate policy ideas throughout the party. These ad hoc working groups are designed to be 'small representative groups of the membership around the province' (interview, 3 April 2013) and while originally intended to operate as thematic working groups adopted practice has instead seen them consulted on a range of issues at once. Since 2011, the DUP has also employed a dedicated 'Communications and Development' officer to act as a conduit between those involved in policy development and the membership (interview, 8 May 2013). This officer also assists branches in improving their organisation with the part aim of encouraging members to become more active, not least

in formulating policy (interview, 30 May 2013). Tellingly, the creation of this new role was a direct response to internal criticism of a 'disconnect' between the party grassroots and central leadership (interview, 1 May 2013; see also Tonge *et al* 2014: 73-74).

Since 2012 the DUP has also organised an annual 'Spring Policy Conference'. Open to all members this forum facilitates small group-based discussion on specific policy issues. While not binding, members can vote on an issue, allowing those in the Policy Unit to gauge levels of support. These conferences are closed to the media and so represent a more effective and 'honest' forum for policy debate than the annual conference (interview, 16 April 2013). Along with the introduction of 'PDFs' and the appointment of a policy liaison officer, the establishment of these policy conferences can be viewed as an indication that the DUP has, in recent years, taken a more proactive approach to consulting its membership when formulating policy. This trend towards greater grassroots consultation is, in large part, a consequence of the party's increased size and significant electoral growth since the early 2000s. Originally conceived as a 'party of protest' the DUP's role in government has transformed the party into, 'a traditional political party', a role change which has affected the party's organisational setting and culture (interview, 12 May 2014; see also Tonge et al 2014).

While the DUP has afforded its rank-and-file greater 'voice' in policy formulation in recent years it has also demonstrated a concurrent willingness to consult with the wider (unionist) electorate on a range of issues. Since the early 2000s the party has regularly conducted focus groups on key policy areas (interview, 24 May 2013). The DUP also consults with a wide range of external stakeholders when developing policy. The first port of call for the party's Policy Unit and/or spokespersons will most often be 'outside experts' whose input will typically provide the impetus for certain policy or nudge the party in a particular direction (interview, 16 April 2013). Since 1998 these groups have, it would appear, grown in strength and influence, employing more staff 'to encourage that level of interaction' (interview, 24 May

2013). While an in-depth examination of the influence of such stakeholders on the policy process is beyond the scope of this study, it is possible to identify a set of actors outside the DUP's organisation playing a role in the process.

A final example of the DUP's willingness to look beyond its membership when formulating policy is the party's adoption of a membership category known as a 'Registered Party Supporter'. Also introduced in 2011 this online initiative enables members of the public to 'receive regular updates from the party' and promises those who enlist 'the opportunity to give your feedback' (DUP, 2014). Supporters can attend party conference and are 'kept informed of all party policy and developments within the party' (DUP, 2013). This 'supporter' option was introduced to cater for those citizens who cannot commit to the activity rate expected of a full member and to strengthen the party's links with its latent support base in the wider community (interview, 17th April 2013). A second motive concerned membership recruitment. As the first rung on the organisational ladder supporters might then be incentivised to enlist as full members. Its recruitment capacity aside, the success and efficacy of this venture as a consultative tool should not be overstated. Opportunities for these new actors to provide feedback on policy have been virtually non-existent. Nonetheless, this initiative does constitute a clear attempt by the DUP to stretch its organisational boundaries, involving a greater number of citizens in policy development. The potential therefore exists for 'supporters' to play some role in the process *alongside* 'paid-up' members.

Social Democratic and Labour Party

The annual conference has always been the sovereign body that determines SDLP policy. As with other cases the purpose of the SDLP's conference is 'to establish a representative democratic link between the final policy adopted by the party and its grassroots membership'

Table 2.   Representation on Northern Ireland parties' main policy-making bodies

Party (Forum)	Overall size/ Attendance	Basis of Representation	Formula for Membership Representation	Other Bodies Represented
SDLP (Conference)	'Several hundred'	Size of local branch membership	Two delegates for first 10-20 members; one extra for every 10 members thereafter	Executive Committee; all elected representatives; Two delegates from SDLP Youth, SDLP Women's Group and other Support Groups
APNI (Council)	Approx. 150	Set number for each Constituency Association	10 delegates per Constituency Association	Party Officers; Executive Committee; All elected representatives; 5 Vice Presidents; 10 delegates from Young Alliance
Sinn Féin (Conference)	'Several hundred'	Size of local branch membership	Two delegates for branch of 20 members or less; 3 delegates for branch of over 20 members	National Executive; Two delegates from each regional and district executive, Republican Youth, National Councillors Forum; One delegate from the Six-County Parliamentary Group and 26-County Parliamentary Group
DUP (Central Executive Committee)	Approx. 150	Set number for each Constituency Association	5 delegates per Constituency Association	Two delegates from University Associations; Four delegates from Young Democrats; The Party Leader and Deputy Leader; All MPs, MLAs, MEPs and peers
UUP (Executive Committee)	Approx. 140	Set number for each Constituency Association	The Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer of each Constituency Association plus two delegates per Constituency Association	The Leader; Party Officers; 3 members of Parliamentary Party; MEPs; Executive Ministers; Leader of Assembly Party, Chief Whip and 3 MLAs who are not Ministers; Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer plus 3 other members of Councillors' Association, Young Unionists and Women's Unionist Council

Sources: Sinn Féin (2013); APNI (2013); SDLP (2012); DUP (2013); UUP (2007)

(Gauja, 2013a: 66). Local branches elect representatives to attend the conference on their behalf and delegate entitlement is scaled according to membership size (see Table 2). Motions can also be submitted by any party body, including branches and elected representatives.

