

9 Why do political parties use democratic innovations for internal reforms?

The case of the Belgian French-speaking Christian Democratic party

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Introduction

In the past few years, democratic innovations have been experimented with in various old liberal democracies. Belgium has been a pioneer in the design and implementation of democratic innovations. Deliberative commissions and petitions have been integrated into the legislative process at the regional level (Macq and Jacquet, 2023). Participatory budgets have multiplied at the local level, and mini-publics, citizens' assemblies, and panels have equally burgeoned in the past few years (Vrydagh et al., 2020).

Parties have also progressively taken up this trend. It follows a first wave of internal party reforms that have pushed parties towards more inclusiveness in their decision-making processes, especially regarding the selection of their personnel (Aylott and Bolin, 2017; Cross and Katz, 2013; Gauja, 2016; Gherghina and Jacquet, 2023; Hazan and Rahat, 2010). The effects of these reforms are still being debated. The literature points to the tensions between a normative ideal of openness and reconnecting with the party grassroots on the one hand, and a more strategic reality of disintermediation of the party organisation, increased centralisation and leadership control (Garcia Lupato and Meloni, 2023; Junius and Matthieu, 2023), and plebiscitary form of internal decision-making logic (von dem Berge and Poguntke, 2017) on the other. This has pushed some scholars to promote a more assembly based model of intra-party democracy instead (Gherghina et al., 2020; Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein, 2017; Junius and Matthieu, 2023). Adopting talk-centric rather than voter-centric decision-making practices can empower supporters by providing them with the opportunity to engage “in inclusive mutual processes of reason-giving with the politicians” (Gherghina et al., 2023, p. 488). Yet the existing literature on the deliberative turn within parties has mainly focused on normative arguments as to why parties should follow the deliberative democratic ideal, while empirical studies of its implementation and the consequences on party dynamics remain more scarce.

This chapter fills the gap identified above by focusing on why party actors choose (or accept) to use democratic innovations to conduct internal reforms.

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More specifically, we focus on the incentives to use (or accept) these tools, from the perspective of the party actors. In doing so, we adopt a constructivist approach to understanding reform processes as we focus on actors' perceptions of the process and their reported motivations. This allows a more in-depth analysis of how party actors perceive the tension between two types of incentives: the normative incentives of openness and party legitimacy and of promotion of democratic innovations on the one hand, and the strategic incentives of centralisation and disintermediation on the other.

To explore this question, we focus on the Belgian French-speaking Christian Democrat party (cdH) and the internal reform process it launched in January 2020. The reform process was planned based on the use of a variety of deliberative and participative democratic tools open to all interested citizens. We mobilise several data sources to analyse this reform process: interviews with key party actors, non-participant observation at one event, party documents, and press reports.

Theoretical and analytical framework

The incentives for party elites to use democratic innovations as a tool in the internal reform process can be understood using insights from the literature on party reforms and the use of deliberative and participatory processes by parties.

Party reforms can be defined as processes of intentionally publicised change made by parties to their core features. These may involve technical and isolated changes, or be grouped into bundles that substantially modify the structures and practices of a party (Gauja, 2016; Legein, 2023). The classic approach to party reforms has been the rational choice approach, which sees party reforms as decided by a small number of rational party elites with control of the party resources, and which are made in response to various internal or external party shocks such as a change of leadership, electoral defeat, scandals, and so on (Harmel and Janda, 1994). In this view, party elites are self-interested and act according to a series of personal motivations or goals. By taking a constructivist turn, recent studies have nevertheless highlighted the importance of taking into account not just self-interest, but also the perceptions, ideas, and values of the actors involved in reform processes (Bell, 2011; Gauja, 2016; Legein, 2023; Luypaert and Legein, 2024). Party reforms result from complex and tension-prone bargaining processes between party actors whose perceptions of their political environment – and solutions to the challenges they face – matter a great deal (Deschouwer, 1992; Norris and Lovenduski, 2004). How actors perceive and construct their reality is likely to influence their position, the strategy they put in place to defend it, and ultimately the outcome of the process.

