**William Cross. 2004. *Political Parties*. Democratic Audit.**

**Approach**

Structural-functionalism

**Thesis**

While Canadian political parties have increased democracy in their leadership elections, they do not provide members with a way to participate in policy development or national election campaigns. Also candidate nominations are being decided by organizational capacity, not policy, and parties are increasingly ignoring areas of the country where they are less popular.

**Contribution**

Systematic examination of democratic shortcomings within parties themselves limit the potential for participation and inclusion in the broader system of representative democracy.

**Key arguments**

* Parties perform policy development, candidate recruitment, leadership selection, campaigning.
* Some argue that participation in Canadian parties should be constrained to ensure that cleavages can be bridged through elite accommodation (e.g. Siegfried, 1904).
* Party systems are different federally and provincially, and people may have different loyalties.
* Parties may exist at only one level, and those with same name at both can actually be very different.
  + Liberals have separate organizations in four biggest provinces (e.g. Quebec and federal Libs very different, and only NDP (with the exception of Quebec) is the only party unified at all levels.
  + Different levels provides more points of access, and greater diversity of views.
  + However, splits efforts since citizens must join and fight to get policy adopted at each level.

*Party members*

* Two types of members: committed activists who are always members and those who join only for nomination or leadership selection (membership can rise by 200 to 300% during leadership selection).
* Few Canadians belong to a party – UK has 3 times the rate of membership.
  + Those who do join are disproportionately educated, old, white, men born in Canada.
  + Joining just takes paying a fee and filling out a form – even non-citizens and underagers can join.
  + Low membership may reflect lack of perceived benefit - 3 times more people think that joining an interest group is an effective way to shape policy than joining a party
* Women underrepresented in membership and decision-making posts
* NDP and Liberals have structures to promote participation by women, youth and minority groups.
* Federally only Liberals have a proportionate francophone membership,
* Most members join because of agreement with party policies, but few join to change them. 70% originally joined to support a particular leadership or nomination candidate

*Involvement of party members*

* Most spend less than 1 hour a month on party activities – 40% attended no event in the past year. No more active if the party has the seat, and newer parties (BQ & Reform) are less active than Liberals.
* Vast majority of members of all parties think they don’t have enough say on policy. Motions adopted at conferences usually ignored – even by NDP and PQ which claim to give more power to members.
* However, given unrepresentative nature of party membership, if grassroots had more power, the parties would be less responsive to the public at large.

*Party policy capacity*

* Significant problem is that parties have no capacity for policy development – focus only on elections.
* Most European parties have policy-institutes or close links with think-tanks. In Canada lack of policy development seen to come from lack of funding.
* Alliance close to Fraser Institute; NDP does have the Douglas-Coldwell Foundation.
* Main benefits of policy think-tanks are:
  + Vehicle for engaging party members in policy development
  + Generate policy ideas outside of the parliamentary party
  + Help the party make transition from opposition to government
  + Can examine issues without attracting media attention or risking a later back-track.
  + Can provide less partisan way for experts to advise the party
  + Reduce impact of leader by providing long-term cohesion to policy options.

*Candidate nomination*

* Nominations mostly locally controlled as trade-off for party discipline in parliament. However, party-leader has final approval of candidate.
* There can also be a tension between local control, with promotes participation and responsiveness, and central control, which promotes inclusion of women and minority candidates.
* More members take part in nominations than anything else, but still low as rate of eligible voters (about 2% of voters in a riding take part in one nomination or another, compared to 20% in the US).
  + Must be a member to take part, but since many join just to vote, fee is just a “poll tax”
* Many nominations are uncontested since 1) the party won’t win the riding; 2) incumbents are usually unchallenged; 3) the “closed nature” deters the candidate (e.g. Liberals often appoint star candidates)
* Instead of debates over policy, nominations depend on organizational capacity – who can sign up the most members. Most arrive at meeting already knowing who to vote for.
* Members of ethnic groups often signed up en masse to support a particular candidate.
  + Some say its illegitimate because it blocks views of long-time party members, but they are equally unrepresentative. Others say socializes new immigrants, but not clear how they are benefitting if they are instructed how to vote and don’t remain members.
* In 2000 80% of candidates nominated were male and less than 10% visible minority
  + Few women or minorities run - when women do run they do just as well as men.
  + Ridings with candidate search committees are 60% more likely to nominate women. However, visible minority groups often excluded from networks drawn upon in the search.
  + In winnable seats NDP saves 60% of nominations for women, 15% for candidates who “reflect the diversity of Canada.’ Other parties seen to have women running where party won’t win.
  + Hard for women and minorities to raise enough money – NDP provide support.

*Leadership selection*

* Prior to adoption of conventions in 1919 leaders were chosen by party’s MPs.
* Over time conventions became less dominated by party elite (old, white, wealthy, male) so that by 1980s 40% of delegates were women and 25% under 24.
* However, rising diversity meant more money spent to shape delegate selection – Chretien spent $3M.
* Direct elections seen 1) more accessible to grassroots than conventions; 2) give more meaningful participation; 3) treat all voters equally. Also more take part – 130,000 in 2003 Liberal vote.
  + First used at provincial level starting in 1980s, then by Reform and now spread to all others.
  + Can be by central convention, riding votes, phone, mail or internet.
  + Some give each riding an equal weight, NDP weights union members – distorts one person, one vote, but ensures greater regional balance.
  + Usually limit voters through a voting fee ($5 to $45 on top of membership) and membership cut-off date. Fee justified to recover technology costs, but can hurt turnout.
  + Some want vote limited to long-time members, but hard to justify leaders’ important public role.
  + Also direct election prevents deliberation between those from different regions and backgrounds as was possible at convention.
* Liberal hybrid model seeks balance –members in each riding to determine what proportion of riding delegates will be selected for each leadership candidate. Delegates must vote for that candidate on first round. Has benefit of mass participation for first round and collective decision making thereafter.

*Election campaigning*

* Constituencies expected to fundraise between elections to pay for own campaign and help nationally
  + Very few have paid campaign staff – rely on volunteers from personal networks.
  + Central campaign offers training to volunteers and candidates. Expected to support party policy.
  + Use of IT in campaigns is having a centralizing effect.
* National campaigns dominated by elites and professionals, grassroots only at constituency.
* National campaigns concentrate resources in winnable areas, regionalizing campaign strategies and discourses and transforming elections into regional contests (e.g. NDP vs. Con in Saskatchewan).
* Regionalization reduces building of national consensus, and uncompetitive ridings ignored.

*Campaign finance*

* Goal of regulation to prevent corruption, ensure equity between parties, and make system accessible to all. Some want no limits preferring only disclosure instead.
* Disclosure has problems in Canada since it occurs post-election.
* In 2000 federal parties spent as much on advertising as Tim Horton’s.
* In Canada equality and access provided by public subsidy to parties, refund of election expenses, some free radio/tv time, as well as spending limits for each constituency and the national campaign.
* When new funding system introduced predicted 90% of party spending would be taxpayer funded. This could reduce their responsiveness to voters.
* System of giving refund of candidate expenses after election is problematic since only those getting 10% of the vote receive refund and money must be spent up front, favouring established parties.

*Suggested reform*

* Open nomination and leadership contests to the general public
* Involve the grassroots more in policy development (especially through policy foundations)
* Finance reform to encourage fundraising through small amounts from individuals
* Proportional representation to keep parties from ignoring less competitive areas.