Wilfried
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Party Membership in Contemporary Europe

Edited by Peter Hefele and Thibault Muzergues

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The Authors

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Dr Mantas Adomėnas assumed the position of Secretary-General of the Community of Democracies, an intergovernmental organisation, on 1 September 2024.

Dr Adomėnas is a Lithuanian scholar and politician who has served in the Lithuanian Parliament (2008–20). At the conclusion of his third parliamentary term, he was nominated as deputy minister of foreign affairs of Lithuania (2021–3).

He has been awarded the Presidential Order of Excellence by Georgia (2013) and the Friendship Medal of Diplomacy by Taiwan (2024). In 2023 he was elected as a member of the Council of the European Council on Foreign Relations. In 2024 the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared him one of the top five enemies of Russia in Lithuania.

During his career, Dr Adomėnas has worked on a range of issues, including support for democracy, foreign affairs, migration policy, national security, culture and education. He has served on international election observation missions to Georgia, Ukraine, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Dr Adomėnas earned his master's degree in Classics at Vilnius University and a Ph.D. at Peterhouse College, University of Cambridge. He publishes essays and scholarly articles on topics ranging from the classics to political philosophy and current affairs, as well as spy novels.

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Tim Bale is a graduate of Cambridge, Northwestern and Sheffield universities and is currently Professor of Politics at Queen Mary University of London.

He is the author of several books on British and European party politics, the most recent of which is *The Conservative Party After Brexit: Turmoil and Transformation*, now out in paperback. The fifth edition of his book *European Politics* will be published this year. Tim is also a frequent contributor to broadcast and print media, with his work for the latter available at https://proftimbale.com/.

Peter Hefele, Policy Director, Wilfried Martens Center of European Studies

Dr Peter Hefele is Policy Director of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, the official think tank of the European People's Party in Brussels. With a career spanning two decades in international politics, he brings deep expertise in foreign and security affairs, economic development, and energy and climate policy.

An economist by training (Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, 1997), Dr Hefele began his career as a researcher in Bonn before joining the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) in 2003. He led departments in Berlin and Asia, including as head of the KAS China Office in Shanghai (2010–15), and later as director of the regional project on Energy Security and Climate Change in Hong Kong (2015–9). From 2019 to 2020, he served as KAS director for Asia and the Pacific.

Dr Hefele combines academic insight with hands-on experience in international cooperation and strategic policy development. He is fluent in German, English and Hungarian, and has a working knowledge of French and Italian.

Teona Lavrelashvili, Research Associate, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

Dr Teona Lavrelashvili is a policy professional specialising in EU affairs, with a decade of experience across EU institutions, academia and think tanks, including roles at the European Commission's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, the European Parliament, KU Leuven and the European Policy Centre.

She earned her Ph.D. in Political Science from KU Leuven, where she managed an academic project—the European Party Monitor—and, in 2022, defended her dissertation on the role of European political parties in the EU enlargement process.

Teona continues her academic engagement as an Associate Professor, delivering lectures at Sciences Po Strasbourg and other universities. Her research focuses on EU relations with the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries, as well as institutional structures and party politics.

Actively involved in civic life, Teona holds several leadership roles. She serves as the president of the College of Europe Alumni Association. She has also initiated and managed numerous projects, notably How Does the EU Work, which has educated over 400 emerging leaders and civil society participants in Brussels. In 2024 she ran as a candidate in the Belgian Federal Parliament elections.

She is fluent in Georgian, English and French, and has a good command of Russian and Spanish.

Thibault Muzergues, Research Associate, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

Thibault Muzergues has been a Research Associate at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies since 2025, where his main focus of research includes political parties and the ideological evolution of the right, as well as geopolitics and transatlantic politics. He also serves as political director of Shared Ground, a think tank dedicated to reconciling conservatism and the environment.

From 2011 to 2025, he worked as director and senior advisor for Europe and the Mediterranean at the International Republican Institute, a US organisation based in Washington, DC, focused on democracy promotion via political party development. Prior to his work there, he worked for five years as a fundraiser and direct marketing consultant to France's then leading party, Union for a Popular Movement (Union pour un mouvement populaire), and Nicolas Sarkozy. In this position he pioneered online fundraising during the 2007 French presidential elections and introduced new marketing techniques to French politics, mostly inspired by the American experience. He began his career in London, where he served as an advisor to the British Conservatives at both the regional and local levels.

Thibault is the author of two books published in both French and English: *The Great Class Shift: How Four Social Tribes Are Redefining Western Politics* (Routledge, 2019), and *War in Europe? From Impossible War to Improbable Peace* (Routledge, 2022)—the latter announcing the return of war to Europe. More recently he has also authored two books in French: *Postpopulisme: la nouvelle vague qui va secouer l'Occident* (Éditions de l'Observatoire, 2024) and *La Droite Woke* (Éditions de l'Observatoire, 2026).

Thibault is a regular contributor to France's major newspapers (*Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Libération*, *L'Express*, *Le Point*, etc.), as well as English- (*Foreign Affairs*, *War On The Rocks, National Interest*) and Italian-language media (*Formiche*, *Il Foglio*, *adnkronos*). He holds an M.Sc. in Russian and Post-Soviet Studies from the London School of Economics, and graduated summa cum laude from the masters programme at Sciences Po Paris.

Heidi Nordby Lunde, Former Norwegian Member of Parliament

Heidi Nordby Lunde served four terms as an MP in the Norwegian parliament for the Conservative Party (Høyre).

Nordby Lunde has a background in marketing, sales and public relations with international companies including HP and PA Consulting. After a breakthrough as a political blogger, she worked as an editor and community manager for a Norwegian news site, and appears as a columnist for several news outlets.

Nordby Lunde makes frequent appearances on television and radio concerning a wide variety of political issues, including tax policies and the economy, EU-related issues, the welfare state, gender equality and sexual and reproductive health rights, and the impact of new technology and social media. Since November 2017 she has been president of European Movement Norway.

Arjen Siegmann, Staff Member for Economic Affairs, Christian Democratic Appeal Research Institute (CDA-WI)

Arjen Siegmann is Professor of Valuable Work and Christian-Social Thinking at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and a research associate at the CDA-WI. His work has been published in international journals including *Operations Research*, *Journal of Banking and Finance*, *Journal of Empirical Finance* and *Journal of Urban Economics*. A volume on climate change, edited by him, was published by Springer in 2022. His work for the CDA-WI includes research on economic topics such as the labour market, climate, housing, fiscal policy and lifelong learning.

Arjen studied Econometrics and Operations Research and received his Ph.D. in Finance in 2003. He then worked as a post-doctoral researcher at the Netherlands Central Bank, as an advisor on strategic model development for ABN AMRO Bank and as an Associate Professor of Finance.

Introduction; Party Membership in Contemporary Europe

Peter Hefele

Party membership in Europe stands at a crossroads. Once the backbone of democratic participation and political (mass) mobilisation, it has undergone profound transformations in recent decades. Groundbreaking societal changes, digitalisation and shifting political cultures have put traditional mass parties under immense pressure. Across the continent, they have seen their ranks dwindle, while new forms of engagement are emerging. Ranging from 'light' digital membership to supporter networks, these new forms are seeking to cope with the increasingly fluid, individualised political identities of European citizens. Yet, no other organisations have so far succeeded in replacing political parties as the key actors in pluralistic and liberal political systems. Being indispensable, however, should not obscure the view on the responsibility of parties and their leadership to constantly question their institutions, procedures and communication strategies.

While the previous volumes in this series looked at general developments[1] and the crucial issue of party funding,[2] this book sheds light on the changing nature of

1 T. Muzergues, A. Braun and R. Le Quiniou (eds.), *Why We Still Need Parties: The Resilience of Political Parties Explained* (Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2023), accessed at https://www.martenscentre.eu/publication/why-we-still-need-parties-the-resilience-of-europes-political-parties-explained/.

