The Party on Remote Ground: Disengaging and Disappearing?

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The party on the ground has traditionally enabled linkage with the party in office along with providing candidates, selectorates, and campaign volunteers. While this still occurs in cities, we do not know how party organisation changes have affected remote areas. To investigate, we examine two remote Australian electorates: the Barkly in the Northern Territory and the Kimberley in Western Australia. Based on interviews with grassroots members, representatives and officials, we conclude that, although parties still exert their traditional functions in some remote areas, in others they have disengaged, rendering membership less meaningful and weakening the chain of democratic legitimacy.

Keywords: Party organisation, Party members, Australian politics

'We fucked up, you know. We haven't got anybody. We just forgot about Kununurra. There's a bunch of brochures on a greyhound bus. Can you go and pick them up at 2 am in the morning? Can you go and set up the booths? Can you go and round up some people to bloody pamphleteer?'—*phone call from a Labor Party Senator to a former party member in Kununurra (as reported by the latter)*

On the eve of the 2019 Australian Federal election, a Labor senator called an acquaintance in Kununurra, a remote town of over 5000 people in Western Australia (WA). Labor had once had a branch in Kununurra, with an active cohort of members. But by 2019 that was long gone, and the closest party branch was over 1000 km away. Without a party presence on the ground, the party in office had forgotten about the town in the run-up to the election. Notwithstanding the falls

in party membership across Australia (Miragliotta, 2015) and Western democracies generally (Mair, 2013), this failure to fulfil one of a party's 'basic electoral functions' (Scarrow, 2002, pp. 82–83) would hardly have happened in a major city or town, where parties can still rely on a permanent grassroots presence, working alongside more ephemeral supporters at election time (Kefford, 2021). But, as the Kununurra example shows, it can happen in far-flung areas when the party on the ground not only declines but also disappears. While party organisation research, a little like the Australian Labor Party (ALP), has overlooked the party on remote ground, the question of how politics is practiced in such places is an important one not just for parties, but for democracy. In this article, we therefore ask: *How does the party on the ground function in remote areas?*

As one of the three 'faces' of the party, the party on the ground in Western democracies has traditionally fulfilled several key roles and activities (Katz and Mair, 1993; Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). First, grassroots members provide a link to the ground level, informing the party in office of issues that arise within localities (Heidar, 2006, p. 304). Second, they provide both a pool of candidates for elections and a selectorate that is well placed to choose the most appropriate candidate for that area. Third, at election time, grassroots members support the campaign not only through financial contributions but also by undertaking a range of unpaid high-intensity activities, such as canvassing, handing out how-to-vote cards and staffing election booths (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). While the party presence on the ground may have diminished, the above functions are still considered essential by mainstream party elites (Scarrow, 2015). As Cross and Gauja (2014b, p. 616) conclude in their study of the membership strategies of the major Australian parties, 'there is a genuine view by the parties that an active and engaged membership is necessary for them to achieve their functional objectives'.

However, if party membership has shrunk in remote areas as it has in urban ones, then it is possible that parties in the former no longer have the minimum critical mass of members necessary to fulfil the above roles. This is made more plausible by the fact that discontent and apathy towards politics are higher in peripheral areas, where citizens are more likely to consider themselves 'left behind' by distant metropolitan elites (Jennings *et al.*, 2021). Research in Europe has shown that people outside urban areas are less satisfied with democracy (Lago, 2021) and have lower levels of political trust (Mitsch *et al.*, 2021). There are thus good reasons to believe that people will be even less inclined to participate as grassroots members of the major parties in remote areas than they are in urban ones. If that is the case, in addition to posing problems for parties, it raises questions about the health of democracy in the periphery. Our study thus contributes to understanding both how the changes affecting party organisations in Western democracies have played out in remote areas, and how they impact on democratic linkage.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, we discuss how party organisations at grassroots levels have declined in recent decades, along with the possible implications of this for remote areas. We then present our case studies from two remote Australian constituencies: the Barkly in the Northern Territory (NT) and the Kimberley in Western Australia (WA). In the results section, we draw on interviews with 38 party representatives, officials, members and supporters from the three major parties in the Barkly and the Kimberley, the ALP, the Country Liberal Party (CLP) and the Liberal Party (LP), to understand how parties on the ground fulfil their roles of providing consistent linkage, candidates and selectorates and volunteers for election campaigns. We find that, in the Barkly, the Labor Party facilitates this, but the CLP presents a more mixed picture. By contrast, in the Kimberley, the LP enables members to fulfil their traditional functions more than the Labor Party does. We conclude that, while it may offer short-term benefits, party elite withdrawal from the zones of engagement with the party on remote ground carries long-term organisational and democratic drawbacks.

