

# Party membership: An under-studied mode of political participation<sup>1</sup>

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European political parties have been recruiting members for over a century. However, ‘parties without partisans’ are conceivable today<sup>2</sup>. Clearly, parties are changing, whether they are mutating, adapting or declining<sup>3</sup>. In this context, it is crucial to understand the changes which affect party membership.

Firstly, party membership figures are often used as indicators of party change or party decline, both by parties and party scholars: ‘there exists a tendency among both political parties and political analysts to place a particularly high value on the traditional notion of the ‘mass’ party’<sup>4</sup>. Party strength is measured through its anchorage in society<sup>5</sup>, and any signs of diminishing records are interpreted as a growing distance between citizens and political parties. The role of membership figures as an indicator in the controversy on party decline makes it a crucial phenomenon to study.

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<sup>2</sup> R.J. DALTON and M. WATTENBERG (eds), *Parties without partisans*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> R.S. KATZ and P. MAIR, ‘Changing Models of Party Organizations and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party’, *Party Politics*, 1/1, 1995, p. 5-28; H.L. REITER, ‘Party Decline in the West: A Skeptic’s View’, *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 1/3, 1989, p. 325-326.

<sup>4</sup> P. MAIR and I. VAN BIEZEN, ‘Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies: 1980-2000’, *Party Politics*, 7/1, 2001, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> T. POGUNTKE, ‘Anti-Party Sentiment. Conceptual Thoughts and Empirical Evidence: Explorations into a Minefield’, Special Issue of the *European Journal of Political Research*, 29/3, 1996, p. 321.

Secondly, a political system based on representation must somehow translate popular will into policies. In order to do so, representative democracies rely mainly on parties to aggregate interests. Therefore, parties are seen as performing key functions in democracies<sup>6</sup>, including interest aggregation, recruitment, and linkage functions (participation and representation)<sup>7</sup>. When exerted indirectly, the linkage function relies on membership organisation<sup>8</sup>. In that sense, according to Poguntke, the party on the ground constitutes ‘the most tightly knit connection between party elites and voters’<sup>9</sup>, and party members can be portrayed as ‘the parties’ eyes and ears’<sup>10</sup>. The changes affecting party membership may indirectly affect the capacity of parties to perform their linkage function. Some authors claim that with the erosion of party membership figures and the lack of representativeness of the party on the ground, the linkage capacity of parties is decreasing<sup>11</sup>.

This makes the study of party membership and its mechanisms, processes and evolutions crucial. However, until recently, scholars have not devoted much attention to the phenomenon.

### **Party membership: a gap in the literature**

Party membership is at the crossroads of two prolific fields in political science. One would therefore expect to find an abundant literature on the topic. However, this is far from being the case.

Literature on political parties has developed greatly since the mid-1990s<sup>12</sup>. As Mair puts it, ‘little more than a decade ago, students of party politics were often accused of being engaged in a somewhat passé branch of the discipline; today it

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<sup>6</sup> A. KING, ‘Political Parties in Western Democracies. Some Sceptical Reflections’, *Polity*, 1969, p. 111-142; synthesis presented in E. VAN HAUTE, *Adhérer à un parti. Aux sources de la participation politique*, Brussels, Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 2009, p. 124.

<sup>7</sup> K. LAWSON, *Political parties and linkage: a comparative perspective*, London, Yale University Press, 1980.

<sup>8</sup> T. POGUNTKE, ‘Party Organizational Linkage: Parties without Firm Social Roots?’, in K.R. LUTHER and F. MÜLLER-ROMMEL (eds), *Political Parties in the New Europe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> T. POGUNTKE, *loc. cit.*, 2002, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> P. WHITELEY, P. SEYD and J. RICHARDSON, *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> S. SCARROW, ‘Parties without members?’, in R.J. DALTON and M.P. WATTENBERG (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 82-83; A. WIDFELT, ‘Losing touch? The political representativeness of Swedish parties, 1985-1994’, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 22/4, 1999, p. 307-326; K. HEIDAR and J. SAGLIE, ‘A decline of linkage? Intra-party participation in Norway, 1991-2000’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 42/6, 2003, p. 761-786.

<sup>12</sup> BARTOLINI *et al.* refer to about 11,500 books and articles in their inventory in 1998. S. BARTOLINI, D. CARAMANI, and S. HUG, *Parties and Party Systems: A Bibliographical Guide to the Literature on Parties and Party Systems in Europe since 1945*, London, Sage, 1998; D. CARAMANI and S. HUG, ‘The Literature on European Parties and Party Systems since 1945: a Quantitative Analysis’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 33/4, 1998, p. 497-524.

is a field which is brimming with health and promises'<sup>13</sup>. However, this literature covers certain aspects of the study of parties to the detriment of others<sup>14</sup>. While the analyses of the role of parties in the electorate or parties in government are numerous, research on party membership, which links the study of parties to research on political participation, is scarce and is of a descriptive nature. Most of it does not rely on firm theoretical grounds. This is paradoxical given the large amount of literature on party organisations.

In the same way, the literature on political participation rarely focuses on party membership as a mode of participation: 'the analysis of membership in political groups as a separate type of political participation has not been carried out until now in a systematic fashion'<sup>15</sup>. It either develops general indexes of political participation or focuses on less 'traditional' forms of participation. The study of party membership as a form of political participation developed slowly as an autonomous sub-field.