In order to arrive at a better understanding of the 'responsiveness and inclusiveness of conference as a policy-making forum' it is necessary to consider other factors besides the formal rules that govern participation (Gauja, 2013a: 68). Firstly, the role perception of those 'representing' local branches, whether they regard themselves as a delegate mandated to vote a certain way or a representative acting according to personal conscience. While attendees in other social democratic parties typically act as delegates (Gauja, 2013a: 49) we find no hard and fast rule on this issue within the SDLP and a blurring in practice between the delegate and representative models. The typical scenario sees 'delegates' given free-rein on most issues but mandated on more contentious ones. The party seeks to facilitate a link between grassroots discussion and policy outcomes by circulating agenda to branches in advance of any meeting. However, the quality of discussion and the branches capacity to consider what is often a hefty agenda varies according to their organisational strength and priorities, which is highly variable (interview, 9 April 2013).

Secondly, the quality of deliberation at conference is an important factor when ascertaining its effectiveness and significance as a policy-making forum. Given the highly variable nature of policy debate at SDLP branch level, the onus shifts to conference to ensure quality discussion. Again the high volume of motions to be considered is important here. Typically conference will consider between 125-200 motions and the average debate on motions raised in a specific area lasts roughly 30 minutes. From a deliberative standpoint it is, therefore, difficult to expect that conference could achieve anything more substantial than ratification or rejection of a policy motion. As one SDLP MLA explained, 'conference is short

and people like to socialise' (interview, 22 March 2013). Indeed, as well as its keen social aspect, the SDLP conference performs a host of other non-policy-oriented functions, including holding elections and hosting keynote speeches.

In recent years the SDLP has sought to make conference a more effective forum for policy debate. In 2004 the party established a formal 'Policy Secretary' position within each branch whose role is 'to stimulate policy discussion' (SDLP, 2004). Since 2010 the party has held lengthy panel discussions designed to 'inform conference and get delegates thinking about some of the bigger issues and the party's core values or principles' (interview, 8 May 2014). The party has also moved to revise, if not entirely reimagine, the role played by its 'Central Council', the main forum for party-wide policy discussion between conferences. This body was reconstituted following a major organisational review in 2004/5; however, it is only in recent years that it has become an effective vehicle for policy development under its own steam and one which dovetails with conference (SDLP, 2010c; interview, 8 May 2014).

The principal motor for policy generation in the SDLP is a central 'Policy Unit'. A large portion of this unit's time is spent dealing with the parliamentary party's everyday workload. However, it also facilitates policy discussion within the party; formulates policy initiatives; and prepares manifestos (SDLP, 2010; 2011). The unit has no authority to unilaterally develop policy and so works closely alongside other party actors, with party spokespeople typically inviting the unit to co-draft policy for discussion amongst the parliamentary group (MLAs and MPs) (interview, 21 March 2013).

The extent to which policy is influenced by the SDLP's Assembly team and at leadership level is revealed by our candidate survey (see Table 3). Respondents identified the party's MLAs as the most influential actors, with 72 per cent viewing them as either 'very' or 'extremely' influential in setting the party's general policy direction. The party leader was deemed the second most influential actor. It is also possible to identify a neat split between the

influence of the 'party in public office' and the grassroots. The three least influential organs are found in the extra-parliamentary party, with 42 per cent of respondents deeming the membership to be 'not very' influential. Past analyses of the SDLP's organisation have stressed the dominant role played by the party's elected representatives (see McAllister, 1977: 45; Mitchell, 1991: 73). It would appear that this perception endures.

Table 3.   SDLP candidates' perceptions of the influence of party organs on party's general policy direction

	Not very influential	Fairly influential	Very influential	Extremely influential	Total %	n
Party leader	8	25	47	19	100	59
Party executive	13	46	30	11	100	61
Party officers	18	53	25	3	100	60
Party council	24	47	24	5	100	59
Parliamentary team (MPs)	7	38	33	22	100	60
Assembly team (MLAs)	2	27	52	20	100	60
Local councillors	19	50	26	5	100	58
Party conference/AGM	14	38	34	14	100	58
Local party associations	34	44	17	5	100	59
Ordinary party members	42	39	14	5	100	59

Source: Northern Ireland Candidates Survey 2011 (Assembly and local government)

Another body which the Policy Unit liaises closely with (and shares certain responsibilities) is the Policy Committee, a formal development and oversight group. Although its remit is wide-ranging the committee's capacity to develop policy is constrained by the fact that it is a voluntary body which typically meets on a bi-monthly basis. Much of its time is also spent considering proposals brought to it by the Policy Unit (interview, 21 March 2013). As a result, the committee will typically conduct a 'policy review' to draft a list of policies to be developed or revisited by the Policy Unit. From time to time, the committee will establish working groups focused on developing policy on a specific issue or general area. These groups

are regarded as more amenable to grassroots involvement, with circulars inviting members with an interest, expertise or background in the specific area to join (interview, 8 May 2014).

