

# Level of Internal Democracy in Political Party Primaries in the 2017 and 2022 General Elections in Kirinyaga County, Kenya

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## ABSTRACT

This study assessed internal democracy in political party primaries in the 2017 and 2022 general elections in Kirinyaga County, Kenya. This study was anchored on two complementary theories namely; classical elite theory and the theory of parties. The classical elite theory argued that although a political party has a semblance of mass participation it is under the control of small elites who select members to represent the party at the larger level. This study took the form of an exploratory research design. This study utilized a combination of primary and secondary data collection methods. A sample of 400 individuals was chosen for field interviews. Questionnaires were distributed to 360 regular party members, encompassing men, women, and youth. This group of respondents was identified using random probability sampling. Additionally, interview schedules were conducted with 40 participants, which included party officials, experts, IEBC officials, observers, and primary candidates. This group was selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The data gathered was analyzed and interpreted using both quantitative and qualitative methods. This study noted that lack of political party institutionalization and weak political party structures result in lack of internal democracy that undermined party primaries in Kirinyaga County, Kenya.

## INTRODUCTION

Researchers have identified two primary systems for conducting political party primaries in these mature democracies: open and closed systems. Rowena (2001) and Alcántara and Freidenberg (2001) highlight the example of the United States, where the entire electorate, including those not affiliated with any party, is permitted to participate in the selection of candidates during party primaries before an election. In this scenario, it is the electorate, rather than the party organization, that decides which candidate will represent the party in the general election. Conversely, the British system of party primaries follows a closed model, where participation is typically restricted to party members, excluding individuals who are not affiliated with the party from the voting process.

Political parties in emerging democracies have established processes for nominating candidates during party primaries (Oduor, 2016). Dodsworth (2022) points out that the National Democratic Congress (NDC) in Ghana, which historically restricted candidate selection in primaries to a few hundred individuals, initiated reforms in 2015 that allowed all party members to participate in the nomination process. This approach stands in stark contrast to that of the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) in Tanzania, which relies on extensive consultations and consensus (Simba, 2011; Kolumbia, 2020). In Kenya, the major coalition parties utilized consensus to select their presidential candidates during the general elections of 2013, 2017, and 2022.

The democratic characteristics of political party primaries in Africa's emerging democracies have been examined. Salih (2013) provides a historical analysis of African political parties, revealing how clientelist politics undermine accountability and responsiveness within these organizations. Gambo (2007) and Kura (2008) note a lack of internal democracy in Nigerian political parties concerning candidate selection for elective offices. Moreover, Okafor (2015) emphasizes that clientelistic networks and the issue of 'godfatherism' significantly influence the success of candidates in party primaries. Additionally, Alexander and McGregor (2013) suggest that party primaries often reflect the preferences of party leadership rather than those of the general electorate.

Tsubura (2015) documents of strong clientelistic networks characterized by exchange of goodies for political support in party primaries Tanzania. Similar observations have been noted in Kenya where lack of internal party democracy as a consequence of institutional shortcomings that create conducive environment for the monopolization and patronage of political party activities (Wanjohi, 1997; Maiyo, 2008). Influential party figures ensure the election of their preferred candidates (Bosire, 2010; Simba, 2011). Concerns regarding the transparency of political party primaries in Kenya have been raised by Mbai (2003) and Wanyande (2003). Subsequently, the candidates chosen to represent their parties in general elections have diminished the importance of primaries, reducing them to mere formalities.

Kirinyaga County has witnessed intense political competition among candidates in various elective positions in party primaries in the 2017 and the 2022 general elections. In the 2017 general elections the dominant political parties were Jubilee Party (JP), Nark –Kenya (N-Kenya) In spite of the above there exists no specific study on party primaries in Kirinyaga County. Little attention has been given to political party primaries in Kirinyaga County despite the significant role that parties play in leadership selection process, shaping the legislature and influencing the quality of democracy in the country which organizes sham elections characterized by violence and other malpractices rather than intra-party competition.

Literature examined regarding internal democracy indicates that political party primaries often do not adhere to the stipulations outlined in the party constitution. The party leadership tends to manipulate the process, determining the outcomes and rendering the primaries little more than a superficial exercise. While the reviewed literature provides valuable insights, it fails to specifically address the context of party primaries in Kenya, particularly in Kirinyaga County during the period in question. In light of the aforementioned context, this study assessed internal democracy in political party primaries in the 2017 and 2022 general elections in Kirinyaga County, Kenya.