Surprisingly, the interest in the topic emerged only recently as a consequence of a rather slow development in the academic literature. Three major steps can be identified in the literature on party membership.

The first studies developed in the 1950s and consisted of citizen surveys in the framework of large research projects on political participation. The sub-field on party membership did not exist in itself but was part of larger studies on citizen engagement in political life<sup>16</sup>. These studies relied on techniques developed during the behaviouralist revolution, such as population surveys. The methodological approach was therefore quantitative: scholars were interested in evaluating the proportion of citizens involved in political life. They at most included in their questionnaire one question on party affiliation or organisational affiliation, but far from systematically<sup>17</sup>: 'Indeed, it is striking to observe that among the huge variety of surveys that have been carried out on political attitudes and preferences in recent decades, and even among the now voluminous set of professional election studies, there are remarkably few that include questions on party membership in particular'<sup>18</sup>. These works tried to evaluate the number of citizens involved in partisan activities, and painted a portrait of this group of citizens. But they did not attempt to tackle the question in greater detail: 'All

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<sup>13</sup> P. MAIR, *Party system change. Approaches and interpretations*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, p. VII.

<sup>14</sup> H.L. REITER, 'The Study of Political Parties, 1906-2005: The View from the Journals', *American Political Science Review*, 100/4, 2006, p. 613-618.

<sup>15</sup> L. MORALES, 'Citizens in politics: The individual and contextual determinants of political membership in Western countries', *Barcelona Working Papers*, 164, 2001, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> S. ROKKAN, 'Electoral Activity, Party Membership and Organizational Influence: An Initial Analysis of Data from the Norwegian Election Studies', *Acta Sociologica*, 4/1, 1959, p. 25-34; M.E. OLSEN, 'Three Routes to Political Party Participation', *Western Political Quarterly*, 29/4, 1976, p. 550-562.

<sup>17</sup> This is not the case in the studies conducted by Lane or Milbrath, and Verba and Nie only include this mode of participation in their later work (1978). See R.E. LANE, *Political Life: Why People get Involved in Politics*, New York, Free Press, 1959; L.W. MILBRATH, *op. cit.*; S. VERBA, N.H. NIE, and J. KIM, *Participation and Political Equality: a Seven-Nation Comparison*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978.

<sup>18</sup> P. MAIR and I. VAN BIEZEN, *loc. cit.*, p. 6.

of these studies deal with party membership, but hardly give it more than a passing attention'<sup>19</sup>. At most, they gave a broad idea of the phenomenon.

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, the literature started to be more directly related to partisan participation, but focused only on specific aspects of it: a geographical zone<sup>20</sup>, a specific group in the population<sup>21</sup>, or a specific party stratum (party elites, candidates, representatives, or delegates). The first comparative research on party delegates (European Political Parties' Middle-Level Elites Project – EPPMLE) was carried out in the 1970s. A common questionnaire was used to survey the delegates at 39 party congresses<sup>22</sup>. This strategy was developed mainly to overcome the high costs of larger studies or the parties' reluctance to allow larger studies to be carried out. Consequently, they suffer from two major gaps. On the one hand, these studies tend to be of a descriptive nature. They focus mainly on the socio-demographic and political profile of the respondents. On the other hand, they are rather limited in their scope, which hinders the possibilities of a global or comparative perspective. In 1983, Bartolini diagnosed that 'the existing literature on party membership is both meagre and largely idiosyncratic in nature'<sup>23</sup>.

It was not until the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s that the first studies on party membership at large emerged, through three main developments in the literature: the analysis of party membership figures, the study of party membership at the micro level (supply side) and research on the demand side, i.e. party organisations and their relationship with their grassroots.

First, considerable attention was dedicated to the analysis of the volatility and the general decline in party memberships which seems characteristic of most western democracies. The exercise was very much linked to the thesis of party decline, and party membership was often used as an indicator of this alleged decline. Research consisted in attempts to count party members and/or activists. However, the tools and measures used to assess party membership levels, as well as the conclusion on trends over time, are both debated in the literature.

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<sup>19</sup> A. WIDFELT, *Linking Parties with People? Party Membership in Sweden 1960-1997*, London, Ashgate, 1999, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> F. SUBILEAU, 'Le militantisme dans les partis politiques sous la Cinquième République. Etat des travaux de langue française', *Revue française de science politique*, 31/5-6, 1981, p. 1051.

<sup>21</sup> Z. BAUMAN, 'Les membres et les 'activistes' du Parti dans l'entreprise', in P. BIRNBAUM and J. LECA (dir.), *Sur l'individualisme*, Paris, PFNSP, 1986, p. 151-174; P. ABRAMS and A. LITTLE, 'The Young Activists in British Politics', *British Journal of Sociology*, 65/4, 1965, p. 315-333; F. SUBILEAU, *loc. cit.*, p. 1052-1053.

<sup>22</sup> K. REIF, R. CAYROL, and O. NIEDERMAYER, 'National Political Parties' Middle-Level Elites and European Integration', *European Journal of Political Research*, 8/1, 1980, p. 91. A synthesis of the main results appears in 'Party Activists in Comparative Perspective', *International Political Science Review*, 4/1, 1983.

<sup>23</sup> S. BARTOLINI, 'The Membership of Mass Parties: The Social Democratic Experience 1889-1978', in H. DAALDER and P. MAIR (eds), *Western European Party System. Continuity and Change*, Beverly Hills, Sage, 1983, p. 200.