The SDLP's Policy Committee has seen its role in the policy process diminish with the establishment of devolution and the emergence of a new tier of politicians. For much of the party's history, in the absence of any functioning government (beyond council level), the committee was the central engine of policy development and was largely populated by senior figures who would later assume office in 1998 (Farren, 2000; interview, 27 March 2013). Policy-making authority has therefore shifted from the volunteers in the Policy Committee to the party's MLA grouping, as outlined by one senior official:

> [In] 1998 the balance of power swung to the Assembly group. Party executive, by and large, is responsible for organisation and fundraising but policy now resides with the Assembly group. … That institutional change had a major impact. It changed the dynamic in that the Assembly group asserted itself. It basically told the executive: 'You can mind your own business in relation to policy matters. We are the people who are making these decisions' (interview, 10 April 2013)

Evidence also suggests that following the re-establishment of power-sharing in 2007 the Policy Committee experienced an identity crisis. Internal reports from 2008 to 2012 detail a period of self-reflection on its 'core purpose and function' (SDLP, 2011). With most policy well-established and Assembly spokespersons largely autonomous regarding everyday political developments the committee admitted to suffering from aimlessness (SDLP, 2011). In 2010/11 committee members met with counterparts in Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour to discuss how their respective policy committees worked, while other European parties were assessed for best practice (SDLP, 2010). One result of this self-evaluation has been a renewed desire on the committee's part to facilitate consultation on policy with various levels of the party and with members especially. In 2008 the practice of conducting 'Constituency Visits' was established, with committee members visiting constituencies to outline policy initiatives

and gather members' views. The following year the committee introduced the requirement that each Constituency Council hold an annual meeting at which members can discuss and formulate policy. Since 2010 the committee has held workshops focused on their prioritised policy theme to which members are invited (interview, 8 May 2014) and in 2012 members were invited to register their email and receive regular updates on party activity in a number of areas.

By far the most innovative consultative mechanism established by the SDLP Policy Committee in recent years is an online 'Policy Forum'. Introduced in 2013, this forum is open only to registered members and 'enables [them] to express their views on policy issues and participate in the development of SDLP policy in conversations across the party in addition to discussions within their branches' (SDLP, 2014). In terms of outcome, such debate assists in 'reviews of existing policies and in the creation of new policies, responses to consultations and contributions to party manifestos'. The scheme's architects also posited a clear link between online debate and policy output, with the goal of holding policy workshops following extensive consultation in the forums (SDLP, 2013). This discussion board, whatever of its success in practice, therefore, reflects a wider drive and intent by the SDLP to engage members in policy development.

Finally, despite the SDLP's moves towards a more consultative form of policy development in recent years the party has also sought to engage the views of those outside its organisation. Standard practice sees the Policy Unit consult with external stakeholders in the initial stages of drafting policy (interview, 21 March 2013). In recent years the SDLP has also used focus groups to consult the public on a number of policy areas, informing the work of both the Policy Unit and Committee (interview, 8 May 2014). Some policy workshops have been open to non-members and wider forums of public consultation have also become regular features of the SDLP's policy development process (interview, 15 March 2013). Since 2012

the party has committed itself to holding a number of large thematic policy conferences to which the public is invited to participate in panel discussions, with comments fed back through the party structures. When considering the SDLP's policy process it is, therefore, important to account for the involvement of actors with no formal ties to the party.

Alliance Party

Alliance policy is officially approved by 'Council', a delegate body which meets to discuss resolutions on a quarterly basis. The majority of delegates represent the membership and proposals can be brought by any organ of the extra-parliamentary party and by party executive (see Table 2). In policy-making terms this body performs a similar role to a conventional party conference. Alliance does not specify that associations mandate their delegates. However, on the more contentious issues council-goers will tend to be issued with a mandate (interview, 5 June 2013). Proposals are circulated to associations in advance of meetings to facilitate discussion among members which will then inform their representatives' position. However, as with the SDLP, the state of local party organisation and so the degree of agency enjoyed by delegates is highly variable (interview, 24 May 2013). Given the regularity of meetings the agenda is substantially smaller than that of a typical party conference, with delegates considering just a handful of motions. This concentrated schedule affords delegates (and members) greater opportunity to consider any proposals. A smaller agenda also represents a more manageable workload to a membership base which, generally speaking, is more preoccupied with fundraising and campaigning (interview, 28 March 2013).

Indeed, considerations of the quality of policy deliberation by the extra-parliamentary party – both at association-level and at conference – partly informed a move by Alliance to devolve policy-making powers from its annual conference to Council in 2012. Since the party's

establishment in 1970 policy was debated and ratified at an annual conference. From 2010 onwards, however, the utility of conference as a policy-making forum came under scrutiny. The move to strip conference of its policy-making powers was partly intended to make for more structured and focused debate, replacing 'fairly meaningless resolutions' with substantive policy proposals (interview, 5 June 2013). Originally a delegate body, attendance rights were extended to all members in 1994. As a result, policy debate 'became very unmanageable in terms of the numbers involved and slightly chaotic in that people could be raising things that were slightly off the agenda' (interview, 24 May 2013). On a related note, a more 'professional' approach to the party's image in the public eye was a key consideration when moving policy debate behind closed doors. The party's electoral growth in recent years has seen conference receive unprecedented media attention. Given such increased coverage, conference was no longer deemed a suitable forum for policy debate (interview, 10 May 2013). This concurs with a wider contemporary trend affecting party conferences in several Western democracies, where public relations considerations have become just as, if not more, important than policy debate (Seyd, 1999; Faucher-King, 2005). As a result, Alliance's conference now consists of keynotes, a wider exhibition, panel discussions and fringe events.