2 T. Muzergues (ed.), *Financing Politics in Europe: A Political Party Roadmap for More Transparency and Effectiveness* (Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2024), accessed at https://www.martenscentre.eu/publication/financing-politics-in-europe-a-political-party-roadmap-for-more-transparency-and-effectiveness/.

party membership. As *Arjen Siegmann* illustrates, political parties today embody a paradox: they are simultaneously open channels for citizen participation and closed organisations seeking coherence and discipline. In the Netherlands and beyond, the digital era has lowered thresholds for participation but introduced new frictions, challenging parties to sustain meaningful member engagement. Membership remains a key indicator of political vitality, correlating with electoral support. However, the times when engagement was based on a stable membership are gone, having been replaced by a more volatile and issue-driven form of activism.

Mantas Adomėnas highlights the persistence of low membership levels in Central and Eastern Europe—typically around 1%–3% of the population—alongside the rise of leader-centric and clientelist 'cadre' parties. Despite experimentation with multi-speed and movement-style membership, parties in the region often remain elite-driven, reflecting deeper crises of trust and institutionalisation. By contrast, *Teona Lavrelashvili's* analysis of EU accession countries reveals a paradoxical picture: seemingly high membership rates, particularly in the Western Balkans, often mask clientelist networks in which affiliation serves as a pathway to jobs and services rather than as a vehicle for genuine political engagement.

At the European level, *Peter Hefele* explores the unique challenges faced by Europarties, transnational organisations caught between being federations of national parties and representing genuine pan-European movements. Some of these organisations, such as Volt or the European Greens, have experimented with direct membership and digital-first strategies. But most Europarties remain elite-driven, dominated by national member parties and always in danger of becoming disconnected from citizens. This raises questions about their capacity and willingness to foster a truly European political identity.

Thibault Muzergues contributes two critical perspectives. The first focuses on the dilemmas of internal party democracy, where opening up leadership selection and policymaking to members can revitalise parties but also threaten their coherence. His second contribution deals with the emergence of 'memberless' parties—highly

personalised, digitally driven organisations such as Macron's En Marche—that challenge the very notion of traditional membership. These developments suggest that party engagement is diversifying, with traditional dues-paying members coexisting alongside casual supporters and digital followers. Which type of political movement will prevail remains an open question.

Finally, *Tim Bale's* analysis focuses on why people still join political parties. He finds that members are primarily driven by ideological commitment, collective policy goals and a desire to express their political identity. Careerist motivations are playing a far smaller role than commonly assumed. This clearly shows that, despite the decline of mass membership, parties remain vital spaces for political socialisation and democratic participation—and no other type of organisation can easily take over.

Heidi Nordby Lunde further expands on this discussion by reframing party membership as a potential antidote to the political disengagement of recent decades. She argues that revitalising grassroots participation can make parties more resilient against populism and media-driven politics. Drawing on examples from Nordic political life, she emphasises the need to rebuild parties as community actors—reconnecting with citizens through local presence, open digital dialogues and innovative forms of engagement such as ad hoc, issue-based initiatives and digital town halls. Nordby Lunde contends that members serve as both the living institutional memory of their parties and vital agents of renewal. In this double role, they ensure that parties remain grounded in their communities and responsive to societal changes. This underlines the broader point that political parties, even in a digital and fragmented era, must evolve into platforms for civic engagement.

Together these contributions paint a complex picture of party membership in Europe: declining in numbers but diversifying in form, caught between tradition and innovation. The dual challenge of maintaining relevance and cohesion in an individualised society, across different regions and institutional contexts, has the potential to offer valuable insights into the future of party membership in European democracies—as an indispensable resource for vital democracies.

With this third volume, we finish our series of analyses on the European political party systems, the result of very fruitful collaboration with Thibault Muzergues. I also thank all our European experts for their valuable contributions, which reflect the diversity of European political parties and political systems. This book is being published against the backdrop of the internal and external challenges facing the democratic systems in Europe. The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, the think tank of the largest European political party, sees it as a timely contribution to the debate on the renewal of European democracies. Political parties still play a key role in any successful transformation of the national and European political systems.

Brussels, 1 December 2025

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The Party Is Always Right

Membership and Conflict in the Modern Political Party

Arjen Siegmann

On the left, nothing is right. On the right, nothing is left.[3]

There is an inherent conflict in the modern political party. On the one hand, it enables citizens to participate in the political process. It is a way to translate a worldview or political convictions into representation in parliament and legislative action. The party is the sum of its members—and more. On the other hand, the party leadership demands loyalty from the members. Once in power, or close to power, a party must be able to wield its power without being constantly criticised by disgruntled members. As such, a political party is both very open and very closed at the same time.

The arrival of social media has changed the external environment in which a political party operates. Former trade-offs in party policies, organisational structures and existing norms have all been affected. And continue to be. Digital communication has become the norm. But the norm for what? Traditional frictions, such as the difficulty of contacting members directly, have been reduced. But other frictions have remained or have worsened, for example, the ability of a party to explain its foundations and operating principles.

In this chapter I discuss the role of party membership and its future. First, I analyse the relevance of party membership for political success. The results of this analysis are used to describe the dilemma posed by the Hotelling model, also known as the rational vote theorem. In this model, political parties are likened to ice cream sellers on a beach who are aiming to maximise their sales. I argue that, although the model is instructive, it misses the essential elements of political engagement, empathy and commitment. I close with two possible scenarios for the future.

Some examples are taken from the Dutch political landscape, which has been more dynamic than elsewhere, with many new parties forming and disappearing.

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3 Paraphrase of a quote by Janet Yellen at a Federal Open Market Committee meeting during the 2008 financial crisis: 'An accounting joke concerning the balance sheets of many financial institutions is now making the rounds, and it summarizes the situation as follows: On the left-hand side, nothing is right; and on the right-hand side, nothing is left.' E. Schwartz, 'Humor in Fed Transcripts', *Econlife.com*, 22 February 2014, accessed at https://econlife.com/2014/02/federal-reserve-humor-in-2008-transcripts/.

The dynamism and innovation in some of these parties provide informative lessons for the future of political parties.

Lower thresholds and new frictions for membership

Political parties have existed since the late nineteenth century, which is around 250 years ago now. Invoking Lindy's law, which provides that the future life expectancy of non-perishable things, such as ideas or structures, is proportional to their current age, we can expect them to survive for another 250 years.[4]

In the European context, there is simply no alternative for ambitious persons to participate in active politics other than through participation in a political party. As argued elsewhere, this is different from US-style politics where the person is the focal point of elections and the role of the political party is much less pronounced than in Europe.[5] As such, there is ample room for careful analysis and deliberation of the European-style political party and its membership as an institution. It is an institution that, like other social structures, tends to have a long lifespan and will not disappear easily.

This institution has changed drastically in the twenty-first century as a result of the rise of new communication technologies. These have had a significant impact on the political community. As a first observation, we can see that not only do digital communities provide new forms of bonding and bridging capital,[6] but they are much easier to form and maintain than non-digital communities.[7] The role of a political party to bring like-minded people together has become less relevant.

4 I. Eliazar, 'Lindy's Law', *Physica A: Statistical Mechanics and Its Applications* 486 (2017), 797–805.

5 A. Siegmann, 'The Farmers' Revolt in the Netherlands: Causes and Consequences', *European View* 23/2 (2024), 156–66.

6 T. Williams et al., 'Beyond Bridging and Bonding: The Role of Social Capital in Organizations', *Community Development Journal* 57/4 (2022), 769–92.