The first debate concerns the techniques used to measure party membership. Two alternative measures coexist: the objective and the subjective measure<sup>24</sup>. The subjective measure (also known as reported party membership) is based on population surveys, whereby citizens are asked whether they are affiliated to a political party. It is criticised for the potential misunderstanding of the question or the meaning of affiliation. Another problem with this technique is the low proportion of citizens who declare that they are affiliated to a party, and therefore the small size of the sample. The objective measure of party membership consists in asking the parties themselves. The technique also raises questions: the availability of data varies greatly across parties and countries, which hinders the comparative ambitions; the reliability of the data is questioned (poor quality of the databases, symbolic character of membership figures, etc.).

In the literature, the use of the objective measure is more frequent, although often performed at national level or on a specific party or party family (generally, left-wing parties). Cross-national comparisons appeared later. Bartolini was one of the first to emphasise membership decline in social-democratic parties<sup>25</sup>. This trend was confirmed by von Beyme regarding the socialist, communist and Christian democratic families<sup>26</sup> and by Sundberg for the Scandinavian countries<sup>27</sup>. The comparative effort was brought one step further thanks to the work of Mair and Katz in 1992<sup>28</sup>, followed up in 2001<sup>29</sup>, and more recently in 2009<sup>30</sup>. Their conclusions stress that membership decline is deepening over time. Authors using the subjective measure seem to converge in their conclusions<sup>31</sup>. Other authors have added nuances to these findings. Selle and Svåsand claim that there is no general party membership decline, no decline in party identification and no major change in the level of party activism<sup>32</sup>. Norris draws attention to some precautions which should be taken when analysing the figures. Firstly, the starting point of the comparison over time is crucial and has a huge impact on the conclusions regarding the evolution of party membership. Secondly, it does not say anything about who is staying and who is leaving. Again, this could affect the interpretation of the phenomenon.

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<sup>24</sup> S. VERBA, N.H. NIE and J. KIM, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> S. BARTOLINI, in H. DAALDER and P. MAIR (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 177-220.

<sup>26</sup> K. VON BEYME, *Political Parties in Western Democracies*, Aldershot, Gower, 1985.

<sup>27</sup> J. SUNBERG, 'Exploring the case of declining party membership in Denmark: A Scandinavian comparison', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 10/1, 1987, p. 17-38.

<sup>28</sup> R.S. KATZ and P. MAIR, 'Membership of political parties in European democracies, 1960-1990', *European Journal of Political Research*, 22/3, 1992, p. 329-345.

<sup>29</sup> P. MAIR and I. VAN BIEZEN, *loc. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> I. VAN BIEZEN, P. MAIR, and T. POGUNTKE, 'Going, Going, ... Gone? Party Membership in the 21st Century', Paper presented at the *ECPR Joint Session of Workshops*, Lisbon, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> P. BRÉCHON, 'Les partis politiques dans les grandes enquêtes internationales', in D. ANDOLFATTO, F. GREFFET, and L. OLIVIER (dir.), *Les partis politiques. Quelles perspectives ?*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001, p. 42-43 ; A. WIDFELT, in H.-D. KLINGEMANN and D. FUCHS (ed.), *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> P. SELLE and L. SVASAND, 'Membership in Party Organizations and the Problem of Decline of Parties', *Comparative Political Studies*, 23, 1991, p. 459-477.

In return, this has made the question of who joins political organisations a significant one commanding considerable attention (supply side). The work of Seyd and Whiteley can be considered as a turning point in this respect<sup>33</sup>. Since then, several scholars or teams have performed the same type of analysis in their national contexts<sup>34</sup>. The focus has been on the micro level of analysis. The main areas of interest have been the sociodemographic and political profile of the respondents and their attitudes, motivations and level of activism. Most of this literature is rather descriptive, although the basic models of political participation are applied to explain membership and activism: the resource model<sup>35</sup>, the sociopsychological model<sup>36</sup>, and the rational choice model<sup>37</sup>. Today, we have a better picture of who joins parties, why they do it, what opinions they hold, and what their level of activism is. But our knowledge is still kaleidoscopic, as the existing studies are generally one-party or one-country studies. Very little comparative work has been done so far<sup>38</sup>. Furthermore, because the literature relies on theories of political participation, it tries mainly to explain the act of joining. Many questions are left unanswered: what are the consequences of party membership on the individual, polity and society? What actually happens after joining: what type of activities do members engage in and why? What are their channels of expression? What impact do they have on certain decisions? What makes them stay or leave the party? etc.

The third orientation in the literature investigates the demand side, i.e. party organisations and their relation with their grassroots. The literature and approaches regarding political parties rarely refer to party membership explicitly, with the exception of the functionalist and rational choice approaches. The functionalist approach sees parties and their members as key stakeholders fulfilling essential functions in representative democracies, including interest aggregation, recruitment, and the linkage function (participation and representation)<sup>39</sup>. When exerted indirectly, the linkage function relies on membership organisation<sup>40</sup>. The changes affecting party membership may indirectly affect the capacity of parties to perform their linkage function<sup>41</sup>. Some authors claim that with the erosion of party membership figures

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<sup>33</sup> P. SEYD and P. WHITELEY, *Labour's Grassroots. The Politics of Party Membership*, Palgrave, Macmillan, 1992; P. WHITELEY, P. SEYD and J. RICHARDSON, *op. cit.*, 1994.