Existing research on party reforms also almost exclusively focuses on party elites and ignores the role of intermediate elites and the party on the ground as reform agents (Gauja, 2016). However dominant they may be, party elites still have to build coalitions of support that are strong enough to overcome the various barriers to change, such as bureaucratic entrenchment, safeguarding

of prerogatives, or grassroots dissent (Bale, 2012; Butler, 2021; Gauja, 2012). Accommodating other party actors' preferences would therefore be a sensible strategy for party elites in attempting to increase the likelihood of success of the reform process. For instance, existing research has emphasised how reform processes towards more inclusiveness in decision-making procedures have been met with scepticism or opposition by intermediate elites, who have perceived these reforms as threatening their role and position in the party (Gherghina and Jacquet, 2023; Junius et al., 2020). The perceptions of these party actors are therefore also important to take into account when analysing party reforms.

Party reforms can be carried out using various processes, including democratic innovations. The literature on democratic innovations and political parties is quite recent and still scarce (Gherghina and Jacquet, 2023). A series of works have identified the drivers for parties to support democratic innovations at the system level or within parties. First, ideology matters and left-wing parties are more supportive of democratic reforms aiming to give more power to citizens (Herzog, 2016; Lawrence, Donovan, and Bowler, 2009). Left-wing ideology is often associated with beliefs in equality and in more inclusive political processes (Rangoni et al., 2023). These beliefs are particularly strong among the Greens, who advocate for democratic innovations, reflecting post-materialist ideals and promoting a horizontal and grassroots form of political organisation (Junius et al., 2020).

Normative considerations are also put forward to defend the use of democratic innovations within political parties. Democratic innovations are, for instance, depicted as opportunities to educate party affiliates and citizens on specific topics, but also to enhance the legitimacy and quality of decisions: "Deliberation on policy issues would allow party members to see how the policy agenda set by parties for the broader society reflect their voices" (Gherghina and Jacquet, 2023, p. 499; see also Wolkenstein, 2016). Lastly, political parties may defend the use of democratic innovations for strategic reasons, in order to achieve their policy-seeking, vote-seeking, or office-seeking goals (Gherghina and Jacquet, 2023). For instance, democratic innovations could be a way to defend policy issues that are not on the political agenda, not supported by other party elites, or not achievable using representative channels. Indeed, Rangoni et al. (2023) show that MPs who are disadvantaged in terms of political resources and from opposition parties tend to be more supportive of democratic innovations, and thus of shifting power from elected politicians to citizens. Democratic innovations can also be supported in combination with a vote-seeking strategy, either structurally, such as the Agora party in Brussels (Junius and Matthieu, 2023) or the Danish party Alternativet (Gad, 2020), or with more *ad hoc* processes to gain visibility, strengthen party leadership, or reconnect with voters, for instance in the informal deliberation of the Spanish PSOE in 2015–2017 (Barberà and Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020), or within Demos in Romania (see Gherghina and Stoiciu, 2020).

Internally, democratic innovations can also be guided by the incentive to reconnect and regain membership. This is a classic strategic motivation for

reform processes (Gauja, 2016). Members are still seen by political leaders, particularly those of mainstream parties, as a vital link between political elites and society and a source of democratic legitimacy. The key question, though, remains whether membership should be increased, strengthened, or both through party reforms. Democratic innovations can also be supported by party elites to circumvent intermediate elites and reinforce the centralisation of power. Party research has documented how western European political parties have made their decision-making processes, such as leader or candidate selection, more inclusive of their grassroots (Cross and Pilet, 2015; Gherghina and Stoiciu, 2020; Hazan and Rahat, 2010). Recent studies have also shown how parties increasingly rely on digital participatory tools in key areas (García Lupato and Meloni, 2023; Mosca and Vittori, 2023). These strategies have often led to greater control for party elites through centralisation and disintermediation (Gherghina et al., 2020).

In line with the literature, we opt to focus beyond top party elites and also include representatives of the intermediate elite in our understanding of the reform process. We give special attention to how these actors perceive the process and their reported motivations. Furthermore, we focus on the tension between two types of incentives: the normative incentives of openness and legitimacy, and of the promotion of democratic innovations on the one hand, and the strategic incentives of centralisation and disintermediation on the other.

Chronology and dynamics of the processes

This contribution focuses on the case of the Belgian French-speaking Christian Democratic party (*Centre démocrate humaniste*, cdH) and its two-year-long (2020–2022) internal reform process that mobilised deliberative and participatory tools. The chronology of the process was traced back using internal party materials, especially the party magazine *L'Oranger* (see the list in Appendix 9.1) as well as coverage in the national French-speaking newspaper *Le Soir*, cross-checked with interviews with party actors (see Appendix 9.2).