7 M. Seraj, 'We Create, We Connect, We Respect, Therefore We Are: Intellectual, Social, and Cultural Value in Online Communities', *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 26/4 (2012), 209–22.

Second, the threshold for political participation in the broader sense, has become lower. It has become easier to engage with a societal topic through other channels. Non-governmental organisations, online petitions and social media campaigns provide new and valuable opportunities to take political action. Starting a new political party has also become easier, more closely resembling the 'startup culture' that we see in the business sector.

Third, the lower cost of communication also comes with downsides. The friction of having to talk to someone comes with the (unpredictable) benefit of forming relationships and bonds of trust. These bonds are valuable in times of stress and uncertainty, when coordinated action requires that people trust each other. When interaction becomes quick and digital, we lose these benefits—benefits that become necessities when dealing with serious political challenges. The difficult political problems are people problems: problems where interests clash and worldviews differ.[8] In these situations, exchanging policy views in real life, with real people is not just an instrumental act, but a way of making progress in understanding and trust. Any instrumental or technocratic approach to policy completely ignores this aspect.[9] Furthermore, now that we have some hindsight on the effect of these new technologies, we can see the limits of social media in terms of giving the best experience to people for discussing serious political matters:[10] privacy is not guaranteed and such debate is usually restricted to communicating with like-minded people in a 'happy interaction'. While this might be sufficient for some, the experience is not necessarily fulfilling for those who are really committed and want to 'dig deeper' and bring more meaning to their political commitment.

Fourth, and perhaps paradoxically, genuine engagement in a large political party has become more difficult to achieve as a result of the existence of social media. An existing political party that wants to communicate with its members cannot assume that its emails or app messages will be read with any priority. Because of this, a

8 A. Skaburskis, 'The Origin of "Wicked Problems"', *Planning Theory & Practice* 9/2 (2008), 277–80.

9 B. Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

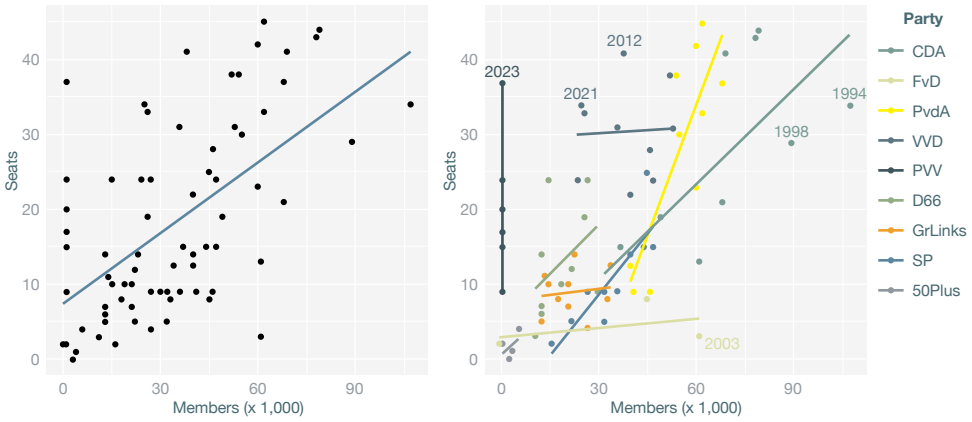
10 L. Kruse, D. Norris and J. Flinchum, 'Social Media as a Public Sphere? Politics on Social Media', *The Sociological Quarterly* 59/1 (2018), 62–84.

party's leadership has less confidence in its ability to transmit its core beliefs to its members. And vice versa: a regular party member might find it hard or impossible to transmit a message to a higher level in the organisation. Even when an email is sent, there is no certainty of it being received by the addressee. Emails to some Dutch and British Members of Parliament now get a standard reply of 'I receive hundreds of emails per day, and I cannot read all of them'. Because of this, channels of in-person communication remain valuable.

What the data says: membership as a harbinger of support

Because of party proliferation, the Netherlands provides a good laboratory for studying voter engagement and how this relates to party membership. For the purpose of this chapter, I have collected data on party membership and election outcomes between 1994 and 2023. This period covers the post–Cold War period, where the decline in membership set in and traditional parties became weaker. Because membership is national, only the direct, national elections for the lower house of the national parliament (Tweede Kamer) are included. The results are below, in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Relationship between seats and membership, 1994–2023



A: All parties B: Per political party

Sources: Collected data from Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen, Dutch electoral council, and own analysis.

Note: Plot A: all outcomes of national elections for the lower house (Tweede Kamer). Plot B: linear fit per political party. CDA: Christian Democratic Appeal (Christen-Democratisch Appèl); VVD: People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie); PvdA: Labour Party (Partij van de Arbeid); PVV: Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid); D66: Democrats 66 (Democraten 66); SP: Socialist Party (Socialistische Partij); GrLinks: GreenLeft (GroenLinks); FvD: Forum for Democracy (Forum voor Democratie); 50Plus: 50PLUS (50PLUS).

Panel A of Figure 1 shows a reasonable correlation between membership (horizontal axis) and seats (vertical axis). It is slightly distorted by the range of vertical points for PVV (one member). Despite this, the R^2 is around 34%. Membership and election outcomes are related, it seems.

Panel B shows the pattern for a selection of individual parties. It shows positive relationships for most, except for the PVV (1 member), the FvD (low number of seats, but many members) and, most notably, the ruling party of the past 15 years, the VVD, a liberal party. While election outcomes for the VVD have remained at around 30 seats, the membership has been in steady decline.

The positive relationship with membership for both the aggregate and the individual parties in terms of seats confirms the idea that membership has meaning. It means commitment to a political cause or worldview and it is a force to be reckoned with. If members' views are neglected, they will sooner or later raise their voices in the general assembly, go away, join another party or start a new one. This dynamic has been visible in the past decade: the membership of traditional parties has declined, but the total number of party members across the party system has remained constant. New parties have proliferated and the political spectrum has become 'busy' with a plethora of views.[11]

Another illustration of membership-as-energy comes from the changes in membership numbers. In the Netherlands, membership of political parties is relatively constant at around 400,000 people, which is approximately 2% of the population. But the

11 A. Siegmann, 'United in Fragmentation: Political Party Resilience in the Netherlands', in T. Muzergues, R. Le Quiniou and A. Braun (eds.), *Why We Still Need Parties: The Resilience of Europe's Political Parties Explained*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2023), 85–96.

membership levels vary across the parties. In 2024 the rise in membership occurred predominantly on the left. Table 1 tabulates the growth in numbers.

Table 1 Membership changes 2023–4

	Net change	Number of new members	Percentage of total
Left	9,484	25,610	77%
Right	-6,003	7,733	23%

Note: Left–right classification where the left includes the Christian Union/ChristenUnie, Democrats 66/Democraten 66, THINK/DENK, GreenLeft/GroenLinks, Labour Party/Partij van de Arbeid, Party for the Animals/Partij voor de Dieren, Socialist Party/Socialistische Partij, and Volt Netherlands/Volt Nederland. Right-leaning parties include the Farmer–Citizen Movement/BoerBurgerBeweging, Interest of the Netherlands/Belang van Nederland, Christian Democratic Appeal/Christen-Democratisch Appèl, Forum for Democracy/Forum voor Democratie, Right Answer 2021/Juiste Antwoord 2021, New Social Contract/Nieuw Sociaal Contract, Reformed Political Party/Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij, and the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy/Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie.

Table 1 shows that the largest net change in membership took place within the left-wing parties: they saw an increase in membership of more than 9,000, while those on the right saw a decline of 6,000 members. If we focus only on *new* registrations, 77% of these happened on the left-hand side of the political spectrum. Apparently, the existence of a right-wing government with the populist PVV in the lead has galvanised progressive voters, pushing them to go further in their political commitment by actually joining the party they support on election day.