The vast majority of Alliance policy is formulated by various elements of the party besides the membership. The most important actors include a central Policy Officer, a formal Policy Committee and the Alliance Assembly group. Since 1998 the party has employed a Policy Officer who divides their time between responding to consultations, assisting Alliance representatives and drafting manifestos (interview, 11 May 2014). This staffer is, however, also involved in the formulation of proposals to be brought before executive and Council and identifying issues on which the party requires new or revised policy. In doing so, they work closely alongside a formal 'Policy Committee'. This committee may, if required, establish smaller working groups focused on a specific policy area and is usually populated by

spokespersons and interested members. The committee's exact composition is regulated by executive with a small number of party officials granted *ex officio* status. As a result, the threshold to gaining a place on the committee is low, with interested members 'pushing against an open door' (interview, 17 April 2013). Despite the apparent ease with which they can gain access onto one of the party's most important policy development bodies those in Alliance highlighted the low levels of interest among members to do so (interview, 17 April 2013). In an attempt to involve members in the policy process Alliance has, since 2012, conducted an annual consultation of its entire membership. This 'Policy Sweep' aggregates members' views on a number of key policy areas, with data fed back through the party structures, informing the proposals brought before Council (interview, 11 May 2014).

Table 4.　　Alliance candidates' perceptions of the influence of party organs on party's general policy direction

	Not very influential	Fairly influential	Very influential	Extremely influential	Total %	n
Party leader	3	15	55	28	100	40
Party executive	5	33	45	18	100	40
Party officers	8	45	43	5	100	40
Party council	8	34	45	13	100	38
Parliamentary team (MPs)	5	28	56	10	100	39
Assembly team (MLAs)	0	31	54	15	100	39
Local councillors	15	55	30	0	100	40
Party conference/AGM	28	45	23	5	100	40
Local party associations	35	45	20	0	100	40
Ordinary party members	45	43	10	3	100	40

Source: Northern Ireland Candidates Survey 2011 (Assembly and local government)

Alliance MLAs and leadership figures play a central role in developing party policy. Spokespersons are especially influential in identifying issues which require new or revised policy and will work closely alongside the Policy Officer to draft proposals. The suggestion that Alliance's 'parliamentary party' is where the real locus of policy power lies is supported

by findings from our candidate survey (see Table 4). The three most influential groupings are, in order of perceived importance, the party leader, Assembly team and parliamentary team.[3] In contrast, the extra-parliamentary party is afforded a low degree of influence, with local associations and party members bottom of the list. However, rather than interpret this as a disenfranchisement of the grassroots, those in Alliance suggested that this reflected the spread of resources in the party, with full-time politicians more au fait with (and interested in) the 'nitty gritty' of policy than the average member. Devolution has also resulted in the parliamentary party overtaking the extra-parliamentary party as the key site from which policy proposals emerge:

> We have seen a shift away from the deep political discussions happening at the Party Executive – which now has more of a managerial role – towards the Assembly Party, where most of the policy discussions would now happen (interview, 10 May 2013).

Furthermore, as a small party with only one staffer with a policy remit and which does not receive state funding Alliance is heavily reliant on the voluntary contributions of its MLAs and their staff. As the party has acknowledged, despite the 'handicap' of not receiving such funding the strong practical role of staff and spokespersons has enabled it to 'punch well above its weight in policy terms' (APNI, 2004). Another consequence of both the party's small size and lack of resources is the involvement of external stakeholders in developing policy. One Alliance official explained how, 'as a small party we are especially reliant on a little outside help and advice when it comes to getting policies up to scratch' (interview, 11 May 2014). Faced with a deficit in terms of research capacity, those tasked with drafting policy will consult with lobby groups and civil society actors to benefit from their expertise. From an intra-party democracy perspective the involvement of these external actors in the policy process is noteworthy.

Ulster Unionist Party

UUP policy is officially endorsed by its executive committee, a body to which the majority of representatives act on behalf of local constituency associations (see Table 1). Policy can also be ratified at a meeting of the entire party membership under the auspices of the 'Ulster Unionist Council' (UUC). In practice, however, ratification by the UUC only occurs in 'extremely exceptional circumstances' (interview, 13 March 2013). The UUC's wings were clipped following a series of reforms in 2005 and 2007 which bolstered the position of the executive as the party's de facto policy approval body and raised the threshold for convening a UUC meeting. Prior to 2005 regular meetings of the UUC were called to consider party policy, a practice which bedevilled past UUP leaders (Farrington, 2006).

The UUP holds an annual conference to which members are invited. This forum can consider policy motions and any representative body from association-level upwards can raise a motion. In the round, however, the policy-making capacity of the UUP conference is negligible. Typically, only one or two motions are debated and these tend to be 'broad-brush' in nature, reaffirming the party's already well-established (consensus) position (interview, 25 April 2013). Instead, the UUP conference agenda is mainly devoted to panel discussions, fringe events and leadership speeches. On occasion delegates will be presented with policy proposals set to be considered by executive in an attempt to encourage them to engage with their representatives on that body. Such occasions are, however, rare. The question then is what opportunities exist for UUP members to influence policy?