1. The party on the ground

In this study we focus on how the party on the ground functions in remote areas. In doing so, we follow the 'three faces of party organisation' framework originally proposed by Katz and Mair (1993, p. 594). As they explain, there are two elite faces of the party: the *party in public office*, meaning the party in parliament and/ or government, and the *party in central office*, which is the national leadership of the party organisation, but which we expand to include leaderships at the state/ territory level.[1] Then there is the *party on the ground*, which comprises members and activists at grassroots level. The main characteristics of this third face, according to Katz and Mair (1993, p. 594), are 'voluntary membership, permanence, and regularity'. While these three faces are intended to be complementary, there are inbuilt tensions regarding competencies that mean they are in competition with one another (Katz and Mair 1993, p. 595). For example, while candidate selection should generally be the preserve of the party on the ground, Cross (2018, p. 212) finds authority for it 'to be both shared and contested between local party activists and central party elites'. The relationship between the party on the ground and in central or public office can also differ from party to party. As Katz and Mair (1993, p. 601) observe: 'on one hand, two faces of the party may be in constant contact and exchange relationships with one another or, alternatively, they may work quite autonomously, each in its own sphere'.

Over the past decades, the relative strengths of the three faces of the party are said to have changed, with the party in public and central office becoming more

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[1]As Cross (2018, p. 211) notes, 'particularly in Australia, "central authority" may be exercised by the state office'.

powerful viz-a-viz the party on the ground (Mair, 2013). Having once been able to rely on large grassroots memberships, the party on the ground is now held to be in long-term decline. As Mair (2013, p. 16) argues, 'the zone of engagement—the traditional world of party democracy where citizens interacted with and felt a sense of attachment to their political leaders—is being evacuated'. On the one hand, citizens are less motivated not only to join, but even to turn out to vote for, parties (Mair, 2013, pp. 22–29; 37–42).[2] On the other, party elites are said to have lost interest in maintaining the same presence on the ground since they no longer have the same need for the contributions of members, whether in terms of their money, time or ideas. Although party elites may still periodically promote membership drives, this is now more a matter of style than substance. Or, as Katz and Mair (1993, p. 605) put it: 'the party in public office wants the appearance, but not the reality, of a strong party on the ground'. Similarly, Scarrow (2002, p. 84) notes, being able to point to successful recruitment of members transmits 'a message of popular legitimacy and enables a party to claim that it has strong ties to "ordinary citizens"'. However, it does not necessarily translate into active members and branches on the ground.

Despite Australian parties being very reluctant to reveal membership numbers (Miragliotta, 2015), we do know that these have declined, just as they have elsewhere (Mair, 2013). As Miragliotta (2015, p. 64) notes, in Australia, 'the percentage of the population who profess membership of political parties has fallen from four percent in 1960, to only one percent in 2007'. She adds that, 'to offset mobilisation gaps, parties have been cultivating supporter networks; welcoming people into the party who have no formal ties to the organisation but who may be amenable to assisting the party when requested' (Miragliotta, 2015, p. 70). This is certainly the case in Australian cities. For example, in his study of election campaigning on the ground in urban areas at the 2019 federal election, Kefford (2021, p. 98) observes that 'thousands of Australians who are not members of political parties engage in the high-intensity activities of campaigning […] and, perhaps more interestingly, they then do not join the organisation that they have poured hours into supporting'.

