

# Chapter 3

## Political parties: structure



### Key questions answered in this chapter

- What is a political party?
- What role do parties perform in the UK system?
- How are the main UK parties organised?
- How internally democratic are the main UK parties?
- How are the main UK parties funded and why is party funding so controversial?

### What is a political party?

**Political parties** are groups of like-minded individuals who seek to realise their shared goals by fielding candidates at elections and thereby securing election to public office.

Most conventional UK parties would ultimately aim to emerge victorious at a general election, and thereby earn the right to form a government at Westminster. In this respect, parties differ significantly from **pressure groups**, for while some pressure groups employ electoral candidacy as a means of raising public awareness of their chosen cause, they generally have little interest in, or prospect of, being returned to office.

#### The origins of modern UK parties

Before the Great Reform Act of 1832, UK parties existed not as mass-membership organisations with formal structures outside of parliament, but as groups of like-minded individuals within the legislature, bound together by shared ideals, friendship or family ties. With electoral reform came the need to organise in order to mobilise the growing electorate. It was at this point that UK political parties as we know them today began to emerge.

## Political parties and pressure groups

Distinguish

between

### Political parties

- Political parties tend to offer a broad portfolio of policies informed by a guiding ideology.
- The main UK political parties have open membership structures and are therefore inclusive.
- Political parties contest elections with a view to securing control of governmental power.
- The main UK parties are highly organised and offer their members an input into key decisions through formalised rules and procedures.

### Pressure groups

- Pressure groups generally pursue a narrower cause or sectional interest.
- Many pressure groups — particularly sectional groups — are more exclusive in their membership.
- Those pressure groups that field candidates in elections are generally doing so simply as a means of raising their profile.
- Even the larger, more established pressure groups are often dominated by a small leading clique and few pressure groups display high levels of internal democracy.

### Different types of political party

#### Mainstream parties

UK politics is dominated by three main political parties: the Conservative Party, which emerged from the Tory group within parliament in the mid-nineteenth century; the Labour Party, formed by trade unions and socialist organisations at the start of the twentieth century; and the Liberal Democrats (Lib Dems), which came into being as a result of the merger between the Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1988.

#### Nationalist parties

Nationalist parties look to nurture the shared cultural identity and language of those indigenous to a given geographical area — whether a ‘nation’, as in the case of the Scottish National Party (SNP), or a region, as in the case of Mebyon Kernow (‘Sons of Cornwall’). While some nationalist parties campaign for full independence for their region or nation (e.g. the SNP in Scotland), others do not (e.g. Plaid Cymru in Wales). The British National Party is different from most other nationalist parties in that it campaigns in support of the way of life and values that it claims are common to all indigenous UK peoples.

#### Single-issue parties

Recent years have seen a rise in the number of single-issue parties contesting elections in the UK. In some cases these parties offer a wide-ranging programme of policies rooted in a particular ideological perspective (e.g. the Green Party). In other cases, these smaller parties campaign on a particular issue (e.g. UKIP on the UK’s role in the European Union), or even a specific policy (e.g. the Pro-Life Alliance on abortion and

embryology). Recent elections have also seen the rise of local single-issue parties such as the Independent Kidderminster Hospital and Health Concern Party, whose candidate Dr Richard Taylor won the Wyre Forest constituency at both the 2001 and 2005 general elections.



Caroline Lucas became the Green Party's first MP at the May 2010 general election

In many cases, such single-issue or ideological parties blur the boundary between political parties and pressure groups, as their primary goal is to raise awareness of a particular issue as opposed to winning an election and/or securing power (see Box 3.1).

**Box 3.1 The Green Party: political party or attitude cause group?**

It is possible for one or more pressure groups to evolve into a political party. A good case in point is the Green Party. Known prior to 1985 as the Ecology Party, the Green Party's origins can be found in a pressure group called 'People' that was formed in 1973. Although the Green Party itself initially appeared to be little more than a glorified single-issue group, it has developed a broader range of policies in recent years in an effort to improve its electoral prospects.