The cdH played a significant role in Belgian politics given its central and pivotal position on the political spectrum. It was actively involved in all national coalition governments from 1958 to 2014 (except for the period 1999–2007). With increasing secularisation, the party struggled to assert a distinct ideological identity in relation to its direct competitors (Pilet and Rangoni, 2021). It abandoned all reference to its Christian roots in 2001, but could not clearly be identified as the owner of any other clear issue. Its main feature had become being a serious and reliable governing partner. After years of electoral erosion, the European, federal and regional elections in May 2019 put the party's support at a historic low. The party leader, Maxime Prévot, who had been voted in January shortly before the elections by a coronation vote of 85%, rapidly announced that the party would not be seeking to be part of any government. He also quickly decided to launch a reform process. An external shock (electoral defeat) and an internal opportunity (change of leader) are

Appendix 9.1 List of party materials and archives

<i>Media</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Date of publication</i>
L'Oranger	Et c'est parti pour un processus de vitalité inédit!	January 2020
L'Oranger	Quel est mon rôle et les coulisses du mouvement	March 2020
L'Oranger	Il Fera Beau Demain, à travers le temps	January 2022
L'Oranger	Continuons de rêver ensemble	March 2020
L'Oranger	Prendre soin de soi et des autres, c'est un projet de société	June 2020
L'Oranger	Continuons à dynamiser le projet, tout en le nourrissant!	June 2020
L'Oranger	Consultation sur la gouvernance interne du futur mouvement politique	December 2020
L'Oranger	Chantier ouvert: définissons l'organisation future de notre parti politique	April 2021
L'Oranger	La campagne participative – qu'est-ce que c'est?	September 2021

Appendix 9.2 List of interviewees

<i>Interview number</i>	<i>Position before 2022</i>	<i>Position at the time of the interview</i>	<i>Interview date</i>	<i>Interview location</i>
11	Party leader	Party leader	21/11/2022	Office – Namur
12	Leader's special advisor	Leader's special advisor	30/09/2022	Party HQ – Brussels
13	Political advisor	Political advisor and leader of party's youth movement	22/11/2022	Party HQ – Brussels
14	Private sector	VP	18/10/2022	Party HQ – Brussels
15	Subnational MP	VP and subnational MP	02/12/2022	Party HQ – Brussels
16	Anonymous	Anonymous	17/10/2022	Coffee House – Brussels
17	Member	VP local section	13/10/2022	Party HQ – Brussels
18	MP	MP	09/12/2022	Parliament – Brussels
19	Subnational MP	Subnational MP	15/12/2022	Parliament – Brussels
110	Party official	Party official	01/12/2020	Online
111	Head of the Youth party branch	Member of another party and local councillor	08/05/2023	Online
112	High-ranking official	High-ranking official	24/05/2023	Party HQ – Brussels

classic triggers of reform as pointed out in the scientific literature (Harmel and Janda, 1994; Gauja, 2016). His decision was supported by most of the rest of the dominant coalition, who were also aware of the need to react and all in favour of his cause.

A couple of months later, Prévot announced at the annual Party Congress held on 11 January 2020 the launch of a year of reflection through a process

that should lead to the complete transformation of the party (Le Soir, 12 January 2020; *L'Oranger*, January 2020). The process was named “It will be sunny tomorrow” (*Il Fera Beau Demain* – IFBD). It was presented as a fully independent citizens’ movement that would have its own image and resources. The idea was to gather together all interested citizens to feed into a reflection about the organisational and ideological principles that should guide the new party, through an inclusive deliberative and participatory process.

Organisationally (see Figure 9.1), a pilot committee led by Laurent de Briey, a former collaborator of cdH ministers and close collaborator of the party, was set up to be formally autonomous from the party to oversee the process with the aim of concluding it in early 2021 (*L'Oranger*, June 2020). A support committee composed of local representatives, a handful of senior officials, representatives of the youth and senior branches, as well as current and former MPs, was meant to meet the pilot committee every month to discuss the progress of the process. The process was initially designed to be decentralised. 70 living area coordinators¹, mostly from local party branches (local party chairs, local councillors, members, etc.) were put in charge of coordinating the activities on the ground and reporting their outputs to the party headquarters, with the aim of providing continuity between major national events. Staff of local