What we know little about, either in Australia or in democracies with similarly isolated areas, such as parts of Canada, the United States and Sweden, is how the dynamics affecting party organisations in cities and towns have impacted the party on remote ground. There are several reasons to believe that these may have worked differently in remote areas compared to metropolitan ones. On the one hand, given the possibilities to connect with voters through television and other

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[2]For a more nuanced view, see Scarrow (2015, p. 37) who argues that 'the mass membership party may be better understood as an ideal to which many parties aspired, particularly parties on the left, but which was only sporadically achieved'.

media, parties may now consider it unnecessarily complex and costly to invest in grassroots structures in remote areas. For their part, citizens in those areas may be less inclined to engage anyway, given their higher levels of apathy and distrust towards parties (Lago, 2021; Mitsch *et al.*, 2021). Certainly, the few relevant international studies point to difficulties in maintaining the party on the ground in more sparsely populated areas. For example, in the United States, Crowder-Meyer (2011) found that local branches of the Democrats and the Republicans in rural counties were less well organised and less active. Similarly, in Sweden, a 2022 report noted how 'even though the number of elected positions in municipalities has decreased, parties still have a hard time finding suitable candidates in many locations, especially in small and rural municipalities' (Ó Erlingsson *et al.*, 2022, p. 4). Finally, Koop (2011, p. 150) observed the difficulties of organising election events in non-urban areas of Ontario since they 'will rarely see turnout from activists from throughout the constituency, and there are entire sections of the riding that lack any form of party life'.

On the other hand, as noted in the introduction, there are linkage and electoral reasons why elites might try to maintain the party on remote ground rather than rely on supporters who just come out for campaigns. It may also be the case that, while disconnected from other branches and members due to geography, party sections can represent an appealing political and social activity in remote areas where there is less competition for people's free time. For example, Koop (2011, p. 145) discusses the Canadian town of Revelstoke which 'is separated from the wider Liberal community by both distance and a mountain pass that can be treacherous to drive in the winter months' but which is a 'vibrant Liberal activist base' that is 'closely bound together by long-term friendships'. Moreover, while rural areas are of course not always also remote, the former in Australia were said to have provided fertile ground for party life until recently. As Ward (1991, p. 163) observed just over two decades ago, 'rural and provincial Australia sustain a web of community ties which still foster a sense of local identification and solidarity and therefore allow continuation of a party structure based upon grassroots involvement in local branches'.

To answer our research question, we examine how grassroots members in remote areas fulfil their traditional key functions. To identify these, we follow Heidar (2006, p. 304), who observes that 'parties may want members to help in campaigning, to provide electoral legitimacy, to run and finance the organization, to recruit new candidates for public office, to anchor the party in civil society, to sound out grassroots opinion and to develop new policies'. These latter points tally with the observation by Katz and Mair (1993, p. 598) that grassroots members 'bring local knowledge to the party'. As Bale *et al.* (2019, p. 181) observe in the United Kingdom, members on the ground are 'seen as a link with the community and sometimes as a source of advice and wise counsel'. Notwithstanding

their openness to extra helpers at election time, party elites still view supporters in countries like Australia (Cross and Gauja, 2014b) and the United Kingdom, 'as complementary (rather than as an alternative) to members, not least because they believe that the latter offer them a higher level of commitment' (Bale *et al.*, 2019, p. 181).[3] The first perspective from which we will therefore examine the party on remote ground is its capacity to provide continuous linkage with the party in office. In other words: is the party on remote ground in a position to regularly inform the other faces of the party?