The myth of the rational voter

With the demise of the traditional, mass political parties[12] goes the demise of the traditional role of party members, who might find themselves thinking that they are nothing more than a group of 'yes men', with very little information on actual policies or the direction of the party. Members may receive an abundance of social media posts

12 P. Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso Books, 2013).

and marketing emails, but this does not necessarily equate to genuine interaction—besides, it is often difficult to 'find the knowledge in information', to quote T. S. Eliot.[13] In this way, the power shifts from the members (and their subcommittees) to the leadership of the party, that is, the people on the sending end of the communication.

From one point of view, party membership is a non-problem. In the Hotelling-Downs model mentioned in the introduction, politicians are likened to ice-cream salesmen on the beach.[14] They distribute themselves along one line, the left–right political spectrum, to maximise 'sales'. Whoever gets the largest chunk of the market, wins the election. As a consequence, the role of party member is negligible. For a functioning democracy, only the parties' positions on the left–right scale matters—not the participation of ordinary members. At the ballot box, voters decide on the relative attractiveness of each party, and it is up to the party leadership to decide whether it wants to change its position before the next election or not.

The Hotelling-Downs view is insightful. It helps us to understand the shifting political positions of parties which cater to voters' preferences. One can observe such dynamics in how the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland), since its inception in 2013, has shifted in its political position depending on what is happening in German society. The model also seems to fit with the clustering of political beliefs in an individual: from one or two political views, one can usually predict the other political positions that a person will have.[15] It turns out that it is possible to position many people accurately on the left–right spectrum. For more extreme positions, such as belief in conspiracy theories, views on different issues can be clustered quite precisely based on whether people trust the government or not.[16]

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13 T. S. Eliot, *The Rock: A Pageant Play Written for Performance at Sadler's Wells Theatre 28 May–9 June 1934 on Behalf of the Forty-Five Churches Fund of the Diocese of London* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934). The full quote is, 'Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?'

14 H. Hotelling, 'Stability in Competition', *The Economic Journal* 39/153 (1929), 41–57.

15 B. Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies—New Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

16 D. Leiser, D. Nofar and P. Wagner-Egger, 'The Conspiratorial Style in Lay Economic Thinking', *PloS one* 12/3 (2017), e0171238, accessed at https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0171238.

However, the Hotelling-Downs view misses an important aspect of reality. In the model, members have no agency: the party leadership chooses the political agenda to maximise the votes received. Changes only occur when the preferences of voters change. The situation of the largest party (by seats won) in the 2023 elections is an example of this. The PVV, the populist party of Geert Wilders, obtained 38 seats in the Tweede Kamer, but it has no members (apart from Wilders himself). The success of the PVV indicates that an electorally successful party does not need members. It has positioned itself well, in terms of the Hotelling model, and that is all that is necessary. Moreover, the party with the largest number of members in the Netherlands, Forum for Democracy, only won three seats. So, having members is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for winning votes.

A direct consequence of the Hotelling-Downs model is that political parties position themselves around the median voter, that is, the voter in the middle of the left–right political axis. The 'centre' of the political spectrum should be active and brimming with political activity. Because it is in the middle, the place where the majority of people are, one would expect parties to position themselves in the centre. But that is not the case.

The problem with the Hotelling-Downs model is that it can only take one dimension (left–right) into account, while in reality political convictions have multiple dimensions. Trying to fit the political beliefs and interests of people into a single left–right dimension resembles the situation of designing a fighter pilot seat for the 'average pilot'. Taking averages over several dimensions, none of the actual pilots would fit in such a seat.[17] In the same way, taking averages over all political standpoints leads to a party-of-averages that nobody wants to vote for.

Remarkably, surveys show that there is dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy among centrist voters. A Pew study from 2024 finds that 'those in the

17 R. Pettys-Baker et al., 'A Contemporary Investigation Into Anthropometric Dimensions and Applications for Design 70 Years After the Publication of "The Average Man"', *Design for Inclusion* 45 (2022), 37–44, doi:10.54941/ahfe1001867.

ideological center are least likely to feel represented by parties'.[18] Earlier Pew studies had similar findings, that the voters of the middle are the least happy. So, while we might predict that parties are fighting for the centre, they are not. Or they are trying but failing spectacularly. Many traditional parties seem to have lost this capability, or willingness, to engage with voters in the centre.

This could be due to a limited ability to adapt to the new political realities. The double dynamics of new parties and the rise of populism in the Netherlands may reflect this. For example, in the 2023 elections, the Farmers' Party became the largest party in the Dutch upper house.[19] This happened almost overnight, and at a time when the centre–right party usually associated with farmers, the CDA, was in government.

Another issue that classical voter theory misses is the role of commitment. This is typically a blind side for economists, as put succinctly by Amartya Sen when he called them 'rational fools'.[20] This criticism was directly aimed at those who believe in models where preferences are fixed and any behaviour can be explained by utility-maximisation. Such thinking shows a complete disregard for what actually drives people: empathy and commitment. The latter, commitment, is what party membership is about.

Commitment is the mechanism whereby people commit to a cause, *in spite of the cost*. This is in direct opposition to behaviour that is driven by cost–benefit considerations. As such, membership of a political party is a signalling device used to show commitment. Being a member is not always fun; it is costly and it does not always benefit the individual. Therefore, becoming a member is a political act, a commitment that has meaning for both the party and the member.

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18 R. Wike et al., *Representative Democracy Remains a Popular Ideal, but People Around the World Are Critical of How It's Working*, Pew Research (February 2024), 16, accessed at https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/02/gap_2024.02.28_democracy-closed-end_report.pdf.

19 Siegmann, 'The Farmers' Revolt in the Netherlands'.

20 A. Sen, 'Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (1977), 317–44.

Two avenues for renewal

To enrich the debate and add something constructive on the future of political parties, allow me to sketch two possible avenues for the future. They are offered not as predictions, but rather as suggestions for development.

One avenue is that of having more *strategic autonomy*: parties might need to become more independent from social media and the attention economy. They can offer more value to membership by having more offline, real-world meetings and genuine interactions (rather than the online interactions that have proven, over time, to be artificial, superficial and, in many ways, meaningless). They have active think tanks outside the limelight that have intensive interactions with other think tanks. They debate each other and reflect on the work done by other parties.

The other avenue is providing value through sharing *member-only information*. Being a member of a political party could provide behind-the-scenes insights into what happens in the political capital, what the processes are and what kind of decisions are coming up in the months ahead. A member of such a party would be like a subscriber to a podcast or magazine—paying for access to information that is otherwise hard to obtain. This function resembles the model of online membership platforms that offer exclusive content, or better or earlier access, aimed at people who are engaged with the brand. Such content is not simply better, but is tailored to those showing an interest.

Conclusion

On the timeline of civilisation, parliamentary democracy with a functioning party-political system is still relatively new. It has evolved in fits and starts. The current changes in the external environment and information and culture, will force it to adapt again. And it probably will. How societies and the political community deal with these adaptations is the relevant question.

In this chapter I have tried to make sense of the political party as a commitment device. It is just as relevant as ever, but its environment has changed. Parties no longer seem to be targeting the centre voter—and this phenomenon can be seen in both European countries and in the US. This is a puzzle.

At the same time, the relevance of party membership is that it is still loosely linked to electoral success. The data for the Netherlands shows a high correlation between party membership and election outcomes. It is still a valid, though noisy, measure of political energy.

Finally, I have sketched two avenues for the development of the modern party. On the one hand, parties could evolve into more closed and dedicated organisations to provide a bulwark against an increasingly polarised and noisy media landscape. On the other, they could take up the task of transmitting political decisions and debates to an interested audience. Either of these avenues seems useful and would contribute to a more mature parliamentary democracy.