**The growing appeal of minority parties**

It is significant that the membership of many nationalist and single-issue parties has risen at the same time that mainstream parties have continued to haemorrhage members (see Table 3.1). Some argue that this is a function of the way in which the main UK parties have moved towards the centre of the political spectrum in recent years, thereby leaving some voters feeling unrepresented. Support for such minority parties at the ballot box may also reflect the fact that

Table 3.1 Individual party membership for the BNP, Green Party, SNP and UKIP (000s)

Year	BNP	Green	SNP	UKIP
2002	3.1	5.9	16.1	10.0
2003	5.5	5.3	9.5	16.0
2004	7.9	6.3	10.9	26.0
2005	6.5	7.1	11.0	19.0
2006	6.3	7.0	12.6	16.0
2007	9.8	7.4	13.9	15.9
2008	11.8	8.0	15.1	14.6

Source: John Marshall, *Membership of UK Political Parties*, House of Commons Library, 2009.

they provide an obvious vehicle for those looking to send a message to government or the main opposition parties by casting a protest vote.

### Weblinks

[www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/briefings/snsg-05125.pdf](http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/briefings/snsg-05125.pdf) – the relevant Standard Note from the House of Commons Library.

### The UK party system

Despite the rise of the Liberal Democrats and other smaller parties in recent years, most commentators still characterise Britain as a **two-party system**.

However, not all nations operate under a two-party system.

#### Single-party systems

In a single-party system, one party dominates, bans other parties and exercises total control over candidacy at elections — where elections occur at all (e.g. in Nazi Germany or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)).

#### Dominant-party systems

In a dominant-party system, a number of parties exist but only one holds government power (e.g. Japan under the Liberal Democratic Party between 1955 and 1993).

#### Multi-party systems

In a multi-party system, many parties compete for power and the government consists of a series of coalitions formed by different combinations of parties (e.g. Italy between 1945 and 1993).

### Key term

> **Two-party system** Where two fairly equally matched parties compete for power at elections and others have little realistic chance of breaking their duopoly.

## Viewpoint Is Britain a two-party system?

YES

- The Labour and Conservative parties are the only parties that have a realistic chance of forming a government in the near future, or at least of being the senior partner in a coalition.
- Even in 2010, the Labour and Conservative parties secured 65.1% of the popular vote and 86.8% of the 650 seats contested.
- The Liberal Democrats (in third) are still a long way behind the second-placed party.

NO

- 34.9% of voters backed parties other than the 'big two' in 2010.
- Although the Liberal Democrats are a third party, they are often second to Labour in the north and west and to the Conservatives in the south and east.
- In reality, different parts of the UK operate under different party systems. For example, in some parts of Scotland there is genuine four-way competition.
- Any party that could mobilise non-voters — 34.9% of registered voters at the 2010 general election — could win the election.

## The roles performed by UK political parties

It is said that political parties perform five main roles: providing representation; facilitating political participation; engaging in political recruitment; formulating policy; and providing stable government.

### Representation

Traditionally, parties were said to represent the views of their members. This was certainly true in an age of mass-membership parties when parties and voters were clearly divided along class lines. Partisan and class dealignment, accompanied by the rise of centrist 'catch-all parties', could be said to have undermined this primary role.

### Participation

Parties encourage political participation by encouraging citizens to engage with the democratic process and giving them the opportunity to exercise power within their chosen party. The quality of participation afforded to members is shaped largely by the extent to which political parties are themselves internally democratic. This is one of the key issues that we will be addressing in the second half of this chapter.

### Political recruitment

Parties play a central role in assessing the qualities of those who seek election to public office and casting aside those who are, for whatever reason, considered unsuitable. Parties also give those who will ultimately become the nation's leaders an opportunity to serve a political apprenticeship at a local level before 'graduating' to high office.

### Policy formulation

Parties engage in detailed internal discussion and debate before drawing their proposals together and presenting them to voters in a single coherent programme (i.e. their manifesto). It is argued that this process is likely to result in a more considered, 'joined-up' style of government than that which might emerge in the absence of political parties.

### Providing stable government

Without parties, it is argued, the Commons would simply be a gathering of around 650 individuals driven by their own goals and political ambitions. Parties present the voters with a clear choice at the ballot box and generally provide order following a general election by allowing a single party to form a government and secure the safe passage of its legislative proposals through the Commons.

## The organisation of the main UK parties

### Local and national level

#### Labour Party

Those who join the Labour Party are assigned to a local branch on the basis of their home postal address. These local branches are the lowest level of the party organisation.

They have a role in selecting candidates for local elections as well as sending delegates to the General Committee of the Constituency Labour Party (CLP). The CLP has a key role in organising the party at constituency level. It takes the lead in local and national election campaigns and plays a part in selecting candidates for parliamentary elections, although the extension of one member, one vote (OMOV) has diminished the role of constituency party leaders in favour of regular members.