Our second perspective concerns another component of Heidar's list: providing candidates and selectorates. As Scarrow *et al.* (2002, p. 134) observe, 'opportunities to influence candidate-selection are one of the most politically significant of the selective benefits which parties are able to offer their members'. This is not just a benefit for members, but also for the party. Cross and Gauja (2014b, p. 619) argue that party elites see the party on the ground 'as helpful both in providing a large pool of potential candidates, who are both known to the party and socialised politically within it, and also as a group to consult in the selection of candidates to ensure that they have broad support at the electorate level'. Consequently, while their constitutions allow them to bend their own rules in certain cases, a standard condition at least formally imposed by the Australian major parties is for aspirant candidates to have been active grassroots members for a set period of time. Similarly, although there is great variation across Australia's states and territories, and within the parties, regarding how candidate selection is conducted, 'the common tendency is for this authority to be shared between the parties' local and central branches' (Cross and Gauja, 2014a, p. 36). Our question, therefore, is: does the party on remote ground have influence on the promotion through its own ranks, and on the selection, of candidates for their electorates?

Our third perspective is the role of the members in election campaigns. Notwithstanding the professionalisation of campaigning and the roles played by supporter-volunteers in urban areas (Kefford, 2021), Cross and Gauja (2014b, p. 618) found in their interviews with Australian party elites that they saw grassroots members as, first and foremost, footsoldiers of campaigns. Moreover, there are reasons to think that this could be a more important role for the party on remote ground than in urban areas. Although McAllister (2015, p. 339) argues that 'Australian's system of compulsory voting means that encouraging voters to turnout is not a factor', this is less applicable in remote areas. For example, while turnout overall at the 2019 Federal election was 91.9 per cent, in remote areas it

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[3]It is worth noting that Gauja and Jackson (2016, p. 375) found that there was little difference between inactive members and active supporters of the Australian Greens as regards their contribution to the party.

was consistently less.[4] Getting the vote out in remote areas should therefore be a more pressing concern for parties. From this final perspective, we are consequently interested in understanding: what role do the members on the ground play in helping the party at election time?

2. Cases and method

We examine the party on remote ground in two Australian electorates at the territory/state level: the Barkly in the NT and the Kimberley in WA.[5] The entirety of these electorates are classified as either 'remote' or 'very remote' by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.[6] Both electorates contain sizeable Indigenous populations: around 70 per cent of people in the Barkly and 50 per cent in the Kimberley are Indigenous.[7] The Barkly has around 8500 inhabitants in an area of over 440,000 km^2, while the Kimberley has a population of just over 34,000 people in an area of around 536,000 km^2.[8] By comparison, Spain has a population of more than 47 million spread across a little more than 500,000 km^2. Both the Barkly and the Kimberley have turnout levels that are well below their state/territory averages—which is exacerbated by low voting in very remote Indigenous communities. At the 2020 NT Assembly election, 63.2 per cent of voters in the Barkly cast their ballot, compared to a Territory average of 74.9 per cent.[9] Similarly, at the 2021 WA state election, 70.4 per cent in the Kimberley voted, far less than the 85.3 per cent turnout across the state.[10] In each electorate, we focus on the two major parties. These are: (1) the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in the NT and WA; (2) the Country Liberal Party (CLP) in the NT and the Liberal Party (LP) in WA. Choosing two jurisdictions provides us with likely variation in terms of the influence that the party in office has over the party on the ground, given the substantial autonomy of Australian parties at state/territory level (Cross and Gauja, 2014a, p. 24).

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[4]https://www.aec.gov.au/media/media-releases/2019/06-13a.htm

[5]The NT and WA are the two jurisdictions in Australia with the highest percentages of land classified as 'remote' or 'very remote' by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. They are also the two jurisdictions with the highest percentages of citizens living in remote areas (see https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/4102.0chapter3002008). Within the NT and WA, the Barkly and the Kimberly were areas where we had contacts with party officials and representatives thanks to other strands of our research. This facilitated access to interviewees.

[6]See https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/home/remoteness+structure

[7]See https://www.barkly.nt.gov.au/region/cultural-information and https://kdc.wa.gov.au/our-region/live-kimberley/demographics.

[8]For the Barkly, see the 2016 census data: https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/SED70004. The same data for the Kimberley is available here: https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/SED53003

[9]See https://ntec.nt.gov.au/elections/Legislative-Assembly-elections/Past-elections/results-general-elections/2020-territory-election/results/barkly.