Responsibility for coordinating policy development within the UUP lies almost entirely with a 'Policy Officer' based in a small central 'Policy Unit'. Unlike some parties, the UUP does not possess an elected policy development group with the party's MLAs, leadership and officer team performing an equivalent function, liaising closely with the Policy Unit. The

Policy Officer has a gamut of options available for both involving and consulting the wider party. Indeed, as a result of certain organisational developments in recent years, it could be argued that UUP members are afforded an unprecedented number of opportunities to influence and develop policy. 2005 saw the creation of a centralised register of party members, meaning that, for the first time in its history, the party possessed a comprehensive database of members' contact details. This initiative was a long-held goal of intra-party 'modernisers' who bemoaned the practice of local branches or constituency associations being responsible for membership registration (Farrington, 2006: 44). Under this system efficient communication and widespread engagement with the membership on policy matters was extremely difficult, with local elites taking a laissez-faire approach to registration (interview, 23 April 2013). The centralisation of membership registration has, therefore, gone some way to liberating UUP members in terms of policy-making. No longer reliant on local elites as conduits, the party centre now has the means to directly involve members in the process.

Other recent initiatives have strengthened the lines of communication between the UUP centre and periphery. In 2010, the Elliott leadership issued an appeal for members to register their email address with party headquarters and established the practice of a weekly 'Leader's Bulletin' (interview, 25 April 2013). Among other things, this communique contains appeals to become involved in policy development. Perhaps the clearest example of the UUP's new-found capacity (and willingness) to engage its members in policy development is the establishment of 8-10 'Policy Forums' in 2012. Established at the behest of the leadership, these groupings are structured according to wider policy areas, loosely mirroring government departments. Crucially, they are composed entirely of members with a declared interest in the specific area (interview, 26 April 2013). The most popular groups are approximately 100-150 members strong and discussion is typically via email (interview, 13 March 2013(3)). In many ways, these groupings resemble the 'thematic networks' central to the 'network party'

typology, where discussion occurs in groups which cross-cut the traditional geographical branch structure (Heidar and Saglie, 2003).

While recent years have seen the UUP adopt a more proactive approach to involving and consulting its membership this does not represent the typical picture of policy development in the party. More usual practice sees the Policy Officer work closely alongside party spokespeople to develop policies which will then be presented to the leadership and Assembly group. Approved policy then proceeds to the executive (usually via the Party Officers) for final endorsement. This chain-of-command, with the executive ratifying policy which has emerged almost entirely from the party room or leader's office, has been identified in other studies of the UUP (Farrington, 2006: 38). Our candidate survey also reveals the extent to which policy selection in the UUP is considered a primarily elite-centric venture (see Table 5). The two most influential actors are the party leader and MLA team. In terms of those bodies representing the extra-parliamentary party, only the party executive is granted a relatively high degree of influence − most likely a reflection of its ultimate approval authority. Tellingly, local party associations and party members are ranked least influential in the process.

Other new features of the UUP's policy process also serve to counter-balance recent moves to afford members a more privileged role. These concern the involvement of actors outside the party's formal structures. In 2013 the UUP adopted a new initiative of holding a series of public consultations. These meetings focused specifically on the party's education policy and took place across Northern Ireland. While members were invited to attend, the emphasis appears to have been on consulting with both sectoral groups and members of the public.

> [That] is the first time that we have gone *outside of the party* … To get not only our members but the public more aware of what our policy is and allowing them some input (interview, 13 March 2013(2), *emphasis added*).

While a one-off case the UUP has, nonetheless, demonstrated a new-found willingness to tap wider public sentiment and involve extra-party actors.

Table 5.   UUP candidates' perceptions of the influence of party organs on party's general policy direction

	Not very influential	Fairly influential	Very influential	Extremely influential	Total %	Total n
Party leader	7	21	44	27	100	70
Party executive	12	29	41	18	100	68
Party officers	13	32	49	6	100	69
Party council	18	50	26	6	100	66
Parliamentary team (MPs)	47	24	22	7	100	59
Assembly team (MLAs)	3	36	39	22	100	67
Local councillors	18	60	22	0	100	67
Party conference/AGM	35	38	22	4	100	68
Local party associations	23	58	13	6	100	69
Ordinary party members	42	42	10	6	100	67

Source: Northern Ireland Candidates Survey 2011 (Assembly and local government)
Note: At the time of the survey the UUP had no representation at Westminster which likely explains the comparatively low response rate for that option

The goal of formulating more 'representative' policy with input from the public has also seen the UUP engage in the recent practice (since 2011/12) of conducting focus groups on key policy areas. Not strictly performed for electioneering purposes these groups have directly informed the development of policy (interview, 17 May 2014). Typically speaking, the initial stages of policy development will also see the UUP Policy Unit and/or spokespersons consult with relevant external stakeholders. The involvement of these extra-party actors is necessary to make up for a 'knowledge deficit' on the part of both central staff, given their small numbers and the resources available to them, and the party membership (interview, 13 March 2013). Again, as with all of the main parties in Northern Ireland, civil society actors, pressure groups

and industry experts appear to play a key role in the development of policy in the UUP, alongside the party's formal membership.