### **Statement of the Problem**

With the return of party pluralism in Kenya, political parties have become actively engaged in electoral processes by endorsing candidates for various positions during general elections. This engagement necessitated the nomination of individuals for different elective roles by these parties. Consequently, the major political parties in Kenya have developed procedures for selecting their candidates for general elections. It was anticipated that the shift towards a more competitive political environment and the regular occurrence of elections would enhance the internal organization of these political parties. As democratic opportunities expanded, there were expectations that the newly formed political parties would demonstrate internal democracy, especially in the management of their primary elections.

The assumption that effective governance would emerge from the revival of multi-party politics in Africa has been challenged by observations regarding how political parties recruit candidates for general elections, who subsequently attain leadership positions in the country. Modern democracies highlight the crucial role of political parties in creating party platforms and nominating candidates for elections. Despite these considerations, there is a notable lack of research on the conduct of primaries by political parties in Kirinyaga County. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the political party primaries that took place during the general elections of 2017 and 2022 in Kirinyaga County, Kenya.

### **Objective**

The objective of the study was to assess internal democracy in political party primaries in the 2017 and 2022 general elections in Kirinyaga County, Kenya.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Research on party primaries and internal democracy within African political parties is extensive. Salih (2013) indicates that clientelistic networks within these parties have adversely affected their internal mechanisms, especially during primary elections. Okafor (2015) examines the primaries and member elections of political

parties in Anambra State, Nigeria, revealing that the candidates selected by these parties often do not align with the preferences of their constituents. The study identifies challenges such as the "son-of-the-soil syndrome," economic influence, and 'godfatherism' as barriers to conducting fair and transparent candidate selection processes in primaries. Gambo (2007) and Kura (2008) argue that Nigerian political parties demonstrate a significant deficiency in internal democracy when it comes to candidate selection for electoral positions.

The scholars cited above do stress the importance of electing new party leaders in open, honest, and transparent elections. They point out that regular elections will guarantee that a political party's authority is not monopolized by a select few. It is vital to confront the above assertions when it comes to the more widespread implementation of free, fair, and transparent elections. Internal elections' freedom, fairness, and transparency are determined by the party's constitution.

Oloo (2007) examines the weak administrative structure that has defined political parties in Kenya since the reestablishment of party pluralism. The weak structures in these political parties expose them to control of wealthy individuals. Kanyinga (2014) adds that this makes certain political parties to be identified with particular personalities with huge support from particular ethnic strongholds. The individualization of these political parties weakens the expression of interests and simultaneously jeopardizes the processes of policy development and decision-making.

Simba (2011) explores the internal governance frameworks of political parties within the context of democratic governance in East Africa. The author highlights that the presence of weak internal structures within these parties fails to ensure the conduct of free and fair primaries. In East Africa, political party leadership predominantly revolves around influential figures. Simba cites examples such as the Uganda Peoples' Congress (UPC) led by Milton Obote, the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) in Tanzania under Julius Nyerere, and both the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) under Daniel Moi and Raila Odinga, respectively (Ibid, 2011).

Bosire (2010) examines the institutional development of political parties in Kenya, concluding that many of these parties lack the essential frameworks to ensure transparent primary elections. Maiyo (2008) further argues that the lack of internal democracy within these political entities has hindered the candidate selection process during primaries since the revival of multi-party politics in Kenya. Moreover, Wanjohi (1997) claims that the regulations governing political parties in Kenya fail to provide explicit guidelines for conducting party primaries.

Kura (2008) asserts that when power is concentrated in the hands of a few individuals or party officials, it necessitates a thorough evaluation of the internal democratic processes within political parties. It is crucial to highlight the importance of internal democracy in these organizations. Firstly, it fosters democratic dialogue and the consideration of significant issues, cultivating a culture of collective ownership over decisions. Secondly, it promotes party unity by minimizing factionalism and fragmentation. Thirdly, it establishes formal procedures for resolving internal disputes. Finally, it mitigates the arbitrary and opportunistic exercise of delegated authority (Ibid, 2008).

This study interrogated the claim that most political parties in Africa are predominantly controlled by their leaders. These influential figures have taken charge of party operations, created personalized leadership styles, and wielded considerable power over the candidate selection and nomination processes during primary elections. Additionally, the research explored how affiliations with the party's ruling elite and other notable individuals impacted electoral results and candidate choices in party primaries.