[10]https://www.elections.wa.gov.au/elections/state/sgelection#/sg2021/electorate/KIM/results

   Our primary method of data collection was semi-structured individual and group interviews, with additional information coming from party websites and constitutions. We conducted most of the fieldwork in two trips. The first was to the Barkly in August 2019. There we visited Tennant Creek, the largest town with 3500 people, and Borroloola, a very remote township with a population of around 700. In early March 2020, we travelled to two towns in the Kimberley: Broome, which is the largest town and has a population of approximately 14,000, and Kununurra, where just over 5000 people live. In each electorate, we interviewed grassroots members and branch secretaries. Finally, we interviewed sitting and past representatives, in addition to party officials, in the NT capital, Darwin, and the WA one, Perth, during the 2017–2020 period. Overall, 38 participants were interviewed (see 'Appendix' section for details).

3. Parties on the ground in the Barkly and the Kimberley

In presenting our findings, we follow the same order of the three key functions of the party on the ground set out earlier. The first concerns the degree to which the party on remote ground is in a position to regularly inform the other faces of the party. To answer that, it is worth first considering the basic capacities of the parties in terms of branches and members. In the Barkly, Labor and the CLP only have formal full branches in Tennant Creek. Labor also has what it referred to as a sub-branch of members in Borroloola. Labor membership in the Barkly was over double that of the CLP (see Table 1). In the Kimberley, Labor had a branch in Broome, while the Liberals had branches in both Broome and Kununurra. Liberal membership in the Kimberley was around double that of the ALP. In both the Barkly and the Kimberley, we were told that membership figures for the two major parties had been higher in the past. In addition, we were told that the ALP once had four branches across the Kimberley, including one in Kununurra a few decades ago with around 20 members. Finally, as regards the demographic profile of the grassroots members we spoke to, there was a good mix of 13 women and 12 men, but only two were below the age of 40, suggesting that parties in remote areas struggle to attract younger members, as is generally true in

Table 1. Members of party branches and sub-branches in the Barkly and the Kimberley

		Members
Barkly	Tennant Creek ALP	20–30
	Tennant Creek CLP	10–12
	Borroloola ALP	5–8
Kimberley	Broome ALP	20–30
	Broome Liberals	50
	Kununurra Liberals	16

Source: Interviews with party officials and members.

Western democracies (Heidar and Wauters, 2019). Given the large Indigenous populations in both areas, we endeavoured also to speak to Indigenous grassroots members. Although few active party members in our case study locations were Indigenous, we were able to speak to Indigenous members of the ALP in Tennant Creek, Borroloola and Broome and of the LP in Kununurra.

Beyond questions about numbers, we asked interviewees about their levels of activism, especially high-intensity activism such as attending meetings and canvassing (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). We were told that, in each branch there was a hard core—always comprising less than half the membership—who would come to at least a few bi-monthly meetings per year. In the case of the smallest branch, the CLP in the Barkly, this meant the party on the ground relied heavily on the sustained commitment of a few individuals. As for those members who were not regularly active, these were said to be a mixture of (1) people who would help the party with canvassing or handing out how-to-vote cards at election time, but did not like attending meetings, and (2) people who wanted to support the party by joining it but either lacked the time or the desire do anything other than low-intensity activities such as donating money or perhaps putting up a poster (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). In addition to personal circumstances and inclinations, there were several factors mentioned by interviewees as influencing engagement with the party. First and foremost was the frequency with which their party's state- or territory-level representatives came to branch meetings. Here, the difference between the Barkly and the Kimberley branches of the ALP was striking. In the Barkly, the ALP territory-level MP, Gerry McCarthy, would regularly attend branch meetings in Tennant Creek, which were held in his office on the main street. Moreover, his electorate officer was very active both in terms of organising local members and visiting different areas of the vast constituency.[11] By contrast, in the Kimberley, the ALP state-level MP, Josie Farrer, did not come to branch meetings, which were held in one of the grassroots members' homes rather than in Farrer's Broome office, and her electorate team were allegedly not even party members. While ALP representatives from other representational levels, including federal, did occasionally meet members in Broome, the lack of interaction with their state MP was a sore point for members. It also meant that the party on the ground was denied a regular opportunity to inform the party in state office about their concerns and issues. For the CLP in the Barkly and the LP in the Kimberley, the levels of engagement with the party appeared to be less of a concern for members, although in both places, they noted how difficult and costly it was to travel to party events in Darwin and Perth. Nonetheless,

