BRITISH PARTY MEMBERS

An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Party membership and activism is declining among Britain's three major parties. Using individual membership survey data, evidence of this decline, particularly in party activism, is presented. Reasons for the decline are considered. It is suggested that choice-based rather than structural explanations are more persuasive. The impact of the decline upon the parties and the political system is considered. The article concludes that it is possible for parties to stimulate membership and activism.

It might seem perverse to devote an entire issue of *Party Politics* to party members when they appear to be a dying breed of political activists in the advanced industrial democracies. Both the supply of political enthusiasts eager to join parties, and the demand of parties for such enthusiasts, seems to be waning. Rather than the mass-membership party being a party of the future, as predicted by Duverger (1954), it now appears to be a party of the past. Mair (1997: 124) claims that among three distinct elements of party organization – the party in public office, the party bureaucracy and the voluntary membership organization – the first two remain strong, but the third is in decline. The contemporary party, it would appear, is becoming, or has already become, an organization with a relatively small number of members, or with no members at all as distinct from supporters.

If membership parties are in free-fall decline why might this be so, and what might be the consequences both for parties in particular, and for the political system more generally? Should attempts be made to arrest the decline and, if so, how might this be done? To fully answer these questions we need to know more about party members. In particular, more needs to be known about why individuals join parties, what they do as party members, what are their beliefs and what are their distinguishing characteristics.

Notwithstanding the prevalence of membership parties in the advanced industrial democracies, few individual studies have been made of the people who join. Party scholars have been fortunate that aggregate data on party membership are extensive, thanks in large part to the work of Richard Katz and Peter Mair and their colleagues in the ECPR Party Research group (Katz and Mair, 1992, 1994). Using their data it is possible to compare party memberships over time and between countries. Nevertheless, these data cannot answer the questions we have posed. It was for this reason that an ECPR Research Session was held in Tromsø in 1995 to discuss party membership. From this research meeting party membership studies were initiated in Canada, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway and the USA to supplement the studies already conducted in Great Britain (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992; Whiteley et al., 1994). In this issue of *Party Politics* we present some of the findings of these membership studies.[1]

In this introductory article we use our British data, based upon extensive surveys of Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat party members (Billinghurst et al., forthcoming; Seyd and Whiteley, 1992, 1999, 2002; Whiteley and Seyd, 2002; Whiteley et al., 1994), to, first, examine the trends in party membership and, second, to consider explanations for the decline. Based upon our survey information on the activities of members within their party organizations, we assess the likely impact of these trends on the British party system. Finally, we consider whether parties should try and reverse the trends.

Trends in Party Membership

A recent study of parties in all advanced industrial democracies reveals that, with the one exception of Spain, the trend in membership numbers is downwards (Webb et al., 2002). Another survey of membership in 20 European countries confirms this trend: the authors conclude that 'in each of the long-established European democracies, without exception, the absolute numbers of members have now fallen, and sometimes quite considerably' (Mair and Van Biezen, 2001: 6). As far as Britain is concerned, the downward trend in the memberships of the two major parties appears to have been going on for a long period, particularly since the 1980s (see Table 1). It is impossible to be certain about the exact date when this decline first set in, because Labour's membership figures were certainly exaggerated until the early 1980s, and neither the Conservative nor the Liberal Democrat parties publish annual membership figures and so for them the estimates in Table 1 are approximations.

It is important to note that the trend in membership has not been permanently downwards since the 1980s. Between 1994 and 1998 the British Labour Party *expanded* its membership.[2] A combination of factors help to explain this growth. First, a divided and demoralised Conservative Party

Table 1. Individual party membership, 1983–2003

	Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrats
1983	295,344	1,200,000	145,258*
1987	288,829	1,000,000	137,500*
1992	279,530	500,000	100,000
1997	405,238	400,000	100,000
2001		350,000	90,000

*Includes membership of the Social Democratic Party.
Sources: Labour Party NEC Annual Reports; Webb, 2002: 24.