The reform of membership registration in 2007 also saw the formalisation of a 'supporter' category of UUP membership (UUP, 2014a). While these supporters do not enjoy any voting rights in intra-party elections they are consulted on party policy via email and through invitation to working groups (interview, 19 March 2013). In addition, the UUP website provides an option for the public to register and 'Stay Informed'; again facilitating their involvement in the process (UUP, 2014b). Both of these initiatives were designed to boost party membership by incentivising supporters to take the next step to full membership (interview, 16 May 2013). Given the traditional vagaries which have surrounded the UUP's organisational boundaries at grassroots level it could be argued that this does not constitute as considerable a dilution of formal members' influence on intra-party affairs as suggested in other cases (see Scarrow, 2014; Gauja, 2013a: Ch. 6). Nonetheless, it is a noteworthy contemporary development and one which chimes with other moves by the UUP to 'outsource' policy development.

Sinn Féin

The supreme legislative body of Sinn Féin is the party's annual conference, where any party organ can submit a motion to conference, including a local branch.[4] Voting rights at this delegate meeting are bestowed upon several actors, the majority of which represent local branches (see Table 1). Sinn Féin does not stipulate that delegates be mandated. However, the party does attempt to ensure a direct link between members' preference and their representatives' vote by distributing agenda to branches in advance of conference. Some in Sinn Féin referred to healthy levels of policy debate at branch level, leading to strict

'mandation' (interview, 22 April 2013). However, while extensive deliberation at branch level is in keeping with other accounts which stress the high-rate of grassroots activism in Sinn Féin (Maillot, 2005; Bean, 2007), the majority of interviewees accepted that such an ideal was often at the mercy of practical organisational realities and inconsistencies. A more likely scenario, therefore, appears to be that on account of the large number of motions debated – on average 150-200 – delegates will only be mandated on contentious issues (interview, 9 April 2013).

The quality of debate at Sinn Féin's conference is also highly variable and issue-dependent. Given the volume of motions debate is strictly time-limited. Sinn Féin's conference also performs a multitude of non-policy-related functions. It is, perhaps above all else, an important public relations exercise for the party with speeches from the leadership garnering substantial media coverage. Sinn Féin has earned a reputation as an especially savvy party in respect of public relations and media management, an adeptness aided in large part by its comparatively high degree of internal cohesion (Spencer, 2006). As demonstrated in other cases, the policy-making capacity of conferences has suffered as parties have grown more appreciative of their 'political marketing' power (Lilleker, 2005; Seyd, 1999). Some Sinn Féin officials acknowledged the 'curbing' (interview, 8 May 2013) effect greater media coverage of conference proceedings has had on the nature of debate in recent years: 'We are acutely aware that it's not just what you say but where you say it, and who is able to hear it and how they then use that' (interview, 25 April 2013). Critics have also argued that Sinn Féin's conference is largely conducted for the optics, with dissenting views discouraged and debate strictly 'stage-managed' by the leadership (see Bean, 2007: 119-121; Alonso, 2007: 126; 135-6; Frampton, 2009: 117; 144). In response to these accusations, however, some in Sinn Féin acknowledged that changes in the party's fortunes, size and the political context in which it operates has necessitated a 'looser' organisational culture, 'one more tolerant of local initiative' (interview, 25 April 2013). Other observers have registered their surprise at the nature of debate and, at

times, openly critical stance of delegates at Sinn Féin conferences. Doyle (2008:143) remarks that Sinn Féin's conference is 'unusual for the influence it still has on party policy'; and that despite growing PR demands, 'it retains for party members its constitutional function of making policy'; and that 'the nature of the debates and the number of motions passed at a typical [conference] reflect an institution with significant power and authority'. Those in Sinn Féin also referred to the party's decision to call specially convened conferences on 'seismic' issues in the past as evidence of its tolerance of 'big, open, frank debate' (interview, 22 April 2013).[5]

The notion of conference exercising considerable influence on the development of Sinn Féin policy finds some support in results from our candidate survey (Table 6). 76 per cent of Sinn Féin respondents deemed conference either 'very' or 'extremely' influential in terms of setting the party's general policy direction. The authority of conference is closely matched by the party Executive, the elected body tasked with determining policy between conferences (75 per cent); a result which tallies with long-held impressions of a strong national leadership and party centre (see below). Comparatively, the influence attributed to Sinn Féin's conference is the highest of any of the 'sovereign' policy-making bodies in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, Sinn Féin respondents also attributed their membership and local associations with a higher degree of influence than any of the other parties, suggesting an active role for the grassroots in the process. Sinn Féin's conference may therefore not be, as some suggest, a toothless body conducted mainly for show.

Policy development in Sinn Féin is coordinated and directed by a central Policy Unit. Reflecting the party's mandate in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland this unit is sub-divided, with separate bodies operating in both jurisdictions. The policy development mechanisms adopted by these two units largely mirror each other in terms of structure and operation. Long-standing practice (since at least 2002) has seen the party establish permanent

'Policy Advisory Groups' (PAGs) to deal with short-term policy developments but also longer-term policy (Sinn Féin, 2002). PAGs are organised along departmental lines and membership is regulated by the Policy Unit. These working groups are small in size (roughly 6-7 persons) with membership almost completely limited to the relevant minister and their advisors, committee members or elected spokespersons and Policy Unit staff. Some PAGs may also include party members who have expressed interest in an area or specific issue, however, for the purposes of aggregation, the party prefers PAGs to remain small in size (interview, 16 May 2014).

