

The Labour party, Momentum and the problem with intra-party democracy

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*The Momentum movement and the rise in Labour membership are, Jeremy Corbyn's supporters argue, proof that the party is returning to its roots and embracing ordinary people's concerns. But political scientists tend to be sceptical about intra-party democracy, because party members are usually more radical than the average voter. **Fabio Wolkenstein** says claims that Labour has reconnected with its "working-class core" are problematic, not least because the working class do not necessarily tack to the left – and indeed many have been attracted to Ukip.*



A Corbyn supporter takes a selfie during the March for Refugees in September 2015. Photo: [Garry Knight](#) via a [CC-BY 2.0 licence](#)

Political scientists working on political parties tend to be [sceptical about intra-party democracy](#). Many take it for granted that there is a trade-off between empowering the members on the ground and appealing to the wider citizenry. A party can be internally democratic or electorally successful, but not both at the same time. The reason is that party members are usually politically more radical than the average voter, so that implicating them in internal decision making will shift a party's ideological profile to the extremes, away from positions that a majority of citizens might endorse. In the end, this diminishes the capacity of parties to perform their representative functions.

This argument is far from new, but it has come into public view again in the context of Jeremy Corbyn's recent re-election as leader of the Labour party. Much of the debate around Corbyn's leadership has focused on the question of whether or not his proposed "[democratic revolution](#)" in the Labour party will reduce Labour's capacity to win elections. According to many observers of British politics, and certainly for those within the party who oppose Corbyn's leadership, increasing the extent to which the so-called "Corbynistas" — in particular the growing [Momentum](#) movement — can exercise control over the party is bound to marginalise the party electorally, rendering it unattractive for the more moderate voters whose trust the party must win in order to secure a majority in general elections.

The argument that parties cannot be internally democratic and win elections is only as strong as the accuracy of its empirical presumptions. Suppose party members are not sectarian radicals but responsive to the concerns of the wider public, or that activists manage to change the hearts and minds of large numbers of previously uncommitted voters — when that is the case, enhancing intra-party democracy does not lead to radicalisation and undermine the party’s electability. Quite the opposite: if party members manage to build sustainable coalitions with those who the party seeks to represent, giving them the opportunity actively to shape the partisan agenda can considerably strengthen the party’s credibility and representativeness.

Those sympathetic to Corbyn often defend his commitment to democratise the Labour party in precisely these terms: they appeal to the pressing need to reconnect with ordinary citizens and suggest that more internal democracy is the best strategy to achieve that. As one [commentator](#), Luke Savage, puts it:

“Not only has Labour become less representative of the communities that send its MPs to parliament, but the party’s increased professionalisation has actively disconnected it from their needs, wounding its long-term electoral prospects.”

Making the party more internally democratic, he continues, can finally end Labour’s “severance from a significant chunk of its social base,” putting working-class people who understand the demands and concerns of those the party seeks to speak for into the driving seat again.

It would be rash to dismiss this argument. To be sure, one should be cautious with celebrating the recent expansion of party membership as a sign that Labour has become the “[first mass party in the advanced capitalist world this century](#),” for if all it takes to count as a party member is a payment of £3, it is not entirely clear why an increase in membership figures would be a reliable indicator of public support, let alone signalling increased support from the “communities that send Labour MPs to parliament.” But there can be no doubt that Labour’s efforts to make partisan politics more accessible and democratic have inspired many hitherto passive citizens to engage in politics, and so contributed in important ways to reinvigorating the previously weak connection between the party and the public.

Yet the argument that more internal democracy can help Labour reconnect with its social base also has serious limitations. Most importantly, it overlooks that those who are usually considered Labour’s social base do not form a homogenous group with largely similar political preferences. What one might call the “working class” of our age is a deeply fragmented collective of people. For example, it is no secret that an increasing number of [older, white voters with few educational qualifications](#) support the political right, in particular UKIP, having been left behind economically and feeling disconnected from younger, more socially liberal left-wing elites. How making the Labour party more internally democratic could speak to those segments of the working class is very difficult to see. Ultimately, many of them feel so alienated from the left that they would not even toy with the thought of joining Labour.

There is a great danger that the response to this challenge will sound something like this: Labour’s internal democratisation simply empowers “good” working class people — plainly, those who are receptive to a left-wing political agenda — while there is in any case no point in engaging a dialogue with the “bad” working class people who hold socially conservative views, resent immigration and see UKIP rather than Labour as the “[party of work](#).” This is not an unusual position among the contemporary left: one might see it manifested, for example, in Labour members’ shouting “We don’t want Tories!” [at the recent party conference](#), in response to one speaker’s suggestion that Labour must win some Tory votes. But clearly this way of thinking won’t help ending Labour’s severance from its social base.

If the newly empowered Labour members are serious about reconnecting with those the party routinely claims to speak for, then they will have to aim at the kind of coalition-building work that intra-party democracy always requires if it is to serve a party’s credibility and representativeness. Specifically, they must invest their efforts and energies into finding a common language with those of their supposed “core” voters who are so disaffected with the left today.

Bridging the deep ideological gulf that separates current Labour activists from many older, white working class voters is of course not going to be easy. But it seems key to disproving the thesis that Labour cannot be internally democratic and electorally successful at the same time. And if Corbyn and his followers could achieve this, surely this would be a good thing for Labour. Perhaps it could also facilitate building coalitions within the party.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

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