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[11]On the importance of similar figures—constituency agents (or 'organisers')—in maintaining a vibrant party on the ground in the United Kingdom, see Bale *et al.* (2019, pp. 178–179).

interviewees told us that Liberal representatives from various institutional levels travelled to meet members, with events being organised around these visits (in fact, in Kununurra, these occasions were apparently the only times that local branch meetings were held).

Another factor influencing engagement with the party in remote areas is geography and distances between places, which particularly affects people living in remote Indigenous communities. There were again clear differences between the ALP in the Barkly and the Kimberley. In the Barkly, the MP McCarthy would travel a couple of times a year to the small and isolated town of Borroloola to hold branch meetings.[12] Moreover, given the party's strict rules regarding quorums for meetings, he would bring members up from Tennant Creek to make up the numbers. McCarthy had also tried to involve Indigenous members from remote communities by getting them to phone into branch meetings (held in Tennant Creek). However, this had failed for several reasons. First, there were technical issues due to poor reception in remote areas. Second, the party's laws prohibited members from voting over the phone, so this created a disparity amongst them. Third, as many interviewees told us, the traditional bureaucratic branch meeting just did not appeal to Indigenous people living in very remote communities.

In the Kimberley, the situation in the ALP was different as members outside Broome were given little opportunity to interact with other members or party representatives. We were told that, a few years previously, a group of them had tried to resurrect the ALP branch in Kununurra, but had failed to meet the necessary condition of 10 signed-up members. This was due in part to one of the aspirant members being rejected (after several months of waiting) by the party central office in Perth. The group largely disintegrated afterwards and only a few had remained members of the ALP (but were formally part of the Broome branch, over 1000 km away). As one of them in Kununurra told us:

> I get the minutes and stuff of the Broome branch meetings. I get invitations to go, but I'm hardly ever in Broome when they're on. Sometimes when I'm in Broome for work and they've got some function or something on, I'll go

The ALP central office in Perth was aware of the difficulties in involving members not living in the main towns, but claimed that vested interests within the party blocked reform. The acting state secretary of the Western Australian ALP, Ellie Whiteaker, told us in early 2020:

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[12]Three-quarters of Borroloola's inhabitants are Indigenous. See https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/IARE705001

> I don't think the party structure serves how people want to participate in a modern political party. We didn't even let people hold meetings online or over the phone. They have to seek special permission. If I tried to move a bunch of rules tomorrow to change how our party is structured, I would not get broad support to do that in any group. Because it serves the people who are in power to have these structures

As regards the CLP, the party did not have any active members in the Barkly outside Tennant Creek and did not appear particularly interested in gaining them. From their perspective, so long as they kept in touch with supporters (rather than members) in remote Indigenous communities who would be willing to help them out at election time, that was sufficient. On this point, a CLP territory director, Brad Vermeer, told us in 2018: 'branches just don't work out in large geographic regions. It's not possible'. What the party had done instead was to set up a 'rural branch' that contained members, said to be mainly white farmers and their families, who were spread across the more remote parts of the NT. CLP President, Ron Kelly, explained to us in 2019: 'the rural branch meets when we need to and it's normally when there's an event or something'. The branch seemed to be focussed on social activities but did provide a means for members to meet one another and the party elites. Like McCarthy in the Barkly ALP, those we spoke to in the CLP and the LP in WA were sceptical about how much technology could improve the membership experience.