Shallow Roots

Political Membership Trends and Prospects in Central and Eastern Europe

Mantas Adomėnas

Behold, a sower went forth to sow; and when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up. Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth. And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.

(Matthew 13:3–6)

The issue of political party membership and of the survival of political parties is inextricably linked to the question of the future of liberal, or classical, democracy. The existence and adequate functioning of political parties is central to the currently accepted model of democratic governance, insofar as political parties are more than key players in competitive elections; they do not simply enter and exit electoral competition, but are also active players between elections. In this way, party organisations 'represent the main arena in which citizens are not only able to engage and/or disengage in traditional methods of participation, but can also socialize with politics, shape political agendas, and evaluate policy implementation'.[21] This is therefore the most pertinent issue in the context of the 20-year-long continuous democratic decline worldwide[22] and in view of the 'perfect storm' for global democratic prospects which has been created by the convergence of triple crises. The first crisis is an institutional one: both in terms of national democratic institutions, such as the system of checks and balances, the media and political parties; and the post–Second World War multilateral institutions created to safeguard and promote democratic governance globally. The second is the crisis in democracy's grand narrative, which has failed to significantly evolve past the facile post–Cold War consensus and 'end of history' mentality. The third and final crisis is that of political will, most recently embodied by the US, the paramount champion of democracy globally, apparently relinquishing its commitment

21 S. Gherghina, A. Iancu and S. Soare, 'Party Membership and Its Conceptualization in Democratizing European Countries. An Introduction', in S. Gherghina, A. Iancu and S. Soare (eds.), *Party Members and Their Importance in Non-EU Countries. A Comparative Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2018), 1.

22 Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2025. The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights* (February 2025), 1–30, accessed at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/FITW_World_2025_Feb.2025.pdf.

to promote democratic governance and no longer treating the standard of democracy and human rights as the central vector of global geopolitical alignment.

What are the specifics of these developments for political party membership in Central and Eastern Europe? What do they portend for democratic development in the region—and perhaps beyond? Are there meaningful lessons to be extracted from Central and Eastern European (CEE) trends in political party membership dynamics and phenomena which have more universal application?

Political party membership trends in Central and Eastern Europe

Overview

Political party membership in Central and Eastern Europe has generally been low and has further declined over the past two decades. Whereas in Western democracies an average of 5%–6% of the population are still formal party members, in post-Communist democracies this figure is only about 3%.[23] For example, recent reports find that only some 0.5%–1% of Poles,[24] about 3% of Lithuanians,[25] and roughly 2%–5% of Bulgarians[26] belong to a political party. Even countries with higher membership, such as Estonia, only reach around 4.9%.[27] Furthermore, many CEE political parties have witnessed steep declines in membership—in the Czech case, total party rolls fell from over 500,000 members in 1992 to around 170,000 by 2007—and stagnated thereafter.[28]

23 See D. Nikić Čakar and G. Čular, 'What Explains Party Membership in Post-Yugoslav Countries: Socialism, Nationalism, Clientelism or False Reporting?', *Politics in Central Europe* 19/1 (2023), 61–87; and J. J. Chromiec, *Boosting Party Engagement in Central and Eastern Europe*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Policy Paper no. 10 (July 2020).

24 BTI Poland, *BTI Transformation Index: Poland Country Report 2024*, Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024), accessed at https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/POL.

25 BTI Lithuania, *BTI Transformation Index: Lithuania Country Report 2024*, Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024), accessed at https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/LTU.

26 BTI Bulgaria, *BTI Transformation Index: Bulgaria Country Report 2024*, Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024), accessed at https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/BGR.

27 Chromiec, *Boosting Party Engagement in Central and Eastern Europe*.

28 Gherghina, Iancu and Soare, 'Party Membership and Its Conceptualization in Democratizing European Countries.

Table 1 Approximate party membership in selected Eastern European countries (share of population)

Country	Party members (% of population)
Poland	~0.5%–1% (declined to 0.5% in 2022)
Lithuania	~3%
Bulgaria	~2%–5%
Estonia	~4.9% (2020)
Western European average	**~5.6%**

Source: Collected data from party registries, government reports, academic estimates (2023–5).

While party membership in Eastern Europe remains relatively low compared to in Western Europe, some parties maintain significant grass-roots networks, particularly the dominant ruling parties.

Table 2 Party membership as a percentage of the electorate (2024–5)

Country	Leading parties	Estimated party membership (% of electorate)	Trend
Hungary	Fidesz—Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz)	~2.0%	Stable/slight decline
Poland	Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość)	~1.6%	Stable
Slovakia	Direction—Social Democracy (Smer—sociálna demokracia, Smer–SD), Progressive Slovakia (Progresívne Slovensko, PS)	~1.2%	Declining
Romania	Social Democracy Party (Partidul Social Democrat), National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal)	~1.5%	Slight increase
Czech Republic	Yes 2011 (ANO 2011), Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana)	~1.0%	Declining
Bulgaria	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitie na Bŭlgaria, GERB), We Continue the Change—Democratic Bulgaria (Prodŭlzhavame promyanata—Demokratichna Bŭlgariya)	~1.0%	Declining

Sources: Collected data from party registries, government reports, academic estimates (2023–5).

Membership dynamics (2008–23)

Across the region, party membership levels have remained low and, in many cases, have fallen further over the last 10–15 years. In Poland, for example, membership fell from about 0.9% of the population in 2020 to roughly 0.5% in 2022.[29] In Czechia, established parties (Civic Democratic Party, Social Democracy/Sociální demokracie) have seen membership collapse, while new populist parties (ANO, Freedom and Direct Democracy/Svoboda a přímá demokracie) have deliberately *limited* formal membership in order to retain tight control by the leadership.[30] These trends reflect two common dynamics: on the one hand, an ongoing decline of traditional 'mass party' organisations and, on the other, the rise of personality-driven or 'movement' parties. Early scholarly literature on democracy in the region expected new parties in Central and Eastern Europe to remain weakly organised and dominated by leaders,[31] and the past 15 years have confirmed that expectation: most CEE parties simply did not rebuild large grass-roots bases after the 1990s. In short, as the scholars repeatedly note, CEE parties tend to be small, leader-centred 'cadre' organisations rather than mass-membership parties.[32]

Among the parliamentary parties in the Baltics and Visegrád states, membership shares tend to cluster around 1%–3% of voters.[33] The Baltic states show some variation: Estonia's parties grew their membership rolls throughout the 1990s and 2000s to reach about 5% of the electorate, but this growth has since stabilised;[34] membership levels in Latvia and Lithuania, however, remain lower. In the Western Balkans and Romania, clientelist politics has sometimes produced higher nominal figures (e.g. the older parties in Romania or Serbia have millions of nominal members), but these often reflect patronage networks rather than active volunteers.

29 BTI Poland, *BTI Transformation Index*.

30 BTI Czechia, *BTI Transformation Index: Czechia Country Report 2024*, Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024), accessed at https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/CZE.