<sup>34</sup> See 'Special Issue: Party Members and Activists', *Party Politics*, 20/4, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> S. VERBA, N. NIE and J. KIM, *op. cit.*

<sup>36</sup> S.E. FINKEL and K.-D. OPP, 'Party Identification and Participation in Collective Political Action', *Journal of Politics*, 53/2, 1991, p. 339-371.

<sup>37</sup> P. WHITELEY and P. SEYD, 'Rationality and Party Activism: Encompassing Tests of Alternative Models of Political Participation', *European Journal of Political Research*, 29/2, 1996, p. 215-234.

<sup>38</sup> K. HEIDAR, 'What would be nice to know about party members in European democracies?', Paper presented at the *ECPR Joint Session of Workshops*, Helsinki, 7-12 May 2007.

<sup>39</sup> K. LAWSON, *Political parties and linkage: a comparative perspective*, London, Yale University Press, 1980.

<sup>40</sup> T. POGUNTKE, 'Party Organizational Linkage: Parties without Firm Social Roots?', in K.R. LUTHER and F. MÜLLER-ROMMEL (eds), *Political Parties in the New Europe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>41</sup> A. WIDFELT, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

and the lack of sociological and ideological representativeness of the party on the ground, the linkage capacity of parties is decreasing<sup>42</sup>. Others see in the opening and democratisation of parties a positive evolution in the capacity for parties to perform their linkage function. The rational choice approach also links parties and their members. Its starting point is the paradox of recruitment, whereby parties evaluate the costs and benefits of recruiting members<sup>43</sup>. In this view, if parties do not recruit members, it is because of their negative evaluation of the costs and benefits of recruitment. However, this approach has led to little systematic empirical verification. To sum up, less attention has been dedicated to the demand side, and the literature still lacks empirical validation of the theories. Nevertheless, these analyses indicate that the story is complex, and that existing models at the individual level need to recognise the impact of mobilisation mechanisms and institutional structures<sup>44</sup>.

This brief overview of the existing literature shows that a lot of questions remain open. It is only recently that some of them have aroused academic interest. This late interest might be attributed to various factors. Firstly, as political science is a rather young discipline, its fields of study are still under construction. It became more diversified and specialised progressively. Therefore, if political scientists initially investigated other forms of participation, the development of the discipline encouraged researchers to specialise and deepen their knowledge of the different strata.

Secondly, technical and methodological difficulties slowed down the development of the literature. Research is very much dependent on the relationship between parties and scholars, and parties tend to mistrust party scholars. Research is also very dependent on financial resources, and party membership research is expensive to carry out. This might explain why surveys of congress delegates were preferred: 'to survey the delegates to national party conferences (...) seemed to be a practical (relatively easily accessible) and significant focus'<sup>45</sup>. The use of surveys might also explain why scholars tend to focus on profiles and attitudes rather than on actual behaviour or activities. Techniques and methods have determined both the target population and the content of the analysis.

Thirdly, western societies have faced the 'participatory revolution'<sup>46</sup> and the rise of new, alternative modes of participation. Therefore, scholars have concentrated their attention on the study of these 'new' forms of participation to the detriment of the more traditional, organised channels of participation. However, the signs of a positive relationship between the 'old' and the 'new' forms of participation may have loosened

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<sup>42</sup> S. SCARROW, 'Parties without members?', in R.J. DALTON and M.P. WATTENBERG (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 82-83; A. WIDFELT, *loc. cit.*; K. HEIDAR and J. SAGLIE, 'A decline of linkage? Intra-party participation in Norway, 1991-2000', *European Journal of Political Research*, 42/6, 2003, p. 761-786.

<sup>43</sup> S. SCARROW, 'The 'paradox of enrolment': Assessing the costs and benefits of party membership', *European Journal of Political Research*, 25/1, 1994, p. 41-60.

<sup>44</sup> L. MORALES, *Joining Political Organisations*, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> K. REIF, R. CAYROL, and O. NIEDERMAYER, *loc. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>46</sup> M. KAASE, 'The Challenge of the 'Participatory Revolution' in the Pluralist Democracies', *International Political Science Review*, 5/3, 1984, p. 299-318.

these brakes; parties still exist and their members have not totally disappeared. Consequently, interest in the study of party membership has recently risen again.

Finally, scholars cannot ignore the central paradigms in both fields of study (political participation and party organisation). Both fields have long been dominated by the thesis of the decline. Under these conditions, it is not very surprising that party membership has been neglected by researchers who believed that members were doomed to disappear. Furthermore, equation between party membership and (leftist) mass parties also dominated. The analysis of the grassroots of right-wing parties was therefore hardly considered. More recently, the idea of a mutation of political participation and parties has grown more visible, generating a new interest in party membership research.

### **Normative judgments and theoretical preconceptions**

When engaging in research on party members and activists, scholars should not only be aware of the state of the literature: they should also be conscious of the normative judgments and theoretical preconceptions underlying the study of party membership as a form of political participation and as an aspect of party organisations.