Table 6.   Sinn Féin candidates' perceptions of the influence of party organs on party's general policy direction

	Not very influential	Fairly influential	Very influential	Extremely influential	Total %	n
Party leader	0	25	29	45	100	51
Party executive	2	22	31	44	100	54
Party officers	2	27	49	22	100	51
Party council	10	27	49	14	100	49
Parliamentary team (MPs)	12	39	31	18	100	51
Assembly team (MLAs)	4	32	44	20	100	50
Local councillors	12	49	25	14	100	51
Party conference/AGM	6	18	35	41	100	51
Local party associations	16	40	32	12	100	50
Ordinary party members	24	35	31	10	100	51

Source: Northern Ireland Candidates Survey 2011 (Assembly and local government)

In drafting policy, usual practice sees PAGs firstly consult with relevant non-governmental organisations.[6] With this initial preparatory work conducted wider consultation then occurs with policy papers forwarded to regional executives for consideration, dissemination and feedback. These bodies afford delegate representation to the membership via smaller district executives and local branches. Larger monthly or quarterly regional

meetings are held, focusing on a specific policy. These are open invitation to members and involve 'Q&A' sessions with elected representatives or officials.

The impression provided by those in Sinn Féin is, therefore, of a top-down process, with policy fanning out to the wider party from the centre. Previous studies have revealed the degree of consultation conducted by Sinn Féin in policy-making to be considerable and a prized characteristic of the party (see Cassidy, 2005). While typical practice sees consultation occur mainly at regional level, Sinn Féin has demonstrated its adeptness at conducting large-scale, in-depth consultations with its grassroots on numerous issues in the past two decades. This consultative process has utilised several mechanisms, namely branch visits and presentations by members of the Policy Unit and/or PAGs; single-issue or thematic 'set-piece' policy conferences; and large public consultations. The latter mechanism has attracted perhaps most attention in recent history. Colloquially dubbed 'Republican Family meetings' these 'Town Hall'-style events were frequently held throughout the peace process in the 1990s (and early 2000s) and more sporadically since then. While their use is largely limited to contentious issues they nevertheless represent a consultative tool with which the party is comfortable.

Sinn Féin's use of public meetings is noteworthy in that members of the wider public are afforded a role in the policy process. As a result, there is little in the way of distinction between 'member' and 'supporter' on those occasions. Rather than view such a scenario as a potential threat to the party's institutional integrity and a dilution of the concept of membership those in Sinn Féin regarded it as a virtue. Those in Sinn Féin provided a coterie of explanations for such consultation. Meetings act as a 'litmus test' (interview, 20 March 2013) for party policy initiatives; allow the party to 'feel the pulse of the community' (interview, 28 March 2013); protect against 'group think' (interview, 9 April 2013); afford policy 'greater democratic legitimacy' (interview, 8 May 2013); and ensure that the party 'is not lost to the institutions' (interview, 25 April 2013).

Notably, in recent years Sinn Féin has introduced several initiatives designed to replicate the 'Town Hall' effect, facilitating consultation with both its membership and wider support base, but on a more regular basis. In 2011 the party reformed its membership model, establishing the new category of a 'non-attached member'. Joining centrally rather than via a local branch this 'member' is, to all intents and purposes, a registered supporter who is largely exempt from the high rate of activism expected of a typical member. Sinn Féin officials explained how the comparatively high demands of Sinn Féin membership discouraged many of the party's 'latent supporters' from becoming members, preventing the party from substantially increasing its membership base (interview, 4 March 2013). Crucially, while non-attached members are unable to elect delegates to conference they are afforded a role in the policy-making process in other ways. The involvement of a growing number of actors outside the party's traditional structures, 'exponentially increased the responsibility on national leadership to up [its] game with regard to internal communication and consultation' (interview, 9 April 2013). As a result, the party appointed a new 'Communications Officer' to work closely alongside the Policy Unit. Recently adopted practice sees a weekly email bulletin distributed to the full membership base providing updates on policy, information on upcoming consultations and membership surveys (interview, 16 May 2014). Secondly, in 2010 Sinn Féin launched an 'Online Supporter' option, inviting members of the public to register their email address (Sinn Féin, 2014). In return a subscriber becomes a 'grassroots online activist' involved in the party's policy process (among other things), receiving updates on policy activity and being consulted on policy issues. Along with the party's 'non-attached member' cohort these 'supporters' – most likely those who would normally have attended 'Town Hall' meetings – are now being consulted alongside ordinary members on a regular basis.