Our second sub-question centres on the capacity of the party on remote ground to promote candidates and to participate in their selection. Again, we find considerable variation across our case studies. In the Barkly, ALP members have the power to select the candidate for the Territory election. We were told, however, that in order to avoid unwelcome challenges from within the party membership to the sitting MP, the branch contained a sizeable number of what were referred to as 'sleeping members'. These were paid-up members who did not participate in party activities but could be relied upon to vote for the incumbent in the event of a contested selection ballot.[13] In the CLP, disquiet concerning the choice of a candidate from outside the local party grassroots at the 2016 Territory election had contributed to the branch losing almost all its members. CLP members also recounted how the candidate for the 2019 Federal seat of Lingiari, which includes the Barkly, had been chosen by the party elites, again without consulting the grassroots.

In the Kimberley, we found considerable differences between how the ALP and the LP approach candidate selection. The ALP explicitly looked outside the party to recruit Indigenous candidates for the Kimberley state seat, despite the fact that

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[13]These are more commonly known in Australian political discussions as 'stacks'.

the party on the ground in Broome had a number of Indigenous members (two of whom we interviewed).[14] As the acting WA party secretary, Ellie Whiteaker, told us: 'we work very closely with the Kimberley Land Council to try and find, you know, a genuine leader'.[15] She added that, although the party had a rule that candidates needed to have been members for at least 12 months, 'that's waived on quite a regular basis'. While this condition was often flouted, the party did however enforce its rule that an electorate branch must have at least 40 members to participate in a candidate selection ballot (WA Labor 2017), something that the failure to re-establish the branch in Kununurra had prevented from happening in the Kimberley. Hence, as a Broome-based ALP grassroots member told us: 'All that preselection stuff is done in Perth. They wouldn't even consult us about that kind of thing'. The Liberals in the Kimberley operate differently. As their branch president in Broome told us: 'the branches are involved in the selection process. So we've got six delegates. Kununurra's got six delegates. They're going to scream blue murder if you try to parachute somebody in when there's somebody that's local'.

Our final sub-question concerns the role of the grassroots in supporting the party at election time. This was commonly agreed to be the period when members dedicated most time to the party, particularly since campaigning in remote electorates poses enormous practical challenges. Two Tennant Creek CLP members told us how they would drive long distances to polling booths to pamphleteer for the party, including at a certain personal cost. As one recounted: 'I fractured my ankle all the way through the bottom of the fibs'. He added that, after going to hospital that night, he 'got a moonboot on and went out pre-polling in town the next morning'. While ALP members in the Barkly felt the party appreciated their contributions, this was less so in the Kimberley. As one complained to us: 'We're the cannon fodder. We're the ones that hand out the how-to-vote cards, but I don't know if we're appreciated that much'.

Election campaigns are also when those members who do not attend other events during the year become active. Discussing their involvement, the Liberal president in Kununurra told us: 'there's four guys you'd never get to a meeting, but they'll turn up every day at the polling booth'. Given their low membership numbers, especially outside the major towns, parties on the ground in both electorates rely heavily on supporters. These are often people in Indigenous communities who are willing to help promote a candidate, but do not want to join the party either because of costs or the lack of interesting party activities available outside

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[14] The ALP has dominated elections for the state seat of Kimberley since 1980. All successful candidates during this period have been Indigenous.

[15] The Kimberley Land Council is an Indigenous organisation that assists Indigenous Traditional Owners in acquiring and managing land. Similar organisations exist across Australia.

campaign time. In that sense, given their willingness to undertake high-intensity activities in the absence of any formal membership presence, active supporters in remote areas are more valuable to parties than inactive members (beyond the financial contribution of the latter). Moreover, supporters may be former members whom party elites know they can still turn to if necessary. This was the case, for example, of the former ALP member in Kununurra we cited at the beginning of this article. Having been called in desperation by a Senator after the party had forgotten to organise anything in the town, the member duly 'did all the postering and, you know, got everything set up' and, along with others from the trade union movement, was able to cover the local booths.