On the one hand, researchers of party organisations have to be conscious of the relative hostility against parties among certain political currents, media and citizens (*'Parteienverdrossenheit'*)<sup>47</sup>. But this disdain of parties can also be found among political thinkers and political scientists. For some, 'the existing literature on parties is sufficient'<sup>48</sup>. Daalder distinguishes four trends in the anti-party literature<sup>49</sup>. The first trend denies any legitimate role for parties on normative grounds. Certain visions of democracy see parties as obstacles or threats to democracy and as being unable to optimise interests<sup>50</sup>. In this trend, one could classify the supporters of a conservative approach to democracy whereby parties encourage divisions of civil society, colonise the state and constitute a pathology for democracies. But the supporters of an approach valuing self-expression (participatory democracy) see parties as potential sources of alienation by the elites. These approaches take their roots in the liberal or radical traditions of political thought. Some supporters of a pluralist approach to democracy might also fall into this category when they portray parties as secondary agents of representative democracy compared to other interest groups. Finally, some supporters

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<sup>47</sup> K. LAWSON and P.H. MERKL, *When Parties Fail. Emerging Alternative Organizations*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988; T. POGUNTKE and S. SCARROW, 'The Politics of Anti-Party Sentiment', Special Issue of the *European Journal of Political Research*, 29/3, 1996, p. 257-400; R.J. DALTON, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>48</sup> J.R. MONTERO, and R. GUNTHER, 'Introduction: Reviewing and Reassessing Parties', in R. GUNTHER, J.R. MONTERO, and J. LINZ (eds), *Political Parties. Old Concepts and New Challenges*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> H. DAALDER, 'Parties: Denied, Dismissed, or Redundant? A Critique', in R. GUNTHER, J.R. MONTERO, and J. LINZ (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 39; K. DESCHOUWER, 'Political parties and democracy: A mutual murder?', *European Journal of Political Research*, 29/3, 1996, p. 263-278.

<sup>50</sup> I. VAN BIEZEN and R.S. KATZ, 'Democracy and Political Parties', Paper presented at the ECPR Joint Session of Workshops, Granada, 14-19 April 2005, p. 2-9.



of the deliberative approach to democracy idealise situations of free speech and the strength of the best argument, and deny the role of parties in democracy. These trends have different roots but share a common critique of the principles of representative democracy embodied by political parties. The second trend considers only certain parties as legitimate: it is the selective rejection of parties. Some authors refer to the mass parties as potentially totalitarian, dogmatic, radical, oligarchic, or bureaucratic (see Michels or Weber). Others see state parties or partitocracy as another threat to democracy<sup>51</sup>. The third trend favours certain types of party system to the detriment of others. Daalder refers to the domination of the Westminster model and the rejection of multi-party systems in the literature, and the recent re-evaluation of these models. Finally, the last trend considers that parties are doomed to disappear and thereby become an irrelevant topic of research: parties will become obsolete due to their decline.

The thesis of party decline emerged as early as the mid-1960s. Some argue that parties are the product of a specific situation and that they emerged to perform specific functions in a democracy. Once these functions have been fulfilled or once parties are not able to fulfil them anymore, parties lose their *raison d'être*<sup>52</sup>. Others argue that parties emerged to represent specific interests and groups. These diverging interests and groups have come closer, making parties less relevant. Finally, neo-corporatists or neo-pluralists argue that other groups or organisations will replace parties in the near future. Researchers have tried to attest the decline of parties with indicators. Reiter warns political scientists against these indicators and insists on the clear distinction between the decline of parties and other signs of turbulence: 'generalisations about the decline of party systems across the west are often imaginative and heuristic'<sup>53</sup>.

The supporters of a representative conception of democracy often have the opposite view: parties are no longer obstacles to democracy, but are seen as a condition for democracy<sup>54</sup>. Some authors such as Bryce, Aldrich, Stokes, Schattschneider, and Müller even consider representative democracy as inseparable from parties<sup>55</sup>.

This book shares with Seiler the idea that it is not so much whether parties serve democracy or not, but rather which relationship they sustain<sup>56</sup>. This goes against the thesis of party obsolescence. Parties remain central stakeholders of representative democracy, and 'parties continue to matter. Parties continue to survive'<sup>57</sup>. Therefore, without considering them as essential to the functioning of democracy, it simply recognises the fact that they are central stakeholders of the political system, and should therefore constitute a privileged topic of research for political scientists. The

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<sup>51</sup> H.-J. PUHLE, 'Still the Age of Catch-allism? Volksparteien and Parteienstaat in Crisis and Re-equilibration', in R. GUNTHER, J.R. MONTERO, and J. LINZ (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 58-83.

<sup>52</sup> P. SCHMITTER, 'Parties are not what they once were', in L. DIAMOND and R. GUNTHER (eds), *Political Parties and Democracy*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

<sup>53</sup> H.L. REITER, *loc. cit.*, 1989, p. 343.

<sup>54</sup> D.-L. SEILER, *Les partis politiques*, Paris, A. Colin, 2000, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 27.

<sup>55</sup> E.E. SCHATTSCHNEIDER, *Party Government*, New York, Rinehart, 1942, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> D.-L. SEILER, *op. cit.*, 2000, p. 27.

<sup>57</sup> P. MAIR, *Party System Change. Approaches and Interpretations*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, p. 90.

challenges which they face should not call into question the relevance of the research topic – on the contrary.