31 Nikić Čakar and Čular, 'What Explains Party Membership in Post-Yugoslav Countries'.

32 Ibid.; see also BTI Czechia, *BTI Transformation Index*.

33 Chromiec, *Boosting Party Engagement in Central and Eastern Europe*.

34 Ibid.

Overall, Eastern Europe's parties have not bucked the long-term trend of declining mass membership that has been seen worldwide.[35] In fact, surveys show that citizens' trust in parties is very low (often below 20%),[36] while active party membership is among the rarest forms of civic engagement (only 2%–5% in most East European countries).[37]

Regional characteristics: Central and Eastern Europe vs. Western Europe

Several features distinguish CEE party systems from those of Western Europe. First, membership is uniformly low (as Table 1 illustrates)—roughly half of the Western average.[38] Parties generally do not have entrenched class or ideological bases, nor do they draw on century-old membership traditions. This leads to weaker organisational roots: as Dario Nikić Čakar and Goran Čular have pointed out, 'political parties in new democracies . . . have rather weak organizational capacity with a marginalized role for members'.[39] In practice, most Eastern parties are *cadre parties*—tight networks formed around a leader—rather than the mass parties of the post-war West. Many newer parties adopt a professionalised structure with only a handful of active members, treating membership more as a symbolic credential than as a source of manpower or influence.[40]

Second, there is an anti-party sentiment across the region which leads to party personalisation. As Jakub Chromiec notes, Central and Eastern Europe is dominated by 'virtual' politics and 'anti-party' feelings so strong that few organisations even call themselves a 'party'.[41] Voters often perceive parties as corrupt patronage machines,

35 P. Delwit, 'Still in Decline? Party Membership in Europe', in E. Van Haute (ed.), *Party Membership in Europe: Exploration Into the Anthills of Party Politics* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2011), 25–42.

36 BTI Lithuania, *BTI Transformation Index*.

37 BTI Bulgaria, *BTI Transformation Index.*

38 See Nikić Čakar and Goran Čular, 'What Explains Party Membership in Post-Yugoslav Countries'.

39 Ibid., 63.

40 Ibid.

41 Chromiec, Boosting Party Engagement in Central and Eastern Europe, 17.

while ruling parties justify this sentiment by frequently rewarding supporters with state jobs or contracts rather than party membership perks. Electoral volatility is higher than in the West, with new populist or protest parties emerging frequently.[42] Based on this, in many countries, membership appeals less as a civic duty and more as a vehicle for influence or patronage.

Third, clientelism and patronage are widespread. In several Balkan and Eastern European cases, joining the governing party can yield tangible private benefits (such as access to jobs, contracts and social programmes), creating incentives for mass enrolment that are hardly ideological. Studies note that some countries (e.g. Serbia) have high nominal party membership rolls primarily for clientelistic reasons.[43] However, as public trust is low, many citizens see little personal value in formal membership beyond potential influence or material gain.[44]

Fourth, while first-generation political parties in Eastern Europe (i.e. those created immediately after the fall of Communism and continuously active since) tend to model their structure (including membership) on catch-all, broad-church, classical political parties, second-generation political parties (those founded in the 2000s) have taken a different approach to membership structure. For example, new parties are increasingly tending to adopt multi-speed or multi-tiered membership models (for example, PS in Slovakia; and the Alliance for the Union of Romanians/Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor in Romania), which offers the chance to enlist people either as basic supporters (adding them to an email list, encouraging activism) or as full members (allowing them to participate in internal votes and candidate selection).[45] Movement-style parties, such as Momentum Movement (Momentum Mozgalom, Hungary) and PS, inspired by Western counterparts such as France's On the Move!

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42 Gherghina, Iancu and Soare, 'Party Membership and Its Conceptualization in Democratizing European Countries', 3.

43 Chromiec, *Boosting Party Engagement in Central and Eastern Europe*.

44 BTI Bulgaria, *BTI Transformation Index*; BTI Lithuania, BTI Transformation Index.

45 M. Hooghe and A.-K. Kölln, 'Types of Party Affiliation and the Multi-Speed Party: What Kind of Party Support Is Functionally Equivalent to Party Membership?', *Party Politics* 26/4 (2018), 355–65.

(*En Marche!*), emphasise horizontal structures, issue-based mobilisation and digital openness (through the use of apps such as Slack and Discord). In particular, PS, a new liberal–progressive movement party, seems to have implemented a movement-style openness model through innovative multi-speed membership (formal members vs. supporting sympathisers), open policy hackathons, citizen assemblies and a sophisticated digital strategy (highly active on Instagram and TikTok, appealing to younger, urban voters).[46] In contrast, another Slovak party, Smer–SD, exhibits the traits of a former mass party that is now shifting towards a clientelist–elite format. Its membership has fallen due to scandals and leadership fatigue, but Smer retains control of vast patronage networks in some regions thanks to its individual members.

Another established CEE party, GERB (Bulgaria), which can be considered a technocratic–conservative hybrid party, has adopted the strategy of technocratic and controlled growth. GERB has strict membership vetting, resulting in fewer but more loyal members, and it emphasises mayoral networks and local project delivery. Furthermore, in the words of Kopeček and Svačinová, 'If first- and second-generation parties exhibit strong decentralization tendencies, new parties are precisely the opposite. Andrej Babiš' ANO [Czechia] is distinguished by its enormous centralization, almost absolute dominance of its leader, and lack of intra-party democracy. . . . ANO can be characterized as a perfect example of a business-firm party; one that arose thanks to the initiative of a political entrepreneur'.[47] In the case of TOP 09 (with TOP standing for Tradice Odpovědnost Prosperita/Tradition Responsibility Prosperity; Czechia), despite it being the liberal opponent to ANO, 'The dominance of the leadership, especially of the party's executive bodies, is evident . . ., and the party places huge emphasis on professionalization. . . . Overall, TOP 09 is primarily a vehicle for the party elite and, in this sense, it approaches the notion of a modern cadre party'.[48]

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46 Ibid.; see also A. L. P. Pirro and D. Róna, 'Far-Right Activism in Hungary: Youth Participation in Jobbik and Its Network', *European Societies* 21/4 (2019), 603–26.

47 L. Kopeček and P. Svačinová, 'Between Organizational Extremes: Czech Parties After a Political Earthquake', in K. Sobolewska-Myslik, B. Kosowska-Gąstoł and P. Borowiec (eds.), *Organizational Structures of Political Parties in Central and Eastern European Countries* (Krakow: Jagielonian University Press, 2017), 154.

48 Ibid., 155.

In summary, CEE parties have in common the decline in the mass-membership model and a reliance on informal networks, and are often personality-driven organisations. This contrasts with Western Europe's democracies, which are still somewhat rooted in strong parties.[49]

New models of party organisation and membership

Faced with weak grass roots, some CEE parties have experimented with alternative organisational models. A common innovation is 'multi-speed' membership: parties introduce a variety of supporter statuses to broaden their appeal without full-membership obligations. For instance, many parties now welcome sympathisers or 'friends of the party', who receive newsletters or limited rights in exchange for minor financial support rather than paying full membership fees. Comparative research finds that it is modern parties that offer these softer entry routes: registered sympathisers often enjoy similar privileges to members (e.g. participation in primaries, voting in leadership contests) but without formal membership fees.[50] This model emerged in Western Europe (for example, We Can/Podemos in Spain has 'circle' members; Macron's party uses digital supporters) and is spreading eastward. While CEE parties are still catching up, some have created parallel structures (e.g. youth wings, donors' clubs, online 'platforms' or 'councils') to engage non-members.

Another trend is the rise of 'movement' or populist parties that downplay formal organisation. New parties often launch around an issue or charismatic figure and rely on media-driven branding rather than member activism. For example, several Czech and Slovak populist parties in the 2010s initially operated more as if they were activist networks than along the lines of traditional parties.[51] Similarly, anti-corruption movements or local protest may transform into parties without undertaking

49 BTI Czechia, *BTI Transformation Index.* See also Nikić Čakar and Čular, 'What Explains Party Membership in Post-Yugoslav Countries'.

50 R. Gomez et al., 'Joining the Party: Incentives and Motivations of Members and Registered Sympathizers in Contemporary Multi-Speed Membership Parties', *Party Politics* 27/4 (2021), 779–90.

51 BTI Czechia, *BTI Transformation Index*.

extensive membership drives; they leverage public enthusiasm and volunteers in election campaigns, but keep formal membership small.