A substantial body of literature underscores the significance of establishing political parties and party systems for the strengthening of democracy. Huntington (1968) describes institutionalization as the process through which organizations, including political parties, acquire value and stability. As a result, political parties transform into institutions through this process. Schedler (1995) defines party institutionalization as the mechanism by which individual political parties participating in electoral contests attain organizational stability and importance. From this perspective, it can be concluded that an institutionalized party demonstrates external autonomy and possesses a robust internal structure. A political party must have an efficient operational

framework while also ensuring independence from the influences of other organizations or political entities.

Basedau and Stroh (2008) examine the degree of institutionalization among political parties in Africa. Their study utilizes four primary criteria to assess 28 political parties across the continent. These criteria encompass the extent of political parties' integration within society, their organizational frameworks, their autonomy levels, and the consistency of their operations. The results reveal that political parties in Africa typically show low levels of institutionalization. Interestingly, the research points out that established ruling parties, such as the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) in Tanzania and the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), exhibit comparatively higher levels of institutionalization. Additionally, this study aimed to analyze the institutionalization of political parties in Kenya, applying the same four criteria defined by Basedau and Stroh, with a specific emphasis on how these parties are connected to the local community in Kirinyaga County. Literature reviewed on the level of internal democracy has revealed that political party primaries are not conducted as per the party constitution. The party hierarchy through manipulation decides who carries the day making party primaries a mere window dressing exercise.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This research was grounded in classical elite theory by Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923), Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941), and Robert Michels (1876-1936). The classical elite theory argued that a small segment of society, comprising the affluent political elite, monopolizes political authority that operates independently of democratic elections. This elite group exerts significant control and influence over political parties' aided by affluent business individuals. As a result, power in political parties continues to be concentrated among a limited number of individuals. The political elite concentrate power among themselves by being unified against the non-elite who are diverse and powerless. The classical elite theory argued that although a political party has a semblance of mass participation it is under the control of small elites who select members to represent the party at the larger level. Given this, it becomes extremely difficult to hold political office holders accountable because they were chosen through party primaries that did not provide the general public the opportunity to participate in the decision-making.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study took the form of an exploratory research design. This study utilized a combination of primary and secondary data collection methods. A sample of 400 individuals was chosen for field interviews. Questionnaires were distributed to 360 regular party members, encompassing men, women, and youth. This group of respondents was identified using random probability sampling. Additionally, interview schedules were conducted with 40 participants, which included party officials, experts, IEBC officials, observers, and primary candidates. This group was selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The data gathered was analyzed and interpreted using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

### **Level of Internal Democracy in Political Party Primaries in the 2017 and 2022 General Elections in Kirinyaga County, Kenya**

Out of the 360 questionnaires administered, 300 responded representing 83.3% while 60 representing 16.7% did not respond. The high response rate by respondents in the questionnaires is reflective of the high level of political awareness among residents of Kirinyaga County. Data from questionnaires was analyzed and interpreted quantitatively by use of descriptive statistics. This study attained 100% response from interview schedules that were administered to lead respondents. This included Party officials, experts, IEBC officials, observers and candidates in party primaries. Data from Key informant interviews was analyzed qualitatively.

Internal party democracy here refers to how effectively political parties conduct their internal electoral processes in a manner that is free, fair, and transparent. This includes the accessibility of party primaries, which reflects the inclusiveness of voter participation, the impartiality of party electoral bodies in their decision-making, and the ability of party members to influence nominations without outside interference. Political parties are essential entities that uphold democratic values within any organized society. As a result, there are



several 'institutional guarantees' that these parties must follow to effectively perform their functions within a democratic system. One of the most critical requirements is the existence of internal (intra-party) democracy. Unfortunately, this vital component of institutional integrity is frequently lacking in many political parties, particularly in emerging democracies (Magolowondo, 2010).

In this regard, the interactions both within individual political parties and between them are crucial, as they significantly affect the robustness and efficiency of the party system, which in turn impacts the overall vitality of democracy and the characteristics of the political environment. Similarly, Mersel (2006) highlights that numerous democracies have recently encountered challenges stemming from nondemocratic political parties, where many organizations prioritize external relations at the expense of essential internal organization and strategic planning. He contends that assessing whether a political party is nondemocratic necessitates an examination of its objectives and practices, as some parties often neglect critical elements such as their internal frameworks.