was confronted by a Labour Party with a new, young leader, and this assisted membership recruitment. Most importantly, however, Tony Blair and his colleagues wanted new members for both inter- and intra-party reasons and were therefore willing to put considerable party resources (personnel, money and time) into their recruitment (see Seyd and Whiteley, 2002). Blair's Labour Party provided a range of incentives to encourage individuals to join. For example, members had the opportunity to influence the choice of party policies and personnel following the introduction of new organizational structures. Furthermore, members were encouraged to believe that they would be contributing to significant policy changes in Britain if they helped Labour to be elected as the governing party. As a further incentive, the party emphasized that new recruits would be joining a growing, vibrant, social organization. These particular incentives were no longer so powerful after Labour had been elected to office in 1997, and from 1998 onwards party membership began to decline again. Whether this membership growth over four years was just a temporary blip in an otherwise inexorable decline, or evidence of fluctuation, is open to debate (see Mair, 2000; Seyd and Whiteley, 2002). The answer depends upon whether structural or choice-based reasons are believed to be more important in explaining the decline in membership numbers. Structural explanations of these trends emphasize the importance of societal trends which are generally beyond the control of parties but which reduce the number of people joining or being active. Choice-based explanations emphasize the importance of various types of incentives in promoting membership and activism which the parties themselves can influence to make participation more attractive to would-be members. Our research shows generally that incentive-based models of participation work better than structural-based models (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). This means that the decline of membership can be turned around with the right incentives.

To begin, we distinguish between supply-side and demand-led explanations of the decline in membership numbers. There are three supply-side explanations. The first argues that membership is drying up because the political marketplace is becoming more competitive. The people who may be intent on becoming involved in politics now have a wider range of

alternative options open to them. Parties are just one of an increasing number of political organizations competing for people's attention. Single-issue groups, in particular, have emerged to compete with parties for people's support and they may attract potential party members. The second explanation stresses the competing pressures on people's time, whether these be work, leisure or entertainment, which have reduced the pool of potential members. Thus there is competition beyond the political marketplace for people's time and energy. The third explanation suggests that socio-economic and demographic changes have served to bring this about, particularly the decline of traditional working-class communities, the expansion of the suburbs, the decline of trade union membership and the growth of female employment. These developments drain the pool of potential party members.

On the demand side, the single most powerful explanation for the decline is that party leaders now have less need for individual members. With the emergence of mass electorates in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, parties needed to organize and mobilize new voters. At this time, members provided the resources, both human and financial, for the political mobilization of voters. However, the development of mass communications and marketing has enabled parties to reach voters directly, particularly at times of elections, and so a major impetus for membership recruitment has now largely disappeared. Furthermore, as parties have succeeded in attracting large donations from corporate organizations and wealthy individuals, they have become less reliant upon the relatively small subscriptions and donations from individual members.

Some of the factors which explain the decline in party membership are outside of the parties' control. For example, parties can have no immediate impact upon the hours that people devote to work, leisure or entertainment, or upon employment patterns. Others, however, are within their remit. For example, they have the powers to create incentives within their own organizations to attract would-be members.

Perhaps of even greater significance for British parties than the decline in the number of members is the decline in members' levels of activism. Members' activities range widely, and at least four types of activities can be distinguished. First, members contact both their fellow party members and also other members of the community on behalf of their party. Second, they campaign for their party and this involves fund-raising, recruiting members and preparing for and running local election campaigns. Third, they represent their party by holding office, either within the party organization or in a range of outside bodies. Finally, they give money to their party.

In Britain there is clear evidence that a decline in most forms of activism has occurred (a similar conclusion is drawn in this volume by the authors of the Danish and Norwegian party membership studies). A simple way of measuring this decline is by asking Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat party members whether they had become more or less active in

the party over the previous five years and then subtracting the percentage of those reporting more activity from those reporting less activity. We see in Table 2 that the decline figures are 11 percent among Labour Party members, 17 percent among Conservative Party members and 26 percent among Liberal Democrats.

Another overall measure of activism is the amount of time members spend on party work in the average month. We see in Table 3 that Labour and Conservative members are now spending less of their time on party activities. Whereas in 1990 almost 1 in 2 Labour members devoted none of their time to party activities, by 1999 this figure had risen to almost 2 in 3. Over a 10-year period there has been a significant growth in the proportion of members who do not work for the party in a typical month. This trend is also apparent for the Conservatives, albeit over a much shorter period of time between 1992 and 1994. We do not have trend figures for the Liberal Democrat members, but we see that 1 in 2 of them spent no time on party activities.