The literature on political parties is not the only field marked by theoretical preconceptions. Research on political participation is also deeply connected to conceptions of democracy. For the supporters of a liberal conception of democracy, participation is only a means, not an end. It is not required to concern the largest number of citizens possible. A limited level of participation is considered enough. Conversely, the participatory conception of democracy sees participation as necessary and desirable. And the deliberative conception of democracy insists on the legitimacy linked to the participatory debate rather than to participation itself.

These epistemological comments show that studying party membership as a form of political participation links these fields to the fundamental debates of political science. Political scientists should be aware of these theoretical preconceptions before engaging in their research.

### **Exploring the anthills of party politics**

This book aims at contributing to three major topics related to the study of party membership. The first is the analysis of party membership figures. Can we attest a decline in the long term? How can we interpret the changes over time? What are the potential explanations for the trends observed? The second topic concerns parties and their members (demand side). How do parties recruit their members? How do they evaluate this resource and manufacture their membership? And the third topic involves party membership at the micro level (supply side), based on party membership surveys and interviews. How do members see their role in the party? What influence do they claim? How do they take action?

In order to answer these questions, this volume focuses on various parties in a variety of countries. The first part of the book adopts a comparative perspective and presents general trends in party membership across Europe. Parts II and III comprise case studies and describe or compare a limited number of parties. Rather than large comparisons and broad generalisations, these chapters offer an in-depth look inside the parties. The study is limited to European parties and European contexts.

The first part of the book is dedicated to the analysis of the general trends in party membership across Europe, combining the two techniques and measures of party membership. In Chapter II, Pascal Delwit adopts a long-term perspective to tackle two questions which have not received clear answers yet: has party membership fallen over time? Is this still the case in the new millennium? Relying on objective measures of party membership and secondary literature, he shows that, over sixty years, a shrinkage of party membership in the old democracies has occurred beyond doubt. However, the pattern seen in recent years is not as clear. The new democracies in central and eastern Europe have begun with what has become the norm: political parties have relatively few members. However, the course of events since the transition to democracy has followed a variety of directions. But the main conclusion might be that these trends have to be analysed in the light of the organisational layout or the characteristics of the parties. Delwit identifies a significant difference between mass-based parties and cadre parties; between parties which, historically, have based a substantial part of their

political influence on raw numbers, and those for which this dimension is absent or less obvious. The dwindling membership mainly concerns mass-based parties.

In Chapter III, Sofie Marien and Ellen Quintelier try to go beyond the debate on trends over time and search for an empirical validation of the reasons for these trends. They examine the validity of three important explanations for declining party membership with respect to the empirical evidence: the evolution of materialist/postmaterialist values, the evolution of group-based membership, and political trust. They test empirically whether the changes in these factors can explain the evolutions of party membership figures using the subjective measure of party membership (data from the European Values Study, 1981-2004). The evidence suggests that participation in voluntary organisations was strongly linked to political mobilisation and participation in political parties in the 1980s. In recent years, however, the effect of these group-based memberships on party membership has declined, resulting in lower and more unequal party membership figures.

In the second part of the book, the contributions focus on the demand side, i.e. on parties and the way they recruit, evaluate, and assess their membership. In Chapter IV, Sorina Soare and Alexandra Ionascu tackle the question of party organisation in post-communist countries through the Romanian case. The starting point of their reflection is a common statement that post-communist parties resemble the western European 'cartelised' parties in the sense that their organisations rely on few members and that they are depicted as being less a part of society and more a part of the state apparatus. In this respect, the Romanian parties' figures show particularly good health in terms of raw membership. In order to assess potential explanations for the Romanian *cas à part*, there are two major caveats: the differences encountered between the parliamentary parties' membership and the myriad of small parties officially registered, and the substantial decrease in membership figures officially registered in 2000 and 2007. Based on these two general considerations, Soare and Ionascu's analysis goes beyond the general figures and static observations in order to identify the reasons for and consequences of cultivating large membership rolls in contemporary Romania. The analysis of the Romanian case generates new insights into the relevance of increasing membership during the party institutionalisation process.

Chapter V also looks at party organisations and their interest in cultivating membership. Wijbrandt van Schuur and Gerrit Voerman analyse political party membership decline in the Netherlands (from about 400,000 members in 1980 to about 300,000 members in 2008). They discussed with party headquarters their strategies for attracting new members and for keeping current members. Since the majority of members do not remain party members for a long time, both strategies deserve full attention. What is the amount of time and money earmarked for membership campaigns? What types of campaign are successful? How do parties register and follow their members, and what is the role of the different branches of the parties? How do they deal with members who have left the party?

In Chapter VI, Florence Haegel studies the way UMP member recruitment has been manufactured. It is of particular relevance given that Sarkozy's electoral success in 2007 was preceded by a strong party mobilisation. The chapter is mainly based on a survey carried out in November 2004 among UMP members during a congress.

It argues that the organisational and social logic of partisanship must be analysed together. It also emphasises how the party linkage is framed by the organisation, which falls back on management tools and promotes flexible ties, and how it is deeply embedded in social networks and 'milieus'.

Chapter VII looks at how the macro level determines how party organisations change. Oscar Barbera, Astrid Barrio, and Juan Rodriguez show the influence which recent political developments in Catalan politics have had in the evolution of two of the main dimensions of party change: party legitimacy and party strength. The paper discusses the changes in the main Catalan political parties in a short but very tumultuous period (1995-2007) in Catalan politics, characterised by institutional reforms and changes in government and party leaderships. They show that these macro-level changes have had a negative impact on party legitimacy and electoral support, but have not eroded party organisational strength.

