This chapter presents an analysis of how participatory opportunities are put into practice by parties, identifying and evaluating the most common ways in which members can formally participate in the policy-making process of their party. I focus on five key vehicles for policy development, each of which provides the practical means by which parties facilitate the different types of participation outlined in the previous chapter: local meetings, policy development and oversight groups, the party conference, direct ballots and consultations. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the observable trends in formal policy development processes, most notably the shift to consultation.

**Local meetings**

Regular meetings of local or constituency parties have been a significant element of the structure of most parties since the emergence of the mass electorate in the late nineteenth century (Seyd and Whiteley, 2002, p. 27), and have traditionally played a key role in policy development. In electoral systems with single member constituencies, the local branch is the base unit of party organisation for the purpose of fielding candidates and contesting elections, mirroring the geographic division of the electorate. A local party will also usually operate as a discrete entity for the purposes of contesting and coordinating local government. Although it is easy to overlook the policy activities of parties at the local level in a study of national policy development, they are important arenas for membership participation and do have a significant impact on the ability of local party activists to devote time to national policy development, a factor examined in greater detail in the following chapter.
If party conferences are regarded as the ‘apex’ of intra-party policy development, branch meetings can usefully be described as the foundations. Local party meetings are designed to provide members with the opportunity to discuss and debate policies in detail and to gather information and form opinions on policy issues with a view to feeding these deliberations into the policy development process. This can occur through sending a representative to approve or reject policy at a party conference, making a policy submission to a consultation or working group on behalf of the branch, submitting a policy motion or amendment to conference, or by educating individual members who then participate directly in policy ballots. For example, local meetings in the Australian Democrats were designed to fulfil both participatory and deliberative functions, with members gathering in small groups (five to ten people) in order to discuss policy and gather information to make an ‘informed postal vote’ (*National Journal*, January 1977, p. 4; February 1977, p. 8).

The larger parties (social democratic parties in particular) encourage local meetings as a forum by which members can participate in policy development through drafting submissions to policy committees and remits to conference. Within the ALP, the significance of local party branches as contributors to the policy process (along with the preferred model of participation) is illustrated in the following call to action:

The NPC [National Policy Committee] would like to facilitate ALP members making a meaningful contribution to Labor’s Platform development. The NPC recommends that branch members discuss the work of the NPC, and making a possible submission to the NPC, at a convenient meeting. Members should begin with familiarising themselves with Labor’s Platform and Constitution. Branches may like to consider holding a forum on areas of interest. The outcomes from these discussions could be submitted as a written contribution to the NPC, and be considered as part of the review process (ALP, 2007).

Therefore, whilst party scholars have documented a greater move to individualisation in candidate and intra-party leadership elections associated with ‘democratising’ initiatives (see for example Cross and Blais, 2012; Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Young and Cross, 2002; Hopkin, 2001; Seyd, 1999), the local party remains the default unit for membership input into policy, and suggests a preference for collective rather than individual action. In the National Policy Dialogue initiated by the