Setting the Agenda

One of the roles of political parties in a democratic system is the aggregation of interests and the elaboration of policy proposals. National conferences and congresses are generally regarded as the forum where major policy debates take place and where strategic decisions are taken. Parties that claim to be democratic, as social democratic and Green parties do, purport that conferences also allow the grassroots to have an input to the policy process and hold their leaders to account. In most continental European parties, the congress is gathered every two or three years to select the party leadership on the basis of a general programmatic motion. Sometimes, several texts and groups are in competition and a vote decides on the dominant coalition. These general motions do not usually address specific policy details. They state policy goals and political orientations for the next three years. In the German SPD, a draft motion is produced by a special committee including experts, ministers, elected representatives and party officials. It is discussed by local branches who can submit amendments in detail. Ultimately the congress rarely makes substantial changes to the original, so the apex of the meeting is the election of the party president and the executive committee. In the French Parti Socialiste (PS), factions that want to assess their strength in the party propose a draft each. The National Council examines the proposals and endeavours to produce a synthetic motion that is submitted to local groups alongside minority positions. Delegates are elected according to the text they support. One of the tasks of the Congress is to produce a single text through negotiations between faction leaders, thus constructing and demonstrating the unity of the party. These discussions are held in backstage rooms whilst plenary debates have little direct impact on their outcome although provocations and dramatisation in the hall raise the stakes. Orators
Delegates are expected to approve whatever compromise has been reached not only on the wording of the motion but also on the composition of the new National Council (Faucher-King and Treille, 2003).

All British political parties hold one major annual conference. Although delegates or representatives do not elect the leadership, positions in national committees are at stake. Conference agendas are composed of topical motions and policy papers submitted by local parties or working groups, rather than general documents. These motions open up debates on policy areas. Neither Labour nor the Conservatives need to engage in debates about alliances because the electoral system usually guarantees single-party government but such discussions appear on third parties’ agendas. In order to maximise their chances, the Greens and Liberal Democrats have to take into account the constraints of institutions and strategically position themselves in a political system distorted by the strong bias of the “first-past-the-post” electoral rule. In the mid-1990s, the Liberal Democrats for instance claimed to be abandoning a policy of equidistance that had never really existed (Ingle, 2000: 187). At the same time, the Greens were briefly considering refocusing on non-violent direct action rather than exhaust themselves in what seemed like a hopeless parliamentary strategy (Faucher, 1999a) or ad hoc alliances with the Liberal Democrats and nationalist parties.

With the exception of the Conservatives, all parties claim that conference decisions play a major role in policy-making thanks to policy motions. Such claims have been criticised as exaggerations or wishful thinking. In his classic study of Labour and the Conservative parties, McKenzie argued that parliamentary groups were largely autonomous, so much so that both organisations were equally dominated by their leadership. He considered that party conferences served merely to confirm party solidarity and to highlight the loyalty and the enthusiasm of the members towards the leader (1964: 189). His thesis was contested for both the Labour party (Minkin, 1980), and the Conservatives (Kelly, 1989; Norton and Aughey, 1981). Minkin demonstrated that the Labour leadership had to negotiate and to work closely with the big unions. Concessions on both sides were necessary to protect party unity. Moreover, the grassroots membership did maintain some influence. Kelly showed that although the Conservative conference has no formal power over policy-making, there are “plenty of occasions when, as a result of intra-party discussion, the policy of the party turned out to be rather different from the one originally envisaged by the leadership” (Kelly, 1989: 20). Overall, if leaderships are not tied to