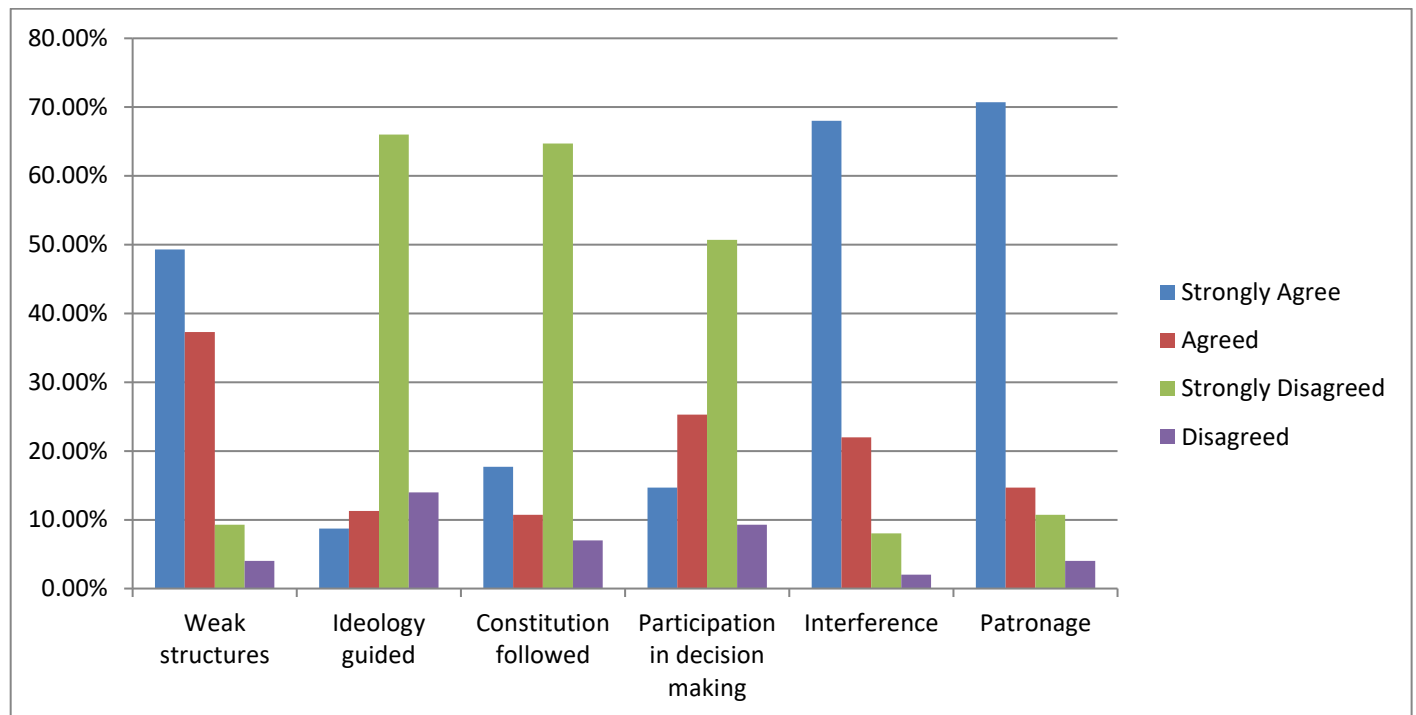
The core concept is that political parties should embody democratic principles not only in their interactions with the public but also within their own organizational frameworks. The relationship between political parties and democratic governance should demonstrate the parties' commitment to both democratic objectives and practices, as well as their dedication to maintaining internal democratic processes (Mersel, 2006). The goal of internal democracy is to cultivate political parties that are more democratic, transparent, and effective. It highlights specific challenges related to the internal management and operation of parties and party systems, including candidate selection, leadership appointments, policy formulation, member relations, gender representation, minority inclusion, youth engagement, and party financing. These issues raise important questions about whether internal democracy is advantageous for parties or if it presents significant threats to their internal unity.

Penning and Hazan (2001) argue that, under certain conditions, open candidate selection methods can empower a select group of political newcomers. This strategy cultivates an essential democratic culture both within the party and in the wider community. Additionally, internal democratic practices can enhance the representation of the electorate's views and strengthen the organization by attracting new members and facilitating the introduction of fresh ideas. It can also establish crucial vertical connections between various deliberative arenas, as well as horizontal links among competing issues. The study presented six questions to respondents, with the corresponding answers summarized in the table below.