4. Conclusion

In this study, we have sought to understand how the party on the ground functions in remote areas. To do so, we examined the Labor Party, Country Liberal Party, and Liberal Party in two remote Australian electorates: the Barkly in the NT and the Kimberley in WA. We found that Labor grassroots members in the Barkly were able to engage with the party, although the rigidity of the branch rules, combined with problems of distance and telecommunications, posed difficulties for those outside the main town. Moreover, much of the success of the ALP on the ground in the Barkly was due to the efforts of a couple of individuals: the sitting MP Gerry McCarthy and his electorate officer.[16] The CLP in the Barkly was also highly dependent on the activism of two members and had risked losing its autonomy in 2016 due to low numbers. For both parties, the fortunes of the party on the ground appeared closely linked to those individuals remaining active.

In the Kimberley, the ALP on the ground in Broome had largely been frozen out by the party in state-level central office and public office. Members had no role in either proposing candidates for state parliament or in expressing a view on the party's chosen candidate. Compounding this, after being elected, the successful candidate did not attend branch meetings or attempt to engage with the grassroots. If the ALP grassroots in Broome was neglected, the ALP party on the ground in Kununurra was a distant memory since the party had let the branch there die and then thwarted attempts to resurrect it. While this was the most dramatic example of party organisational decline we came across, it serves to underline the effects of party withdrawal from the ground, both for supporters and for party elites. By contrast, the LP in the Kimberley appeared a more cohesive and happier organisation, with better linkages between the party in office and on the ground, and members having a role in promoting and selecting candidates. Overall, therefore, our impression of the party on remote ground is one of diversity of outcomes,

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[16]McCarthy decided not to contest the September 2020 Territory election in the Barkly. His electorate officer stood as the ALP candidate but lost.

based on how the other two faces of the party treat it. Put simply, if you want to be an active participant in the life of the party, it seems better to be an ALP member in the Barkly than in the Kimberley, and to be a LP member in the Kimberley than a CLP one in the Barkly. In addition, these results apply largely to the largest towns in our two remote areas. With the exception of Borroloola and one other town in the Barkly where the ALP had sought to cultivate a membership base, party officials were only interested in having supporters in remote Indigenous communities who would help them at election time rather than in having grassroots members who would be continuously involved with the party.

There are several implications to our findings. One is that, while parties in cities may now be happy with a nucleus of members that they can supplement with supporters for election campaigns (Bale *et al.*, 2019; Kefford, 2021), this appears a risky strategy for parties in remote areas where that core group may now be very small. A second implication is that, although it has been widely discussed as an alternative form of grassroots participation (Scarrow, 2015, pp. 166–168), the digital revolution may not be a magic solution for remote areas. This is, firstly, because of the parties' own restrictive rules about online participation in branch meetings, and, secondly, the continuing problems of internet coverage in remote areas.[17] In addition, there is the fact, acknowledged by many party elite interviewees, that branch meetings are an outdated and often not particularly interesting format, especially if one must follow them online.

Finally, our findings have implications for democracy both in Australia and elsewhere. First, in the specific case of Australia, disengaging from the grassroots in remote areas and having little interest in reviving old or existing branches (much less creating new ones) does nothing to bring the many Indigenous people living in those places closer to the political process. Second, and more generally, not having a significant presence on the ground can only exacerbate feelings of antipathy towards mainstream parties and dissatisfaction with democracy in non-urban areas. Indeed, based on their study of eleven parliamentary democracies, Webb *et al.* (2022, p. 166) found that 'organizationally stronger parties are more effective in communicating with voters and sustaining their partisan affinity, and in promoting satisfaction with democratic processes in general'. Especially given declining turnouts in remote areas, not to mention the need for help at election time, it is therefore in the long-term interests of parties to engage with, and cultivate, their grassroots on remote ground.

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[17]We conducted follow-up phone interviews in the Kimberley in late 2022 to see if the pandemic had led to greater use of online communications. While this was the case for the Liberals in Kununurra, it was not for the Liberals and ALP in Broome (also because the main towns in remote areas of the NT and WA largely avoided lockdowns).

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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to report.

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