Hybrid models have also appeared: parties that combine a small hardcore cadre with an open digital presence. In short, Central and Eastern Europe is seeing organisational experimentation—from classic cadre parties to loose follower networks—as actors seek to mobilise supporters in a fragmented media age.

Uses of party members today

Despite low numbers, party members still serve several functions:

- Electoral mobilisation. Party members are the core campaigners on the ground. They distribute leaflets, canvass voters, organise local events, and sometimes act as poll observers or marshals. For smaller parties, a dedicated membership can make the difference in local campaigns.
- Fundraising. Members pay annual dues (though typically small) and may donate more. Parties often cultivate donors as a separate category, but members remain a source of predictable funding.
- Candidate supply and internal legitimacy. Parties often recruit their electoral candidates from among long-time members. In internal votes (for leaders or policies), members cast ballots, giving the party leadership a semblance of broader support. Even if party leaders dominate, having real members provides legitimacy and a 'human face' at the community level.

However, many scholars note that in practice formal members are 'no longer an absolute necessity', or at least much less so than in the past.[52] With state subsidies and external advisors, parties can operate with very few members. In fact, newer CEE parties sometimes bypass members altogether when selecting candidates, favouring technocrats or celebrity nominees. Yet parties still use members as a

52 Delwit, 'Still in Decline?', 26.

tool when convenient—for example, mobilising them for signature drives to register a new party or approaching them for grass-roots feedback. In sum, membership today is often a hybrid resource: valued for campaigning and recruitment, but no longer essential to party survival.

Diversified party statuses (members, friends, donors etc.)

An emerging feature is that parties now offer multiple forms of affiliation beyond simple membership. As noted, some institutions distinguish *full members* (with rights to vote in congresses etc.) from *sympathizers* or *supporters* (who may register online for campaign updates). Other statuses include being a 'friend of the party', or a member of an advocacy club or donor circle. For instance, a party may invite generous donors into an exclusive 'sponsors club' or give them honours without requiring them to do the work of regular members. In many countries, party statutes formally include categories such as *honorary member* or *associate member*.

This creates a kind of status competition: parties try to attract people through the use of different labels and benefits. Some CEE parties (especially those that aim to appear more modern) explicitly advertise such tiers. A recent comparative study argues that members and sympathisers differ in why they join and what they expect from membership.[53] Practically, this means that parties must balance offering enough involvement to each group. For example, donors might gain access to leadership events, sympathisers might get early information on candidates and official members might retain formal voting rights. This segmentation reflects a wider trend: parties want to count 'supporters' even if they are not full dues-paying members. Also, collecting supporters' data helps parties to realise voter-segmentation models and to implement mobilisation operations. The net effect is a blurred line between members and casual affiliates, with parties juggling multiple engagement categories.

53 Gomez et al., 'Joining the Party'.

Member motivations and benefits

What do party members themselves hope to gain? Empirical studies (mostly from Western Europe) provide a useful framework. A comprehensive survey of modern parties found two broad incentive types: instrumental incentives (personal gains) and expressive incentives (values and identity). In that study, full members often cited collective outcomes (influencing policy) and altruistic motives, whereas looser supporters prioritised the chance to influence candidate selection.[54] Translating these findings to Central and Eastern Europe, long-term members typically expect to shape their party's direction, advance a cause or build a career. They may value internal influence (e.g. having a vote in the party congress or preselecting candidates) and collective achievements (e.g. seeing policies implemented). By contrast, affiliated 'friends' or registered supporters might be more interested in *selective benefits*—such as meeting party leaders, attending certain events or securing nominations—without committing to paying dues or full activism.

Qualitative studies available in CEE contexts echo these findings. In many democracies in the region, people who join parties often do so for networking and career reasons (e.g. securing local posts, patronage) and/or out of ideological affinity (i.e. joining a movement they believe in). For example, grass-roots members of parties in post-Communist countries have reported motivations ranging from dissatisfaction with the status quo to the hope of social advancement.[55] In sum, members believe membership can bring them access and impact—access to political networks or benefits, and impact on policy or leadership choices. Whether these expectations are met depends on the party's internal culture. Some members become disillusioned if parties remain opaque and organised from the top-down (a common complaint[56]), while others remain committed out of personal loyalty or ideology.

54 Ibid.

55 Gomez et al., 'Joining the Party'.

56 Chromiec, *Boosting Party Engagement in Central and Eastern Europe*.

Internal party democracy: risks and opportunities

Granting party members more power through internal democracy has both potential benefits and pitfalls.

The opportunities are as follows: member-driven processes (such as open primaries or internal referendums) can enhance legitimacy and engagement. When parties allow broad participation, it can galvanise the membership base, increase trust (because members feel heard) and identify committed activists. A more democratic party may also better reflect public opinion shifts, reducing accusations of elitism. In theory, empowered members could serve as a check on autocratic leaders and ensure that the party remains responsive to its constituency. Strengthening party democracy is often recommended as a way to reverse anti-party sentiment in the region.[57]

However, there are also risks. CEE political parties have historically been 'leader-centred with limited internal democracy', which deliberately reserves decision-making for the top tier of party membership.[58] Rapidly opening up these closed structures can lead to factionalism or capture by special interests. For example, if an inexperienced or fringe group organises better within the party, it might win nominations and push the party towards a radical position. In at least one case in Europe, a populist leader has used open primaries to secure his candidacy (in September 2017, the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle; Italy) membership voted online in a leadership primary; Luigi Di Maio won with 82.6% of the vote to become the party's candidate for prime minister in the 2018 general election). Moreover, a sudden shift to member power can frustrate aspiring leaders rising through the internal party structures and cause splits if ambitions are thwarted. Some scholars warn simply opening party statutes is *not sufficient* to revitalise parties; without cultural and institutional reforms, it can even accelerate decline by exposing internal divisions.[59]

57 Nikić Čakar and Čular, 'What Explains Party Membership in Post-Yugoslav Countries'.

58 Chromiec, *Boosting Party Engagement in Central and Eastern Europe*.

59 Ibid.

In Central and Eastern Europe specifically, the net effect of internal democratisation has been mixed. A few parties have introduced primaries or more inclusive congresses, but often as a façade: long-term members complain that the real power still lies with the founder or an informal leadership circle. Others have seen members loyal to one faction use reforms to oust rivals, weakening party unity. In practice, giving members more say is not sufficient on its own to resolve broader legitimacy or engagement problems. It must be combined with other policies, such as transparent party financing, strong civic education and a culture of accountability.

On the benefits and dangers of experimentation: the case of the Lithuanian Conservatives

In Lithuanian politics, it is the Conservatives, also known as Homeland Union,[60] a centre–right party belonging to the European People's Party political family, that has the longest consistent record of electoral and party-management innovations. I would like to highlight two episodes from its chequered history.

Episode one: the 2018 presidential open primary

When, in the wake of 2016's close parliamentary defeat, Gabrielius Landsbergis was re-elected as the chair of the Conservatives in 2017, he ran on a platform of reforming and rejuvenating the party. One of the pillars of the proposed reform was to open up the candidate selection procedure to broader society through open primaries. The presidential election of 2019 was chosen as the object of this novel electoral experiment.

It would be correct to see the Conservatives' experiments with the candidate selection procedure as the party's response to the constant demand for novelty that is endemic to the Lithuanian political climate. In this regard, it is on a par with other

60 The party's official title is Homeland Union—Lithuanian Christian Democrats (Tėvynės sąjunga—Lietuvos krikščionys demokratai), and its *full* official title is Homeland Union (Conservatives, Political Prisoners and Deportees, Nationalists)—Lithuanian Christian Democrats. Mercifully, it is universally referred to as, simply, the Conservatives.

electoral and political innovations that the Homeland Union has introduced, such as in-depth polling, social-network and digital campaigning, and micro-targeting, as well as other innovative approaches to campaigning and political communication.