Table 1.1 Level of Internal Democracy in Party

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Total
Does the existence of weak structures undermine party primaries	148 (49.3%)	112 (37.3%)	28 (9.3%)	12 (4%)	300 (100%)
Is your party guided by any ideology	26 (8.7%)	34 (11.3%)	198 (66%)	42 (14%)	300 (100%)
Is party constitution followed in clearing candidates in party nomination	53 (17.7%)	32 (10.7%)	194 (64.7%)	21 (7%)	300 (100%)
Do members participate in policy and decision making within the party	44 (14.7%)	76 (25.3%)	152 (50.7%)	28 (9.3%)	300 (100%)
Does interference exist in the running of your party by leadership	204 (68%)	66 (22%)	24 (8%)	6 (2%)	300 (100%)
Has the control of political parties by wealthy and influential individuals undermined their operations	212 (70.7%)	44 (14.7%)	32 (10.7%)	12 (4%)	300 (100%)
<b>Mean</b>	<b>3.82</b>	<b>2.02</b>	<b>3.49</b>	<b>0.67</b>	<b>10</b>

Figure 1.1 Level of Internal Democracy in Party Primaries



This research observed that the internal dynamics of political parties during the 2017 and 2022 general elections in Kirinyaga County were somewhat affected by external factors, such as the national electoral framework, the existing political culture, and legal requirements. Additionally, it was highlighted that internal mechanisms significantly contribute to shaping these dynamics. Internal influences encompassed the traits of leaders and staff, ideological foundations, historical context, and the internal political culture.

The findings noted that the internal operations and functioning of political parties was influenced, to a certain degree, by legal frameworks such as constitutions or specific political party legislation. Internal democracy was found to be predominantly shaped by the party's own internal regulations. The manner in which political parties operated internally significantly affected the representation of various societal needs, interests, and demands. The organizational structure of dominant political parties was found to play a crucial role in party internal democracy. The extent to which party members exerted influence over leadership and the internal decision-making processes was found to be low raising questions on the level of internal democracy.

This research examined the impact of party ideology on the internal democracy of political parties. It was observed that the absence of ideological or policy frameworks has caused these parties to resort to appealing to ethnic sentiments, as well as engaging in patronage and corruption. This has intensified perceptions of ethnic inequality and exclusion within the political landscape. The study revealed that political parties often lack coherent ideologies, defined political agendas, and a national presence, which contributes to ineffective internal democratic practices. In Kirinyaga County, many political parties were found to operate primarily as electoral instruments, gaining visibility only during election seasons and showing little meaningful involvement in between.

The incorporation of democratic principles and processes into a political party's structure includes various elements, such as internal communication, consultation methods, and established guidelines. This structure also encompasses the organizational hierarchy and decision-making processes, while ensuring transparency in the party's activities at all levels. Additionally, it was noted that party members were largely excluded from formal decision-making activities, including participation in internal elections for leadership roles or the selection of candidates for upcoming elections. It was noted that major political parties have not made substantial efforts to improve the representation of historically marginalized groups within their ranks. The involvement of women in party membership and their representation in organizational and governing bodies was found to be significantly lacking.

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The Jubilee Party, for instance, utilized secret ballot voting in most constituencies; nevertheless, it faced numerous allegations of electoral fraud. Many candidates voiced their concerns about the nomination process, asserting that it was swayed by influential party leaders. A number of individuals who did not succeed in the primaries opted to realign with other parties or run as independent candidates. There were also reports of voter bribery and intimidation, particularly related to gubernatorial and parliamentary nominations.

In the case of UDA primaries, an electronic voter registration system was put in place; however, many members claimed they were deliberately excluded from the voting process. In some areas, UDA provided direct nominations to preferred candidates, bypassing the need for competitive elections. Several unsuccessful candidates from the UDA primaries chose to defy the party and run as independents, while others shifted their support to Jubilee or NARC-Kenya. Allegations of voter suppression arose, with reports suggesting that certain voters were hindered from reaching polling stations by rival groups. This study noted of electoral disputes after the declaration of primary results by a number of political parties. This is indicated in the table below.

Table 1.2 Party Election Disputes

Type of Dispute	2017 Jubilee Primaries	2022 UDA & Other Primaries
Vote Rigging Allegations	Ballot stuffing and fake registers	Electronic voter exclusions
Direct Nominations	Some candidates were endorsed without primaries	UDA gave direct tickets to preferred aspirants
Defections	Many Jubilee losers ran as independents	UDA defectors joined NARC-Kenya & Jubilee
Violence & Chaos	Fights broke out in some polling stations	Voter intimidation in party strongholds

This study undertook a comparative analysis of internal democracy in 2017 and 2022 primaries. The following were the results;

Table 1.3 Comparative Analysis of Internal Democracy in 2017 and 2022 Primaries.