The National Executive Committee (NEC) is the main national organ of the Labour Party. It enforces party discipline, ensures the smooth running of the party, oversees the preparation of policy proposals, and has the final say on the selection of parliamentary candidates. The party's annual conference was once the sovereign policy-making body within the Labour Party, although its role was diminished somewhat in the 1990s as we will see.

### Conservative Party

The Conservative Party has a similar structure to the Labour Party at the local level. Branches corresponding to local council wards operate at the lowest level. Above the local branches are the constituency-level Conservative Associations. These bodies play a key role in organising the party at the grassroots level, planning election campaigns, and selecting parliamentary candidates. As with the Labour Party, however, these constituency associations no longer have a free rein in selecting parliamentary candidates.

The national party is organised around the Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ) at Millbank, Westminster. The party's headquarters were previously referred to as Conservative Central Office.

### UK parties sitting in the European Parliament

UK members of the European Parliament (MEPs) traditionally sit in a number of transnational groups as opposed to a single UK block within the chamber. Following the UK elections to the European Parliament in 2009, the 25 Conservative MEPs elected sat with the newly formed European Conservative and Reformists (ECR) group, the 13 Labour MEPs sat with the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (PASD), and the 11 Lib Dem MEPs sat with the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE).

## Internal party democracy

Political parties seek to exercise control over our democratic institutions and it is therefore not surprising that considerable attention focuses on the extent to which parties are themselves internally democratic.

### Choosing and removing party leaders

One significant indicator of internal party democracy is the extent to which regular members are given an input into the process by which the party leader is chosen.

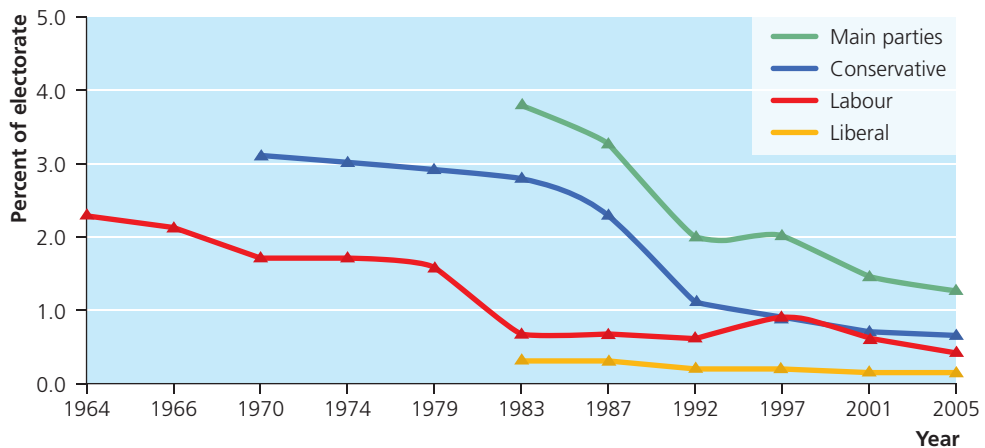
## Concepts explained

**Internal party democracy** A measure of the extent to which rank-and-file members have genuine power within a given political party. Three processes are commonly considered when assessing how internally democratic a political party is: the way in which leaders are chosen; the way in which candidates for parliamentary elections are selected; and the way in which party policy is formulated.

### Conservative Party

The current system for electing Conservative leaders was introduced in 1998 under William Hague, the Conservative Party leader at that time. Hague's successor, Iain Duncan Smith, became the first Conservative Party leader to be elected under the new system in 2001. Under the rules established by Hague, prospective candidates must be sitting Conservative MPs who take the party whip. They must also be nominated and seconded by fellow Conservative MPs. Once nominations close, a series of ballots is held among Conservative MPs, with the lowest-placed candidate in each ballot being eliminated, until only two candidates remain. Individual party members are then invited to choose between these two candidates in a run-off election by postal ballot.

The problem with the current system is that those in the parliamentary party can manipulate the final choice presented to rank-and-file members by voting tactically in the ballots of MPs. In 2001, for example, those on the right of the party deliberately switched their votes in the final ballot of MPs, with the effect of eliminating the early favourite Michael Portillo and presenting the rank-and-file members with a choice between their chosen candidate, the Eurosceptic Iain Duncan Smith, and the moderate Kenneth Clarke, a candidate whom Duncan Smith's supporters knew would not be able to defeat 'their man' in the ballot of individual party members.



Source: John Marshall, *Membership of UK Political Parties*, House of Commons Library, 2009.