Finally, when we examine specific party activities we see in Table 4 that Labour members were less 'frequently' or 'occasionally' engaged in displaying an election poster, signing a party-sponsored petition, delivering party leaflets during an election, attending a party meeting and canvassing voters

Table 2. Levels of party activity (percentages)

	Less active	About the same	More active
Labour 1999	29	53	18
Conservative 1992	25	57	8
Liberal Democrats 1999	41	45	15

Sources: Various surveys of Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat party members. See: Billinghurst et al. forthcoming; Seyd and Whiteley, 1992, 2002; Whiteley and Seyd, 2002; Whiteley et al., 1994).
Question: 'Are you more or less active within the party than you were five years ago (or when you joined if less than five years ago), or about the same?'

Table 3. Time devoted to party activities in the average month

	Lab	Lab	Lab	Cons	Cons	Lib Dem
	1990	1997	1999	1992	1994	1999
None	47	63	65	75	77	54
Up to 5 hours	33	25	22	16	15	29
From 5 up to 10 hours	9	6	7	5	5	7
From 10 up to 20 hours	7	3	3	2	2	4
More than 20 hours	5	3	4	2	2	6

Source: As Table 2.
Question: 'How much time do you devote to party activities in the average month?'

Table 4. Labour Party members' campaigning in the previous five years

Percentage of Members who frequently or occasionally	1990	1997	1999
Displayed an election poster	86	78	76
Signed a petition supported by the party	89	65	60
Donated money to party funds	66	70	68
Helped with party fund-raising	–	35	34
Delivered party leaflets during an election	77	59	61
Attended a party meeting	68	46	48
Canvassed door-to-door on behalf of the party	55	31	32
Canvassed voters by telephone	–	10	13

Source: As Table 2.
Question: 'We would like to ask you about the political activities you may have taken part in
during the last five years. How often have you done this?'

on the doorstep on behalf of their party. Only the proportions of members
canvassing voters by telephone and donating money to party funds had
increased, and then only slightly.

Supply-side and demand-led explanations of declining levels of activism
can again be utilized. For example, on the supply side, the pressures on
people's time, in particular the amount of time spent at work, in domestic
commitments or at leisure, make party activism less attractive. On the
demand side, parties now have less need for their activists as fund-raisers
and election campaigners and, as a consequence, they have reduced their
incentives to become activists. For example, for Labour the activists' powers
to choose party personnel, such as the party leader and parliamentary candi-
dates, and to have an input into policy-making, have all been reduced. All
three parties now elect their leaders by balloting the membership as a whole.
Similarly, the selection of parliamentary candidates is by ballot of all local
members rather than by local activists. These powers have been given to the
members, irrespective of the time and effort that they devote to party activi-
ties, so there are now fewer rewards for becoming an activist.

Impact on the Parties of Declining Membership

What is the likely impact of this decline in membership numbers and levels
of activism? There are several consequences arising from these develop-
ments. First, parties will lose a solid electoral base of supporters. As voters
they constitute a relatively small proportion of the total electorate, but they
are there in both good times and bad. In local government elections or
elections for the European Parliament, where turnouts are very low, they
may be of greater relative importance. Furthermore, in bad electoral times
the existence of a core of loyal supporters is essential to a party's survival
and possible recovery. For example, without the loyalty over decades of its
members and activists the Liberal Party would not be where it is today. In

particular, the growth in the number of Liberal Democrat MPs from the 1992 general election onwards has been based upon the dedicated campaigning activities in particular localities of its members (see Billinghurst et al., forthcoming).

Second, members help provide parties with political legitimacy. They are testament to the fact that a party has support in the community and is rooted in the concerns and values of real people. In this sense, members are 'ambassadors in the community'.

Third, members are a source of regular funds, albeit relatively modest, which are less tied to the whims, pressures and particular policy preferences of large financial donors.[3] This function is linked to the issue of legitimation, since accusations that a party is selling influence are much harder to make when its funds come from a wide variety of voluntary actors, rather than from a small number of rich supporters.

Fourth, members help parties to reproduce themselves over time by providing a pool of people who are willing to be recruited as election candidates, among whom will be future party leaders. In addition, members will provide the personnel who help to run state institutions as diverse as community health councils, school governing boards and the magistracy. Without activists, parties are unable to run candidates in local government elections, contests to the new Scottish and Welsh Assemblies and in the European parliamentary elections. In the context of declining membership parties will find it increasingly difficult to maintain a national electoral presence. Yet the ability to run candidates across Great Britain, in both winnable and unwinnable constituencies, is increasingly important now that many elections are conducted using proportional representation systems. In these electoral systems, overall votes become as significant as specific constituency votes and so parties need standard-bearers in all constituencies.