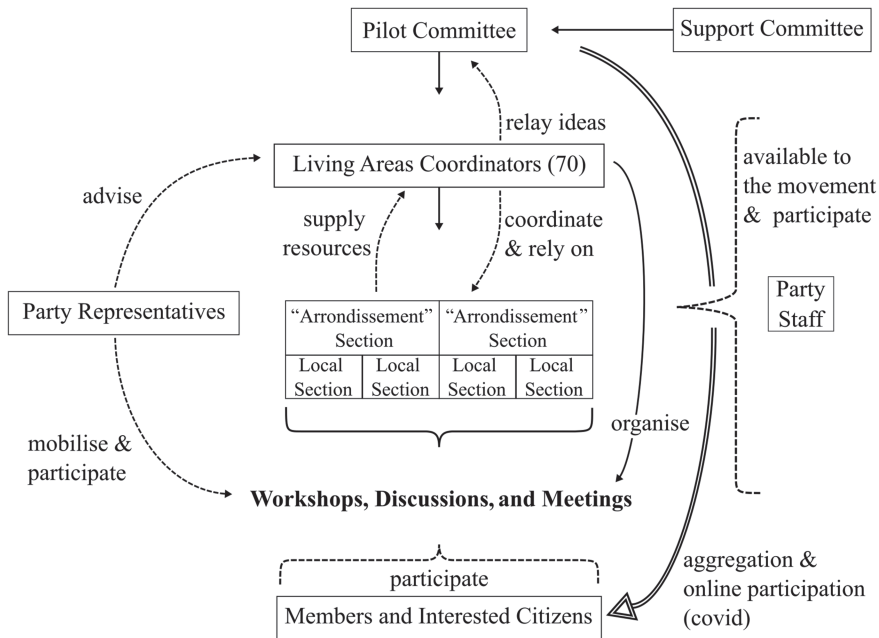


Figure 9.1 Organisation of IFBD.

Note: Dotted arrows refer to an action; solid arrows refer to an organisational link; double arrows refer to the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

and *arrondissement* party branches were intended to provide “financial, organisational, and administrative support to the coordinators” in the organisation of the activities (*L’Oranger*, March 2020). MPs and local representatives had two functions: advising the coordinators, and mobilising participants and actively participating in the activities organised in their constituency. They were also encouraged to translate the outputs of the activities into parliamentary initiatives whenever appropriate (*L’Oranger*, March 2020).

However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the party to reorganise the governance of the process towards a much more centralised process around the pilot committee. The party cancelled all in-person events, including the last three “dream parties” and a door-to-door campaign that had been scheduled, and organised online consultations and debates instead. Overall, the pilot committee took on a particularly central role during the first COVID-19 lockdown, from March to May 2020. The decentralisation ideal had to be buried in favour of a process combining aggregation and online participation.

Regarding the timeline and content, the process was initially planned over one year. The pandemic acted as a great disruptor and the process was extended to last for two years. Ultimately, the process was organised in four phases, punctuated by events implemented at the national level (see Figure 9.2). These moments were designed to bring party supporters together, stimulate the debate, synthesise their concerns, aspirations, and suggestions, and gradually lead them to settle the possible divisive issues that would have emerged from their debates (*L’Oranger*, January 2022).

In the first phase of the process (February–March 2020), four deliberative mini-publics (“dream parties”) were organised, inviting a total of 457 participants to “dream about” and then “decode the discussions about” seven themes decided by the pilot committee (i.e., My Earth, My Relatives, My Country, My Health, My Job, My Mobility, and My Solidarity) (*L’Oranger*, March 2020). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic shut down all forms of in-person activities and marked the end of the first phase.

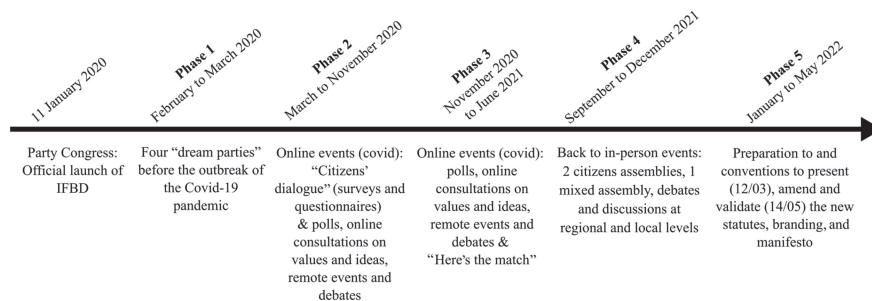


Figure 9.2 Timeline of the process.