Figure 3.1 Membership of the main UK parties as a percentage of the electorate, 1964–2005

Although it might appear sensible to offer individual party members the final say in such contests, doing so can prove problematic when the membership of all three main parties as a percentage of the electorate has contracted significantly in recent years (see Figure 3.1) and the members are themselves increasingly unrepresentative of the broader population. While Iain Duncan Smith was the clear favourite among Conservative Party members back in 2001, he proved singularly unable to capture the imagination of the broader electorate and was ultimately forced to resign by his own parliamentary party after just 2 years as leader. It was telling that individual members were effectively excluded from the process of electing Duncan-Smith's successor as a result of Michael Howard's unopposed 'coronation' as leader in 2003.

### Weblinks

[www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/briefings/snsg-05125.pdf](http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/briefings/snsg-05125.pdf) — membership of UK political parties from a House of Commons Standard Note.

### Labour Party

In the Labour Party, the party leader was once chosen by the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) alone, but since the 1980s leadership elections have operated under an electoral college system. In its present incarnation this electoral college is divided into three distinct sections, with one-third of the votes held by the Parliamentary Labour Party and the party's MEPs, one-third in the hands of **affiliated organisations** such as trade unions, and the final third being cast by **ordinary party members**. Since 1993 such contests have operated on a one member, one vote (OMOV) basis.

Those seeking to run for the post of leader must be nominated by at least 12.5% of the party's MPs where there is a vacancy and 20% of MPs where they seek to challenge the incumbent. If no candidate secures more than half of the votes cast on the first ballot, the rules state that further ballots must be held on an elimination basis until a clear winner emerges.

Although the system is obviously far more democratic than what went before it, rank-and-file members still have a fairly limited influence relative to individual MPs and the affiliated organisations. Indeed, individual members only have a say in the event that more than one candidate is able to secure the support necessary to validate their nomination. When Tony Blair stood down as party leader in 2007, Gordon Brown was

### Concepts explained

#### Affiliated organisations

Groups that are formally linked to the Labour Party without their members holding regular membership of the party. Most trade unions are affiliated to the Labour Party, as are many socialist societies such as the Fabian Society and the Cooperative Society. Their affiliate status means that they retain a degree of input into the development of party policy and the election of party officials such as the party leader.

## Ordinary party members and ordinary Members of Parliament

Distinguish  
between

### Ordinary party members

- The term 'ordinary party members' refers to individual members of a party or the 'rank-and-file' membership — those paid-up party members who do not hold senior positions within their chosen party at national level.

### Ordinary Members of Parliament

- These are Members of Parliament (also known as backbenchers) who do not hold front-bench responsibilities as a government minister, shadow minister or party spokesperson.
- Although every MP will be a paid-up member of his or her chosen party, a question on ordinary party members will normally be expecting you to focus on the issue of internal party democracy — rather than the influence of backbenchers in relation to those on the front benches and their party leader.

elected unopposed. In addition, it is now far harder than it once was to remove a Labour Party leader while the party is in government. This is because such a challenge can only proceed following a majority vote at the annual party conference.

### Liberal Democrats

The system by which the Lib Dems elect their leader is generally regarded as being the most democratic of the three main UK parties. Those wishing to stand must have the support of at least 10% of the parliamentary party and be nominated by no fewer than 200 members from at least 20 different local parties. The election itself then operates on an OMOV basis under a preferential, single transferable vote (STV) system — with losing candidates being eliminated and their votes transferred until one candidate commands the support of more than 50% of those members casting a ballot.

### Candidate selection

As we have already noted, a key role commonly attributed to political parties is political recruitment. It is argued that parties play a role in training potential candidates through their involvement in grassroots party activity. Potential candidates thus serve a kind of political apprenticeship within the party.

### Separating 'the wheat from the chaff'

The number of individuals wanting to be elected to parliament far exceeds the number of seats available in the Commons. Even within a given political party, one would expect to see a handful of willing candidates for every seat contested, hence the need for short-listing. Parties play a key role in separating the genuine contenders from the 'no-hopers'.

All three major parties have traditionally employed a similar three-stage process in selecting parliamentary candidates: first, hopefuls must get their names on to a centrally vetted and approved list of prospective candidates; secondly, the local party draws up a

shortlist from those approved candidates who have expressed an interest; and thirdly, constituency members vote for their preferred candidate, whether in person at a meeting or by postal ballot.