Fifth, when electoral laws restrict the amount of money that can be spent on general election campaigns both at the local and national levels, as occurs in Britain, members are as important as election campaigners. They provide the free human capital needed to help mobilize the voters. Although parties run increasingly sophisticated and costly general election campaigns from their central headquarters, they have to rely upon their members to implement these campaigns in the constituencies (Denver et al., 2003; Whiteley and Seyd, 2003). There is evidence that a party's level of constituency campaigning has a significant impact upon constituency electoral outcomes (Denver and Hands, 1997; Pattie et al., 1994; Seyd and Whiteley, 1992, 2002; Whiteley and Seyd, 1994, 2002, 2003). Parties with fewer active constituency campaigners will suffer electoral consequences.

But parties' electoral campaigning does not just occur every four or five years when general elections are imminent. Local government elections, and now elections to the new, devolved bodies in Scotland and Wales, occur more frequently. State financial support for parties to campaign in these elections, in particular local government elections, is limited and parties are

therefore almost totally reliant upon their activists. These local government election campaigns are the base upon which the national parties develop and extend their support. This has been demonstrated in the rise in the number of Liberal Democrat MPs in the 1997 and 2001 general elections, most of which were won in areas where the party had made significant prior gains in local government elections (see Billinghurst et al., forthcoming).

Sixth, members can be political communicators, both upwards and downwards. Upwards, they are *one among many* means of informing the party leadership of voters' opinions. Opinion polls and focus groups are used by party leaderships to provide a constant input into parties' strategic deliberations. But members can also convey such opinions, and they come from a significant group of voters, namely the party loyalists. Furthermore, members can provide ideas which contribute to policy development, particularly in the context of policy forums which are now a feature of party organizations in Britain. Downwards, members are one of the means by which parties can communicate their ideas and policies to a wider group of people. There is evidence from our 1999 survey that Labour Party members fulfil this important communication role. We see in Table 5 that most Labour Party members are open about their membership and they talk to friends and work colleagues about politics, and offer their opinions on political issues.

People clearly rely upon the mass media, in particular television, for much of their political information. But it is also evident that face-to-face discussion with friends, family and workplace contacts play an important role in influencing political ideas (Pattie et al., 2004). The two-step flow model of political communication argues that people will often validate messages from the media and the parties with people who they know and trust (Popkin, 1991). In this model, 'respected' community opinion-formers and family members play an important role in political communication. Clearly, a large number of party advocates at the local level will serve to reinforce the message which a party is trying to get across to the

Table 5. Labour Party members' contacts with people outside the party (percentages)

	Yes	No
Do members talk about politics with people who are not party members?	86	14
Do their friends ask for their opinions on political issues?	72	28
Do work colleagues ask for their opinions about a political issue?	51	48
Do they offer their opinions to friends without asking them?	56	44
Do they offer their opinions to work colleagues without them asking?	39	61
Do their friends know that they are Labour Party members?	91	9
Do their work colleagues know that they are Labour Party members?	71	29

Source: Seyd and Whiteley (2002: 81).

electorate. So it is in this role that party members are important political communicators.

We have so far outlined the costs to political parties of a declining membership, but there are benefits also. First, recruiting individuals, maintaining membership lists and then providing these members with services can be costly. This is particularly true if parties offer discount memberships to distinct groups of people (for example, the young and the retired). The additional revenue that such members generate may not cover the initial cost of recruitment and servicing this membership, and so financial savings can be made by not recruiting members.

Second, a membership restricts a party leadership's freedom of action to adapt party policies. This could be an electoral liability if the membership is unrepresentative of a party's potential voters. Two recent examples exemplify the problem. In the 1983 general election the Labour Party came very close to electoral meltdown as a consequence of adopting a set of policies more popular with its members than its potential voters. Members' attitudes to nuclear weapons, public ownership and public housing were significantly out of line with those of Labour's voters at that time. A second example occurred during John Major's Conservative Government, when he initiated a 'back to basics' programme of social and moral conservatism which appealed much more to the party membership than to potential Conservative supporters. The contemporary Conservative Party faces a real problem that its members are demographically skewed in terms of their age, education and social class as well as in relation to their opinions on many issues, in comparison with potential Conservative voters. Current Conservative Party leaders face considerable difficulties in positioning the party on such key strategic issues as nation, Europe and social change as a consequence.