Source: Adapted from *L’Oranger* (from January 2020 to January 2022) and completed by the interviews.

The second phase of the process (March–November 2020) consisted of a wide range of tools and types of activities to involve members in the process. First, three “Citizens dialogues” were organised via online aggregative tools available on digital platforms (mostly a website, “ilferabeaudemain.team”, but also a mobile App “If it was me” – *Si c’était moi?*): surveys, questionnaires on nine societal issues identified by the pilot committee (e.g., climate, digital, democracy, etc.), and consultations on intermediate syntheses resulting from the deliberative mini-publics. By May 2020, the platform had recorded 4,413 contributions and 12,006 votes on a wide range of issues. The participants (who were mostly male, as underlined in *L’Oranger*, calling for more women contributors) submitted on average 386 new issues per week which they thought society should look at more seriously and/or proposals to address them on the platform (*L’Oranger*, June 2020). Then, 14 online discussion sessions were held, opening a dialogue between 42 experts and a total of 183,000 spectators/participants. These sessions were moderated by the pilot of the process, Laurent de Briey. The content of the discussions raised a series of new proposals that were then posted on the online platform, as the basis for new online consultations on the values the future party should adopt (593 contributions, 2,756 votes, and 272 participants) or on participants’ trust in political institutions (753 participants). Finally, a participatory board game (“CreaVirus” – *CréaVirus*) was created “to stimulate and supervise discussions on issues between people locked down together” (*L’Oranger*, June 2020). Players of the board game were then invited to submit the outcome of their discussion on the platform so that the pilot committee could integrate them. There is no mention of how much the board game was used, or how many contributions on the platform came from its users.

The third phase (November 2020–June 2021) roughly followed the same path. Although lockdown rules had loosened by then, the participation of supporters began to wane. They were asked to position themselves on nine divisive issues arising from the initial stages of the process. They had to make informed choices based on videos presenting the contrasted opinion of two experts (labelled “Here’s the match” – *Y’a match*). Seven citizens’ workshops were also organised online, mobilising a total of 200 participants. New consultations were also launched on the platform, engaging 174 participants. In parallel, the living area coordinators were called to adapt to the context, familiarise themselves with the new digital tools put in place by the pilot committee, and launch online events in their *virtual geographical* area. Again, there is no mention of how active these virtual geographical areas were in the process. Finally, through the platform and the newspaper, the party invited members to offer their suggestions on the future internal organisation and name of the party (*L’Oranger*, December 2020 and April 2021).

The fourth phase (September–December 2021) started with the organisation of a Congress to present supporters with the initial results of the online consultations. A total of 77 local participatory events were organised, inviting 1,000 participants to take a position on 37 issues on which no consensus had

been reached during the previous online consultation phases. During these events, arbitration committees made up of experts chosen by the pilot committee were responsible for observing, analysing, and making recommendations based on the debates (*L'Oranger*, September 2021). Their recommendations were then submitted to a joint body made up of representatives from the living areas and the political bureau of the party, which was put in charge of making the final decisions on any unresolved issues. Deliberative walks were also organised locally. A conversation guide and an application were provided to living area coordinators and active supporters to help them to organise and supervise debates among small groups of neighbours. In addition, the cdH party leader Maxime Prévot and the pilot of the reform process Laurent de Briey organised citizens' debates on the values and organisation that the future party should adopt in each of Belgium's five French-speaking provinces, and in Brussels. Two mixed citizens' assemblies, one composed of 60 citizens and cdH elected representatives chosen by lot, and the other – held in residence – by young people interested in the process, completed this phase.

On 12 March 2022, Maxime Prévot announced the name, manifesto, and statutes of the party “The Engaged” (*Les Engagé.e.s* – LE) at a national Congress, thus *de facto* formalising the death of the cdH. A final period of consultation followed to give supporters and party representatives the opportunity to propose amendments to these final documents before their formal adoption by the Congress of the new party. On 7 May, a new meeting of the joint body composed of representatives from the living areas and of the members of the political bureau of the former cdH reviewed the amendments and decided whether to take them into account. 700 to 800 amendments were submitted, “many of which were worded in such a way that they could be incorporated straight away” (11). A small number of amendments were put to the vote at the founding Congress of *Les Engagé.e.s*. On 14 May, the Congress ratified the new statutes and manifesto, and Maxime Prévot called for internal elections to choose a party leader for the new party. On 22 June 2022, he himself was elected as party leader with 81% of the votes cast by the party members.