### Conservative Party

Traditionally, those seeking to represent the Conservative Party in parliamentary elections were subject to a tortuous and largely 'closed' process:

- First, prospective candidates had to get their names on to an 'approved' list of candidates by attending a formal interview before a panel.
- Secondly, they would have to apply to a constituency Conservative Association and succeed in getting their name on to a shortlist.
- Thirdly, they would need to garner the support of those party activists attending a constituency general meeting.

Even those candidates who were successful in securing the nomination of their constituency association by such means could still find their nominations vetoed by the national party's Ethics and Integrity Committee, established in the 1990s by the party leader William Hague. However, under the leadership of David Cameron the party looked to democratise the process of candidate selection further, first by introducing the so-called A-lists and later by trialling hustings and primaries.

### A-lists

Cameron's first initiative was the introduction of so-called 'A-lists': the requirement that Conservative Associations included women and those from ethnic minorities in their shortlists. This move was seen by many as an echo of the policy of women-only shortlists first employed by the Labour Party. The Conservatives' A-List scheme did not go as far as requiring local associations to select candidates from certain backgrounds; it merely forced them to draw up more socially diverse shortlists — in reality, many of those candidates ultimately selected still fitted the Conservative stereotype of white, middle-aged men.

### Hustings

Cameron's second innovation was the greater use of open hustings: events where local voters as well as paid-up, card-carrying local party activists were permitted to attend a meeting at which the assembled audience would be able to listen to and the pass their verdict on the prospective parliamentary candidates presented before them. Such hustings, sometimes referred to as primaries, had been used in around 100 contests by August 2009.

### Open primaries

Cameron's third innovation was by far the most dramatic, for August 2009 saw the Conservative Party select its official parliamentary candidate in the parliamentary constituency of Totnes by means of an open primary — a popular ballot in which all

registered voters (i.e. not just party members) have a hand in selecting the candidate who will run in the election proper. This was the first time that a major UK party had employed such a device in selecting a parliamentary candidate. Where the Totnes primary differed from the hustings used elsewhere was that participation was widened not simply by inviting non-members to attend a one-off meeting, but by the party sending out postal ballot papers to every one of the 68,000 registered voters in the constituency, at an estimated cost to the party of £38,000.

### Labour Party

Those wishing to become prospective parliamentary candidates for the Labour Party must first get their names on to the National Executive Committee's approved list. This list is forwarded to Constituency Labour Parties, which draw up a shortlist from those approved candidates who have applied. Constituency party members then select their preferred candidate under one member, one vote. The NEC can impose its own choice of candidate, even where the CLP has already made a selection. The choice of members has also been limited by the introduction of **women-only shortlists** in many of Labour's safer seats.

#### Key term

> **Women-only shortlists** Where a constituency party is required to draw up an entirely female shortlist from which their parliamentary candidate will be chosen. The practice existed in its original form between 1993 and 1996, before being briefly outlawed in 1996 in a ruling under the Sex Discrimination Act. The government subsequently amended the legislation, thus allowing all-women shortlists again. The use of such shortlists in many safe Labour seats was largely responsible for the significant increase in the number of women MPs returned to parliament at the 1997 general election.

At the 2005 general election, the independent candidate Peter Law was elected to represent the constituency of Blaenau Gwent, having been prevented from seeking selection as the official Labour Party candidate by the party's imposition of an all-women shortlist.

### Liberal Democrats

Because the Lib Dems operate under a federal structure, those wishing to become prospective parliamentary candidates for the party must first apply to their national party (England, Scotland or Wales). Those who pass this vetting procedure and become approved candidates can then apply to individual constituencies for selection. Those candidates short-listed by the constituency party go forward to a ballot of all party members in the constituency in question.

### The deselection and imposition of candidates

Although the constituency-level party in all three major parties is normally allowed the final say in selecting parliamentary candidates from the nationally approved lists, the

national parties do retain the ultimate power to deselect and impose candidates where they see fit. In 1986, for example, the Labour Party under Neil Kinnock deselected MPs Dave Nellist and Terry Fields for being part of the banned Militant Tendency. The Labour Party has also imposed candidates on constituencies from time to time: for example, parachuting the former Conservative MP Shaun Woodward in as the Labour candidate for the safe seat of St Helens South ahead of the 2001 general election. More recently, the scandal over MPs' expenses saw both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party moving to bar certain MPs from defending their seats at the 2010 general election.

### **Policy making**

#### Conservative Party

Until the late 1990s, Conservative Party policy was largely determined by the leader of the day. Although the party leader was expected to take on board the views of senior colleagues on the front benches, the 1922 Committee, party elders and the grassroots membership, it was an unashamedly top-down process. As John Major famously said of the party's 1992 general election manifesto, 'it was all me'.