Discussion

The process of selecting policy reveals much about intra-party democracy. This study has demonstrated that the most influential actors within the process in Northern Ireland are parliamentarians, party leaders and dedicated policy staff. The common picture is one of policy 'trickling down' from the 'party in public office' (Katz and Mair, 1995) to grassroots-level for consideration. Comparative research demonstrates that the 'party in public office' is becoming increasingly dominant in political parties vis-à-vis members, an ascendancy owed largely to the 'professionalisation' of party affairs and the growing resources associated with public office (Katz and Mair, 2002). In Northern Ireland there has been an undoubted professionalisation of the party policy process in recent times. Since the advent of devolved power-sharing in 1998 all parties have, to varying degrees, moved to employ professional policy staff to support the parliamentary party. On a related note, as parties move 'closer' to government parliamentary parties are more likely to dominate internal decision-making and become less responsive to their broader party. While applicable to all party systems, this issue is particularly salient in a consociational democracy such as Northern Ireland. Although some parties in the region actively reject the notion (e.g. Sinn Féin), 'governmentalisation' is a difficult force to resist and the evidence presented above suggests that such a trend has taken hold (see also Tonge *et al* 2014: 78).

Northern Ireland's parties do provide members with opportunities to become involved in policy selection. All parties seek, in different ways, to ensure that policy secures members' seal of approval. Party conferences, however, play an (increasingly) limited role in the process. For the DUP, UUP and most recently Alliance, conference – as it is traditionally conceived – does not perform a policy-making role. While conference constitutes the sovereign policy-making authority for both the SDLP and Sinn Féin, legitimate doubts about its effectiveness as a vehicle for policy deliberation can be raised. Instead, Northern Ireland's parties typically

prefer other more discursive and private forums for policy development than conference. A key trend identified in this study is the provision of greater opportunities for ordinary members to register their views on policy. Parties have adopted several initiatives to consult with members to a greater extent than before, with internal lines of communication established or bolstered. While the extent to which party elites have a receptive ear for members' views requires further research, opportunity exists nonetheless for such opinion to be aired.

Although Northern Ireland's parties now provide members with greater opportunities to develop policy, it is also clear that they are equally keen to consult with actors outside their organisational boundaries. The degree of 'policy outsourcing' in the region appears considerable. Expert external stakeholders are often the parties' first port of call when developing policy. Although routine in other cases, the influence of these actors on party policy outcomes in Northern Ireland remains largely under-analysed. In a further indication of the 'professionalisation' of Northern Ireland parties post-devolution, focus groups have also become commonplace. So too have public meetings and consultations. While long-standing practice for Sinn Féin, both the UUP and SDLP have extended invitations to members of the wider community to attend meetings and express their views. Perhaps the most interesting development concerning 'policy outsourcing' is that affecting membership classification. Three of the five parties now afford 'supporters' a role in the policy process alongside formal members.

The high degree of 'policy outsourcing' in Northern Ireland is perhaps inevitable given the parties' small membership size. Producing representative policy is difficult given their weak social roots in the form of official membership. Collectively, members of the main political parties account for approximately just 6.7 per cent of the Northern Ireland electorate.[7] As a result, parties appear to have adopted mechanisms designed to tap sentiment and engage actors beyond their formal organisations. From a participatory standpoint this is not necessarily

a negative development, as a key decision-making process is open to virtually anyone wishing to involve themselves. It does, however, raise potentially serious questions about the institutional integrity of the parties. If the views of supporters, focus groups, members of the public and external experts are privileged in the process, then legitimate concerns can be raised in relation to the meaning and value of conventional party membership. Of course, parties in Northern Ireland may experience greater pressures to 'outsource' when it comes to policy development. As outlined, a favoured condition of consociationalism is the capacity of party elites to consult with and engage 'followers' in their respective communities. Factional unity, a key ingredient of the consociational mix, is best achieved when parties enjoy extensive organisational 'depth' and when elites endeavour to 'explain their behaviour and persuade the masses' (Tsebelis, 1990: 8). Enjoying little in the way of 'depth' via formal membership (or through ancillary associations) and desirous to avoid accusations of being out of touch with those they represent, Northern Irish parties adopt a porous approach to their organisational parameters. Crucially, in an era where parties increasingly face accusations of illegitimacy and are viewed with growing levels of distrust (if not contempt) by citizens, the region's parties may continue with this pursuit to garner greater community 'buy-in' when formulating policy. Such a development may have serious ramifications for the issue of intra-party democracy and the concept of party membership.

Notes

[1] The survey was conducted in 2011 as part of the UK module of the Comparative Candidate Survey project. The combined response rate for the five parties in this study was 35.4 per cent. For further information see: http://ls-ewdsdnn.ces.strath.ac.uk/ukec/2011.aspx.

[2] Other accounts of the internal dynamics of the DUP have shown Special Advisors to play an active and influential (and primarily informal) role in the party's policy-making process (see Tonge *et al* 2014). These actors

are employed as aides to DUP ministers and several former advisors have moved directly into electoral politics. They could, therefore, be justifiably regarded as another strand of the DUP parliamentary party.

[3] At the time of the survey Alliance's parliamentary 'team' consisted of just one MP.

[4] The running order of conference, including the motions to be debated, is determined by the party executive (Ard Chomhairle).

[5] Specially convened conferences have been called to consider the party's support of the Good Friday Agreement (May 1998) and Policing and Justice in Northern Ireland (January 2007).

[6] Sinn Féin interviewees explained that focus groups are not conducted for purely policy development purposes. Focus groups are, however, used by the party's 'Elections Department' during campaigns.

[7] Author's calculation based on several sources. Membership figures are generally not disclosed by the political parties.

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