This description of the chronology and supervision of the process already emphasises a tension between the ideals of openness and decentralisation and the centralised reality reinforced by the context of the pandemic.

Analysis

In order to analyse the motivations behind mobilising deliberative and participatory tools to conduct the internal reform of the party, we relied on original data generated from 12 in-depth interviews with party actors involved in, or privileged witnesses of, the reform process (party leader and advisors, vice-president, national and regional elected representatives, party officials, heads of sub-organisations). The interviews were conducted between 30 September 2022 and 24 May 2023 (see the list in Appendix 0). The interview material was analysed using an inductive thematic analysis to identify and interpret emergent

patterns across the interview data. We inductively generated an initial code using the qualitative data analysis computer software NVivo 14, counting as a coding unit every group of words and (groups of) sentence(s) in which we identified a meaningful pattern. We then created (sub-)categories grouping similar codes. Finally, we identified the clearest and most illustrative quotes for each (sub-)category. To minimise potential reading bias, we used generic labels (e.g., I3 for Interviewee 3) when referencing them in the text. As stated in the theoretical section, we analysed this material through the lens of two main types of motivations: normative and strategic.

Normative incentive of openness for legitimacy purposes

One important motivation put forward by the interviewees behind the implementation of *Il Fera Beau Demain* was the need to revitalise and open up the party. For the party leader and his collaborators, IFBD was perceived as necessary to get things moving in the face of “the desire of certain historical people in the cdH to remain on familiar ground and not move forward”, the advantage being that “by getting a lot of people who were not in the cdH involved, it pushed things to move forward in the right direction” (anonymous).

This goal required a break away from the logic of “entre soi” (I2, I3, I8) and instead to “use the cdH’s remaining foundations to launch a political movement that started from a blank page [... without] being bound by the legacy of the past” (I2, supported by I12). Interviewees 8 and 12 confirmed that: “[IFBD] has been useful because it has tried to break down our self-referential world. It tried to seek out different, even divergent, voices”; “As I said, there was a fear of getting caught up [in habit] and becoming the same [party] again”. The underlying idea was to give the party back to citizens:

How can we ensure that people live better, that our party does better, if not by getting back into the habit of listening to the people. Accepting to be challenged by them, to be questioned, to be criticised by them, so that we can finally reset our programme.

(I1)

For the interviewees, there was a need to (re)mobilise and empower citizens through a large-scale movement breaking down the boundaries between activists, members, supporters, and interested citizens (I12). This openness was an indirect way to increase the legitimacy of the process by including those who would eventually make up the new party’s grassroots and make them responsible for the outcome:

If we had simply proposed a manifesto [...], just coming out and saying: “here we are, now this is our new project”, I don’t think we would have been able to get the support of our former members. But the fact that we integrated them [in the reflection] by telling them: “here: we have

[that basis], but we are putting it in your hands, come and suggest what you want us to do with it”, it helped to get some good amendments to implement.

(I3, supported by I2)

This ideal of openness nevertheless clashed with a reality of the relatively low participation rates of interested citizens: “When you look at the pictures of the events [you can see that], among the 35 citizens, there were perhaps eight who were really, really, really citizens. Eight who had nothing to do with the cdH” (I11, confirmed by I6 and I5). The level of engagement waned even more over time (L’Oranger, January 2022), partly due to the pandemic, but the IFBD promoters also highlighted a more general difficulty in terms of reaching out and attracting new, more diverse profiles, acknowledging that:

“We probably were not able to reach as many people – and involve as many people from outside the party – as we had initially hoped” (I1, confirmed by I5); and that “Seen from the inside, the problem was less the political project than an internal apathy, a form of internal demobilisation. [...] essentially passive activists and, therefore, a low capacity for mobilisation”.

(I2, confirmed by I6)

Normative incentive of promotion of democratic innovation

The process was thought of as an experimentation of democratic innovation. Party actors presented it as a new methodology to be tested and then integrated into the new party in the form of a wider and constant participative and deliberative process designed to reach out to public opinion beyond the party’s “affiliated member”:

The new methodology we have adopted is designed to ensure that the process of renewing our ideas and positions remains permanent. Each year, a convention will be convened with the power to deepen or update pre-defined parts of the party’s manifesto.