The next four chapters reverse the focus and examine party membership at the micro level (supply side). Chapter VIII by Giulia Sandri and Teun Pauwels is a transition between the supply and the demand side. The paper explores the role of party membership and activism in contemporary parties in Belgium and Italy in order to assess their degree of party cartelisation. The paper carries out an empirical examination of the extent to which a 'stratarchy' model of the relationships between grassroots members and party elites is applicable to the selected cases as well as an examination of whether blurred distinctions among members and non-members are equally applicable to the analysis of the selected cases.

In Chapter IX, Patrick Lyons examines the factors which underpin vote choice in party leadership elections among ordinary members. Until recently, most leadership elections within political parties in Europe were restricted to members of parliament, with ordinary party members having no direct role to play in this process. In October 2002, the Irish Labour Party chose its new leader using a postal ballot sent to all members. This case study research reveals that party leadership elections are strongly driven by personalised campaigning, and that policy preferences and key facets of such elections are driven by specific considerations. This research also demonstrates the merits of examining leadership contests as a means of gaining insight into electoral behaviour in general.

In Chapter X, Emilie van Haute looks at the discontented party members who perceive and define their party in negative terms. Based on Hirschman's conception of 'voice' and on May's law of curvilinear disparity, the paper examines the idea that the discontented are more driven by ideological incentives and are more active and more radical than their loyal counterparts. The results confirm the last hypothesis but not the first two. The discontented show weaker socialisation within the party and are less active and less driven by ideological incentives.

In the final chapter, Robin Pettitt considers policymaking in the Labour Party, with particular focus on the role of party members in the process. The chapter first considers some of the arguments for and against membership influence on policy in parties, as well as the attitude of Labour Party members towards this issue. Robin Pettitt then outlines the Labour Party's official attitude towards intra-party democracy, and gives an overview of how policymaking has changed in the Labour Party over

time, before debating what these changes have meant for the level of membership influence in Labour.

### **General trends in party membership in Europe**

This book provides new insights into party membership in Europe. The various chapters show a variety of patterns, but also underline general trends.

First, as Wijbrandt van Schuur and Gerrit Voerman state in their conclusion, the era of the mass party is over. This general pattern is sustained by Chapters II and III, where both the subjective and the objective measures point in the same direction: a decline in party membership. These findings have already been emphasised in the existing literature. However, both chapters provide finer details about the general pattern. If, according to Delwit, the days of mass membership are over ‘beyond any doubt’, it is not the case everywhere, especially since the first decade of this century, and it does not affect every type of party organisation evenly. Delwit shows that there is a significant difference between parties which rely historically on large numbers of members, and parties which grant less importance to this dimension. The idea of party membership decline should refer more specifically to these mass-based parties – a detail which is often omitted in the literature.

The contributions also go one step further than the previous research in examining original explanations of the phenomenon and in discussing its implications. Marien and Quintelier stress that individual profiles alone cannot explain changes in party membership over time. For instance, the argument that declining membership is explained by increasing post-materialism was not validated. In the same way, despite growing unemployment and a sharp increase in education levels, party membership is declining. These results force us to go beyond traditional explanations at the micro level, and to look at how trust as well as mobilisation and recruitment processes affect party membership. Instead of pointing the finger at individual citizens who fail to do their civic duty, the picture which appears here focuses on the role of intermediary agencies and parties themselves. The process through which group-based membership translates into party membership seems to be in difficulty. The link between group membership and party membership is less automatic. This result is congruent with Delwit’s view that membership decline mainly affects mass-based parties or parties which traditionally develop stronger ties with other organisations.

This evolution is of particular importance when it comes to discussing the meaning of the decline and its consequences for parties and representative democracy. On the one hand, this trend might impact equality in political participation. Group-based membership to unions or sociocultural associations, for example, can act as mobilising agencies and activate citizens who are less likely to participate in political life because they lack the necessary individual resources. If the link between group-based membership and parties slackens, it could decrease the representativeness of parties, affect their anchorage in society and increase the gap between citizens and parties and inequalities in political representation. In return, it might have serious consequences for the legitimacy of political parties and their capacity to perform their linkage and interest aggregation functions as well as their representativeness and ability to act as a pool of candidates for representative functions. As van Schuur

and Voerman stated in their chapter, ‘this erosion – if it continues – will attack the very foundations of parliamentary democracy’. This conclusion converges with Mair’s reflection that parties are changing and are shifting from a linkage function to governmental and procedural functions<sup>58</sup>.

However, the picture might not be as gloomy if we take into account the fine distinctions in the general pattern of party membership decline, and if we consider the decline as affecting mass-based parties primarily. In this case, van Schuur and Voerman would be delighted by the observation that parties may have abandoned their habit of keeping their numbers artificially high. What if the drop in membership means that there are stricter rules for joining (minimum age, etc.), and more rigorous monitoring of membership lists? A decline in membership of mass-based or social integration parties might also be interpreted as a decline in political patronage and clientelism. Citizens would join less for selective material incentives such as jobs, social housing, or promotion. In this case, should we regret the decline? This stresses the importance of Norris’ call to study the types of member who renew their membership and who have left the parties. Furthermore, party membership decline can be understood as a decrease in interest in political parties, but studies show that this is not sustained by a decrease in interest in politics in general. Citizens are not becoming less political, but their commitment seems to be more selective and *ad hoc* rather than permanent via parties. Nevertheless, Barbera, Barrio, and Rodriguez have shown that if the legitimacy of parties has decreased, it does not affect their organisational strength.