Factor	2017 Jubilee Primaries	2022 UDA & Other Primaries
Level of Transparency	Weak (many rigging claims)	Moderate (electronic voting, but issues remained)
Voter Participation	Many members excluded	Some members denied voting rights
Defections	High (many ran as independents)	High (defections to NARC-Kenya & Jubilee)
Violence & Chaos	Reported in some areas	Reported in multiple locations
Direct Nominations	Used in select cases	Widespread use in UDA

Averill et al. (2017) assert that the involvement of members in political parties is facilitated by several processes, including policy formulation, leadership and candidate selection, and participation in party structures across all organizational tiers. The degree of member engagement in these activities is significantly influenced by both the formal and informal institutional frameworks established within political party systems. The interplay between

these formal and informal components shapes the level of internal democracy within a political party. Intra-party democracy is crucial for multiple reasons. Firstly, it promotes a culture of democratic dialogue and deliberation on important matters, leading to a collective sense of ownership over decisions. Secondly, it enhances party cohesion by minimizing factionalism and fragmentation. Thirdly, it establishes legitimate mechanisms for resolving internal disputes. Lastly, it reduces the risk of opportunistic and arbitrary exercise of delegated authority.

The attainment of intra-party democracy depends on how effectively membership participation is both formally articulated and practically implemented within the party's organizational rules and procedures. When these rules are inadequately enforced or completely lacking, the party may face significant operational challenges, such as centralized decision-making, difficult coalition negotiations, exclusionary practices in leadership and candidate selection, undemocratic methods of conflict resolution, and illegitimate or unconstitutional party conventions. These challenges often lead to negative outcomes, including a lack of unity, factional conflicts, and instability, which can result in resignations or expulsions, a decrease in membership and electoral support, and weakened coalitions. Ultimately, these factors undermine the capacity of political parties to operate effectively as agents of democracy.

Political competition and organization frequently reflect existing societal divisions, which in turn influence the structure of political parties. Manning (2005) notes that African political parties often lack genuine ties to specific organized social groups. As a result, these parties tend to mobilize supporters around immediate issues, such as ethnicity and opposition to structural economic reforms, without considering the long-term consequences of these approaches. A significant contradiction observed in many African political parties is their inadequate organization and limited institutional capacity. Their decision-making processes are generally informal, with authority concentrated in the hands of the party leader and a small group of wealthy associates who typically provide financial support. The involvement of party members is minimal, mainly serving to endorse decisions made by the elite. Political mobilization often takes the form of personality cults, where allegiance is directed towards the party leader rather than the party as an institution. This situation encourages a culture of "party hopping," where leadership disputes may lead a leader to change parties, bringing their supporters along with them.

German scholar Robert Michels (1962) is renowned for introducing the concept of the "iron law of oligarchy," which asserts that political parties are inherently undemocratic and tend to evolve into oligarchies. In this framework, the elite and leadership of the party assume control, often at the expense of the general membership. This viewpoint indicates that the presence of intra-party democracy is at odds with the elite's inclination towards highly organized, structured, and institutionalized party systems. As a result, political parties characterized by oligarchy typically demonstrate centralized and exclusive decision-making processes, lacking internal democratic practices. It is therefore argued that intra-party democracy is vital for the formation of a democratic state.

Nonetheless, this argument has faced opposition from critics who claim that intra-party democracy may weaken political parties, making it an undesirable approach. Proponents of this perspective argue that "to fulfill democratic goals, political parties must themselves embrace oligarchic principles." These differing viewpoints underscore the significant divide and ongoing discourse surrounding the normative and prescriptive dimensions of intra-party democracy. This section seeks to thoroughly examine both sides of the argument and advocates for the importance and feasibility of intra-party democracy as a means to strengthen democracy within the larger society. Given the characteristics of African party politics previously discussed, intra-party democracy could be instrumental in nurturing and reinforcing a democratic culture within African communities.

## CONCLUSION

This study has underscored the lack of internal democracy in the management of political parties in Kenya, particularly evident during the party primaries for the 2017 and 2022 general elections in Kirinyaga County. It has been observed that the inadequate institutionalization of political parties and weak organizational frameworks significantly impede the effectiveness of party primaries. Moreover, the absence of a unified



ideology among political parties has negatively impacted internal party democracy. Consequently, the established party constitutions were frequently overlooked during the primary elections. The findings indicated that party members were often marginalized in the processes of policy development and decision-making. Additionally, the study highlighted considerable interference in party primaries and internal elections by party leaders. The overwhelming influence of affluent and powerful individuals within political parties was found to undermine party functionality and, in turn, the degree of internal democracy.

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