(I1)

The reform process was thus conceived as an opportunity to institutionalise a new way of doing politics in the new party by including a deliberative body made up of supporters in its new organisational structure:

it was important for us to have this participatory aspect. To really get feedback from civil society, from citizens, and to say that we can no longer work without consulting. So, without that, we would not have become Les Engagées.

(I5, supported by I1 and I10)

In other instances, “we could see that we had some great people with lots of good ideas [within the party]. Yet we had no choice but to open to others and try to find out why it had not worked for us in 2019” (I7, supported by I8 and I12).

The interviewees put forward a strong motivation to move away from what they described as an obsolete way of doing politics, which was too pyramidal, vertical and centralised (I1, confirmed by I11). In contrast, the IFBD promoters opposed a radical and innovative model of openness to civil society (I3, I8, I10).

“[The party leader] talked about the fact that the party was going to integrate into the XXI^e century and that we should work towards more participation, something less pyramidal.” (I11, confirmed by I12); “And I was all the more convinced that this was necessary because [...] I deeply believe that traditional party models are exhausted, have become obsolete. That people no longer believe in them, that there is far too much verticality.” (I1); “ [...] the problem of a party organisation that has become too top-down, too centralised, is highlighted very, very strongly [by public opinion]”.

(I2)

At the same time, the interviewees expressed considerable doubt as to whether the process really had brought about change and influenced the final product. Some denounced a strategic use of the ideas put forward by citizens “for marketing purposes” (I6), pointing to a form of *cherry-picking* of ideas which were compatible with what the promoters of the process had already planned in advance:

“Now, are there really any new fundamental ideas coming out of this? Frankly, I am not really sure. I would say not. I think it was more the work with the experts that did bring something, but the whole participative aspect, the collective intelligence tools used, etc., I did not get the impression that there were a lot of new ideas [coming from there].” (I10); “So I do not think there was a single idea that came out that was not [...] compatible with the pilot’s ideas. So, I do not think [its plans] were shaken by a citizen at any point during the process”.

(I11)

Even the promoters of the process pointed out in the interviews that the IFDB was an instrument designed not so much to “formulate” new party reforms as to “correct” those which were initially contemplated: “It led to some good amendments which sometimes helped to correct certain things” (I3); “[...] even though we already had our sensibilities” (I7); “I did all the summarising myself to make sure there was something there. But honestly, there was no debate, there were no things that necessarily came from outside”. (I6)

A strategy of centralisation and disintermediation

However, this rebranding of the organisation as a more fluid and open movement came in opposition and tension with more strategic motivations for its promoters. Behind the façade of IFBD (I6, I11), a battle for organisational control was being waged.

The party leader and the head of the pilot committee kept a tight and centralised control over the process. Former party officials denounced the extremely vertical decision-making logic that ran through IFBD. Members of the parliamentary party group expressed a feeling of being “robbed” (I6), with some going so far as to announce their withdrawal from political life shortly after the launch of the new party:

“There was a complete disconnection [...] with all the MPs in the party. In this desire to be able to reinvent everything, to dare to go off the track, to want to reach out to the citizen, the cursor was placed 100% on the citizens. The party’s executives were clearly sidelined.” (I4, confirmed by I8, I9 and I11); “Nobody really had a role to play objectively. [...] even in a small role of advising, analysing, and proposing [recommendations]. We were not consulted at all on the final [decisions]”.

(I6, partially confirmed by I12, who spoke of a “very late consultation of MPs’ views”)

From the start, Prévot single-handedly appointed Laurent de Briey to lead the reform process via the pilot committee. By appointing the head of the pilot committee, the party leader freed himself from the constraints of *persuasion* and *bargaining* usually associated with reform processes (Legein 2023), while at the same time keeping *control* over it via his close collaborator. This appointment was not particularly well received by prominent figures in the party, who saw it as a very top-down decision, not a collegial one, and hence not legitimate. The work of de Briey was criticised for the same reasons. This created important frictions, especially with influential figures from the parliamentary group:

[it] was entrusted to a single person who was not elected at all, who was a former collaborator who took the transformation process as his personal project. He led it by speaking in the media as if he was the party leader. As if he was expressing a collective project but he did not consult the others. He worked largely in isolation, not giving any draft of the project to anyone, even the most responsible politicians.