A second general trend emphasised in the various chapters is that several factors favour the recruitment of members by parties. It explains why, paradoxically, some parties are recruiting despite the general decline. The Romanian case highlighted the impact of the political context and historical legacies, as well as the impact of the structure on political competition and on the recruitment capacity of parties. In their chapter, Soare and Ionascu also insisted on the role of regulatory frameworks. Legal arrangements and party financing rules partly determine whether parties need to recruit members or not. The institutions affect the way parties assess the costs and benefits of having members. Furthermore, parties can implement strategies and use the institutions to protect their organisational strength in troubled contexts, as the Spanish case demonstrates. Finally, internal party dynamics and balance of power are crucial in order to understand why parties decide to engage in a recruitment process or not. The power and rights granted to members, such as the right to run as candidate for the party or the power of the local party branch, create incentives to join. The French case shows that recruitment also involves an organisational strategy controlled by professional managers and experts, in line with the election cycles. However, Haegel stresses potential consequences of cyclic and candidate-driven recruitment. Party ties might be more flexible, less stable over time and less territorialised, yet parties do not recruit randomly and still rely on social pools and activate specific networks. Other factors affect the duties and rights which parties grant their members. Sandri and

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<sup>58</sup> S. BARTOLINI and P. MAIR, ‘Challenges to Contemporary Politics Parties’, in L. DIAMOND and R. GUNTHER (eds), *Political Parties and Democracy*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, p. 327-343.

Pauwels emphasise that these rights and duties vary according to party ideology, and that parties do not embrace the same organisational path irrespective of ideological positions.

Finally, the third main conclusion is that, when studying party membership, joining is not everything. Literature on party organisations at the grassroots level mainly focuses on the question of who joins parties and why<sup>59</sup>. Whereas scholars have questioned the motivations for joining a party, very little research has been conducted regarding the reasons for remaining a member or for leaving a party. However, the role and influence of members in the party organisation as well as the way they live and perceive their membership are vast and rather unexplored fields of research. In his chapter, Lyons shows that one of the most important examples of intra-party democracy in action – the selection of a new party leader – follows the same dynamics as those evident in general elections: members evaluate candidates on the basis of their policy positions and future alliances. This implies that general models of voting behaviour apply to the study of intra-party politics (strategic voting, etc.). The similarities with general elections are not limited to vote choice, but also include the choice of campaigning channels. However, intra-party campaigns differ in the sense that they are organised in such a way as to minimise the loss of cohesion. The exact influence which members exert through their role is another aspect which deserves to be investigated, especially since members have been granted more power in several decision-making processes. Several authors are sceptical about the democratisation process of parties, emphasising that this process often goes hand in hand with plebiscitary forms of democracy and with a strengthening of the power of the party leaders<sup>60</sup>. Pettitt's chapter perfectly illustrates the tension between a discourse encouraging intra-party participation and the practical difficulties faced by a large party to implement a powerful and effective way to engage with the members in the construction of policies.

Furthermore, the literature often takes for granted that, because members have made the decision to join a party, they view it in a positive way and tend to be loyal and support it. In her chapter, van Haute shows that this is far from being the case. There are discontented party members, and they may sometimes want to voice their criticism about how the party functions or about its policy orientations. Interestingly, the discontented are not those you hear the most. They tend to be less active and less socialised members. Most of the literature considers activists as the main source of contestation within the party, but it focuses on the voiced criticisms and not on the silent disapproval. However, the analysis of silent discontentment is particularly interesting in the sense that it provides information on the potential reasons for exit and the profile of the potential defections.

These findings open a new agenda for research on party membership. In a paper in 2007, Heidar called for comparative research on the 'who, why, what, opinions and

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<sup>59</sup> P. WHITELEY and P. SEYD, *High Intensity Participation. The Dynamics of Party Activism in Britain*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2002.

<sup>60</sup> L. YOUNG and W. CROSS, 'The Rise of Plebiscitary Democracy in Canadian Political Parties', *Party Politics*, 8/6, 2002, p. 678; S. SCARROW, 'Parties and the Expansion of Direct Democracy: Who Benefits?', *Party Politics*, 5/3, 1999, p. 341-362.

effects' of party membership over time, between parties, party families, and countries, or with other strata (activists, voters, etc.)<sup>61</sup>. We clearly share this plea for comparative research. But this book has also shown the urge to go beyond the classic questions of joining and general membership decline. More attention should be dedicated to original explanations for the decline, and research should discuss the figures and their implications more thoroughly. A second area for further research is the analysis of the role and influence of members in their parties. Theories of party organisational changes are seldom put to the empirical test. This prevents us from going beyond broad conclusions on what is actually happening within parties. Finally, more attention should be dedicated to the study of the members' views and perceptions of their party, and more research should be carried out regarding the process through which loyalty, discontent, voice, criticism, and exit build up. It would certainly contribute to the understanding of intra-party dynamics and processes, and shed light on the general trend of membership decline.

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<sup>61</sup> K. HEIDAR, 'What would be nice to know about party members in European democracies?', Paper presented at the *ECPR Joint Session of Workshops*, Helsinki, 7-12 May 2007, p.6.