In 1998 the system appeared to have been democratised somewhat as part of the then party leader William Hague's 'Fresh Future' initiative. This programme saw the creation of a national party Policy Forum alongside a number of other initiatives aimed at enhancing participation within the party. However, critics argue that these changes were more in appearance than in substance, for while the party's 2001 manifesto appeared to have been the product of greater consultation, the Policy Forum was downgraded under Iain Duncan-Smith and the 2005 manifesto was largely decided by party leader Michael Howard and advisers such as the party's Australian campaign consultant Lynton Crosby.

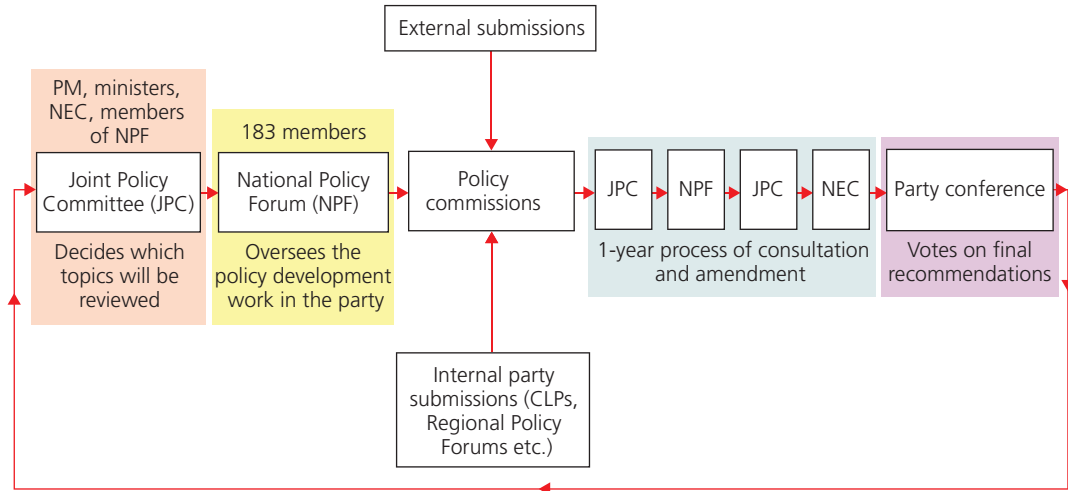
#### Labour Party

The Labour Party conferences of the past were genuine policy-making events. From 1997, however, the party adopted a 2-year policy-making cycle (see Figure 3.2). The National Policy Forum appointed policy commissions to make proposals which were then to be formalised in the National Executive Committee before passing to the party conference for approval. This afforded the party leader more control and helped the party to avoid the kinds of nasty surprises and public shows of disunity common at earlier party conferences. However, critics have argued that the reforms have seen the conference transformed from being a sovereign policy-making body, to little more than a rubber stamp for policies agreed elsewhere.

#### Liberal Democrats

The party is federal in structure, comprising English, Scottish and Welsh state parties with a number of organisational tiers below each national party. What this means in

practice is that policy that will only affect Scotland, for example, will be developed by the Scottish party and confirmed at the conference of that party. Policies affecting England and the whole of the UK are dealt with at the main national conference — the Federal Conference — which meets twice-yearly. This conference is the supreme policy-making body of the party, but it spends most of its time considering proposals from the Federal Policy Committee, state parties, regional parties and local parties. The party leadership's influence over the Federal Policy Committee allows them to steer policy, at least to a degree.



Source: Webb, P. (2000) 'Political parties: adapting to the electoral market' in P. Dunleavy et al., *Developments in British Politics 6*, Macmillan Press.

Figure 3.2 Labour's 2-year rolling policy-making cycle

### Striking the right balance on policy

Although many political parties are keen to involve their ordinary members in the formation of party policy, they are painfully conscious of the fact that they need to have policies that appeal beyond their immediate rank-and-file if they are to have any chance of being returned to office. In an age of mass-membership parties, the views of members might have been a fair indication of how the broader public would react to a given policy. In the modern era, however, party membership is falling and those who do join are increasingly unrepresentative of the broader population. In this context, allowing regular members to determine policy could amount to electoral suicide.

While the Liberal Democrats are widely seen as having the most democratic method for determining party policy, some argue that some of the policies adopted in the past — for example, on cannabis possession, asylum seekers and the local income tax — were rather too easily picked off by Labour and Conservative activists during general election campaigns.