(I6)

The party leader and the head of the pilot committee also took advantage of the process to exclude the historical faces of the party through a process of disintermediation facilitated by the setting up of a participatory and deliberative process external to the party organisation: “It was really thought of as a spin-off of the party. Something from the cdH but completely separate, even

though we had access to the party's resources". (I12, confirmed by I11 and echoed by I10)

The composition of the pilot committee irritated the MPs, who only had rare opportunities to discuss ideas and proposals with it. The pilot committee was perceived as more interested in "coaxing" them than giving them "drafts to discuss, to amend" (I11). But, for the pilot committee, this was also a matter of ensuring "the search for a good balance between, on the one hand, ensuring a place for outsiders and, on the other, bringing parliamentarians on board and keeping them involved" (I12). On that, Interviewee 12 reported that:

even from a very practical point of view, I have spent a lot of time thinking and discussing how we were going to ensure the participation of one MP per group of ten citizens without [that MP] monopolising the floor?

The setting aside of the parliamentary party group went beyond the reform process, as the proposed structure of the new party organisation actually disempowered the MPs. One interviewee mentioned that a party MP stormed out of a meeting room after a IFBD staff member presented the project of new party organisation. Interviewees indicated that the head of the pilot committee made significant efforts to "regain their trust" (I11), yet the MPs were never given the opportunity to negotiate the substance of the reform (I11, supported by I4).

Giving all the space to members and interested citizens was a way for the party leader and the head of the pilot committee to establish a direct link with the grassroots and to bypass not only the elected representatives, but also the intermediate elites (I3, confirmed by I4, I5, I11, and by direct observation of the Convention on 12 March 2022). This was reflected in the way in which IFBD was organised in practice, as explained by a close collaborator of the head of the pilot committee:

[The coordinators] were supposed to organise things on the ground, in their arrondissement branches. The idea was [to organise that], not at the level of the local sections, but at a higher level. We were trying to create a sphere for people living in the same [contextual realities]. But also, to free ourselves a little from the local structures dominated by the "good old" local branches leaders and so on.

(I12)

Discussion and conclusion

This chapter has analysed the incentives to use democratic innovations for internal reform processes within parties through the case of the reform process launched by the French-speaking Christian Democratic party cdH to transform itself into Les Engagés. The analysis relied on party materials, interviews with party actors, non-participant observation, and press reports.

The process-tracing of the reform in its chronology and design had already revealed some tensions between a design that relies on decentralisation and openness, while at the same time being piloted by a close collaborator of the party leader outside of the traditional decision-making channels of the party organisation. These tensions were confirmed by the interview material. Party actors all stressed the normative ideals of openness and the promotion of democratic innovations, but they also pointed to the fact that the party leader used these democratic innovations to circumvent traditional barriers to party change, such as bureaucratic entrenchment, the safeguarding of prerogatives, and grassroots dissent (Bale, 2012; Butler, 2021; Gauja, 2012; Harmel and Janda, 1994). The party leader and his close collaborators kept a tight rein on the whole process, steering its agenda and content and thereby reinforcing the disintermediation of the party, which was already marked by a strong centralisation around a small number of party elites (Pilet and Rangoni, 2021).

These tensions echo the classic tensions in internal reform processes highlighted in the literature (Bale, 2012; Gauja, 2016). The findings also indicate that assembly based models of democracy face the same challenges as plebiscitary forms of intra-party democracy. As one interviewee nicely summed up, “We wanted to create a horizontal movement; we became a vertical mini-party” (I6, supported by I8, I10, and I11). The use of deliberative and participatory tools went hand-in-hand with a reinforcement of leadership domination and centralisation ((Rangoni et al., 2023; Junius et al., 2020). This case therefore illustrates how democratic innovations can be used by a party leader to push internal reforms, first by removing intermediate elites from the process to avoid possible resistance, and second by delegating the difficult work of compilation, bargaining, and persuasion to a technocratic body.

Beyond the specific case under study, the analysis offers insights into the perceptions of actors and their motivations in a reform process. Theoretically, it contributes to the constructivist turn in the study of party reforms. If we want to fully understand the dynamics of internal reforms, we need to take the perceptions of party actors into account. Empirically, the chapter stresses the added value of qualitative methods in producing additional knowledge to understand the use of democratic innovations within parties.

Note

- 1 These areas, later institutionalised in the new party statutes, group together several intermediate party branches (arrondissements), which in turn group together several local party branches (Legein & van Haute, 2021).

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