A further drawback is that if members are part of their party's deliberative decision-making process their participation will both slow down that process and may emphasize divisions and disagreements. At a time when constant, 24-hour news is a dominant feature of the media, speed of political response is required. Furthermore, intra-party debate and discussion will often be represented by the media as internal party strife. The balance between debate and division is a difficult one to maintain, and the perception of a divided party can be electorally damaging. A divided party is often regarded by the public as an unelectable party (Clarke et al., 2004).

What is the impact of the decline in the numbers and levels of activism of party members upon the political system? Perhaps the most significant effect is to promote special interest politics at the expense of responsible party government. Generally, when parties are weak, special interest groups become strong. Such groups are interested in getting benefits for themselves and passing on the costs of these to the wider society. In contrast, political parties have to be responsible in the sense of explaining how they propose to pay for any benefits which they seek. In Olson's (1982) terminology, parties are 'encompassing' organizations which cannot afford to focus just

on benefits if they want to remain credible contenders for government. In a world of rampant special interests, policy-making can become gridlocked by this search for benefits at everyone else's expense. The distinctive contribution of parties to the policy-making process is that they help to allocate costs. More generally, parties will find it more difficult to perform their linkage role effectively, that is to link the opinions of the mass public to the policy-making goals of government (Dalton, 2002). Thus, without members, party leaders and governments are likely to be less accountable and probably less successful as a consequence.

So should parties attempt to reverse the trends which we have outlined? Or is the future party organization likely to be modelled along the lines of Forza Italia with its supporters' clubs? Is there now no need for party members? Given the chance, if they were founding a new party, would party leaders choose to have supporters and financial donors rather than members? Is the future a politics in which organizations of professional political entrepreneurs predominate? Theda Skocpol (2002: 131) has suggested in the US that 'the professionally led advocacy group' has emerged as a new and prominent feature of civic life. She argues (2002: 134) that:

> All in all, the model of what counts as effective organization in U.S. politics and civic life has changed very sharply. No longer do most leaders and citizens think of building, or working through, nationwide federations that link face-to-face groups into state and national networks. If a new cause arises, entrepreneurs think of opening a national office, raising funds through direct mail, and hiring pollsters and media consultants. Polls are used to measure disaggregated public opinion, even as advocacy groups emit press releases about hot-button issues, hire lobbyists to deal with government – and engage in incessant fund-raising to pay for all of the above. Organizational leaders have little time to discuss things with groups of members. Members are a nonlucrative distraction.

Skocpol's comments may also be appropriate to political parties.

The consequences for the political system of a member-free party would be to undermine democracy, since parties would no longer be anchored in distinctive values and groups. Of course some people argue that focus groups can be a substitute for a politics which is anchored in this way. The problem is that focus groups often produce incoherence, since they contain individuals who, for example, want more government spending accompanied by tax cuts, an end to traffic jams but no road pricing and government regulation of other people but not themselves. Only policy-making rooted in community and group values can overcome the collective action problems inherent in contemporary policy-making.

There is no doubt that parties find it more difficult to recruit members today. Politics has become more individualized. People are less willing to participate in collective forms of political activity (Pattie et al., 2004). Furthermore, major socio-economic changes make membership recruitment more difficult. But it is not beyond the possibility of parties to recruit

members and activists. Our earlier work has suggested that individuals respond to various types of incentives, the most important of these being collective, selective, group and expressive. If parties provide a range of these incentives they can still attract members and encourage them to become activists.

Notes

1 Some of the membership studies have now been published in more extended form. For example, see Knut Heidar and Jo Saglie *Hva Skjer Med Partienne?* (Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk, 2002); Michael Gallagher and Michael Marsh *Days of Blue Loyalty: The Politics of Membership of the Fine Gael Party* (Dublin: PSAI Press, 2002); and Karina Pedersen *Party Membership Linkage: The Danish Case* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Politiske Studier, 2003).

2 Party membership increased by 40 percent between 1994 (305,189) and 1998 (405,238). (*Source*: Labour Party National Executive Committee Reports.)

3 For example, during the Conservative Party's difficulties since 1997, some substantial party donors have made it clear that their financial support was dependent upon particular policies or leaders.

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