However, one must also consider other factors that came to light during the Conservatives' Pyrrhic victory in the first round of the 2016 parliamentary election. It was a Pyrrhic victory because their first place in the polls was followed by a total rout in the second round, thereby leaving the party unable to form a government—and in opposition once again. This reversal revealed the party's Achilles' heel: second-choice voters. Their role becomes crucial in the run-offs, where candidates seek to enlarge their core electorate with sympathetic second-choice voters—those who would consider voting for a party if, for any reason, they could not vote for their primary choice.

Thus, while the Conservatives benefited from a stable, staunch, very disciplined and respectable (in Lithuanian terms) circle of voters, the percentage of second-choice voters was the second lowest among the parliamentary parties. The overall number of voters was thus not sufficient to guarantee a parliamentary majority—or even grant a victory in the run-offs with most of the other parties' candidates, given the paucity of second-choice voters.

These problems were predicated on the central issue: image. The Conservatives were seen, according to their own focus-group data, as (a) a party associated with intrigues, deception and machinations; (b) negative, merely critical; (c) angry and quarrelsome; (d) arrogant, distant from the people; (e) self-enclosed and unapproachable; (f) senescent, mildewed and obsolete; (g) preachy and moralistic; and (h) harbouring radical nationalist and reactionary elements, having the nickname 'the Taliban'.

While these challenges could not all be resolved in one stroke, the new party leadership elected after the electoral fiasco of 2016 set about addressing them through a set of reforms laid out in Gabrielius Landsbergis's 2017 leadership manifesto—and holding open primaries was one of the pillars of the set. The reforms were meant to open up the party's structures to those supporters who were wary of joining the

party's membership, as well as to rejuvenate its voting base through a novel practice, thus appealing to experiment-prone first-time voters.

The open primary for the 2019 presidential election was due to take place in the second half of 2018, to give the chosen candidate sufficient time to campaign before the election scheduled for May of the following year.[61]

By mid-September 2018, Homeland Union local branches had put forth 12 prospective presidential candidates; the rules allowed for the nomination of non-party members. Most were courtesy nominations, and 9 out of the 12 withdrew their nominations. The remaining three were Gitanas Nausėda, chief economist at SEB Bank, the principal commentator on the state of the Lithuanian economy for the last 20 years; Ingrida Šimonytė, former minister of finance in Andrius Kubilius's Conservative government of 2008–12, and the only card-carrying party member; and Vygaudas Ušackas, a diplomat and former minister of foreign affairs in the same government.[62] (Subsequently Gitanas Nausėda withdrew, reckoning that his prospects of winning the primaries were not great and that he stood a better chance standing on his own.)

What followed was a short but intense open primary campaign between the two remaining candidates, Šimonytė and Ušackas, which captured national attention and did not yield to its American prototypes in terms of sheer ferocity.

In addition to the 15,000-strong party membership, more than 18,000 independent supporters registered to vote in the Conservatives' open primaries. Although these numbers do not look impressive (the Lithuanian electoral roll contains close to 2.5 million voters), the hype the primaries generated was out of all proportion with the

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61 See BNS, 'TS-LKD ruošiasi rinkimams – kandidatais galės būti siūlomi ir nepartiniai', *Lrt.lt*, 28 April 2018, accessed at https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/210828/ts-lkd-ruosiasi-rinkimams-kandidatais-gales-buti-siulomi-ir-nepartiniai.The open primary procedure itself is outlined in the following Homeland Union document: TS-LKD, 'TS-LKD paramos kandidatui Lietuvos Respublikos Prezidento rinkimuose suteikimo tvarka', *Tsajunga.lt*, 28 April 2018, accessed at https://tsajunga.lt/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Prezidento-tvarka.pdf.

62 S. Gudavičius, 'Konservatorių pirminiams prezidento rinkimams liko trys kandidatai', *Verslo žinios*, 19 September 2019, accessed at https://www.vz.lt/verslo-aplinka/2018/09/19/konservatoriu-pirminiams-prezidento-rinkimams-liko-trys-kandidatai.

voter numbers. This new genre of political competition proved to be extraordinarily intriguing; for more than two months it was the principal political story in the media.

The competition brought out the contrast between the candidates. The 55-year-old Vygaudas Ušackas, a grey-haired former Lithuanian ambassador to the US and the UK, and subsequent EU envoy to Afghanistan and Moscow, sought to look experienced, presidential and to appeal to traditional conservative values; he frequently came off as stiff and generic. He was no match for the vivacious, 44-year-old Ingrida Šimonytė, who exuded energy and competence, and was famous for her sparkling humour and propensity to quote Good Soldier Švejk.[63]

While the candidates themselves abstained from criticising each other in public, the campaign was quite vicious at the grass-roots level, among the supporters of each candidate. Šimonytė was labelled a crypto–liberal bent on perverting authentic conservative values, with her unmarried status flaunted as grounds for insinuations born of fevered imaginations. Ušackas was fiercely criticised as pro-Russian (he continued to advocate for 'constructive dialogue' and 'pragmatic relations' with Moscow) and it was even suggested that he was the 'Trojan horse' of a putative Kremlin takeover plot. Thus, the voters in the primary election had to answer two questions: (1) which candidate would be more appealing, convincing and more likely to win the presidential election next spring? and (2) which was worse—a crypto–liberal or a pro-Russian candidate? Even though there was no polling carried out on this score, the general impression was that the first question was more relevant to independent supporters, while the party membership bitterly agonised over the second one.

When the vote came in November 2018, the result was not hard to surmise. Ingrida Šimonytė won hands down, receiving 78.71% of votes cast, compared to Vygaudas Ušackas's 21.29%. Out of 33,339 registered voters, some 20,859 turned up to vote at the polling stations located in 60 cities and towns of Lithuania and the principal émigré centres abroad. Turnout was 55% among party members and 69% among

63 A satirical First World War character, the creation of the Czech bohemian anarchist writer Jaroslav Hašek (1883–1923), Švejk is better known in Eastern Europe.

independent supporters. The two biggest cities, Vilnius and Kaunas, accounted for more than half (50.57%) of the votes cast, but only 27.5% of all voters. This figure is important, as it points to the type of electorate that this novelty of open primaries attracted: mostly young, urban, educated and socially mobile voters. While Šimonytė also clearly won among party members (albeit no such separate statistics exist), it was obvious to outside observers that it was the registered independent supporters that made her victory a landslide.

This outcome left the way to the presidential election clear for Ingrida Šimonytė, and she ran a youthful, trendy and energetic presidential campaign which appealed to the young, educated and aspiring urban middle-class. She attracted quite a few liberal voters who, frankly, found the unprepossessing and underwhelming liberal candidate boring.

As the sun set on election day, it became clear that Šimonytė had managed to attract a volume of support unwitnessed by the Conservatives since the 1990s. She received 446,719 votes; the last time the Homeland Union or a Conservative candidate had collected a remotely similar amount of votes was in 1996 (parliamentary election, 409,585 votes). She beat Gitanas Nausėda by a fraction (some 5,323 votes, or 1.2% of the total). This surge in electoral support was clearly due to attracting new voters and overcoming the narrow barriers of party allegiance. The mood in her election headquarters was triumphant.

And then the story of 2016 repeated itself all over again. In the run-off, two weeks later, Šimonytė not only failed to increase her basket of votes; she actually lost some (receiving 443,394 votes), while Nausėda very nearly doubled his support (881,495 votes, compared to 441,396 in the first round). The second-choice voter curse was still there.

While the primary election did not resolve the second-choice voter problem for the Conservatives, or at least for Ingrida Šimonytė's campaign, it was a step in the right direction. The problem would not be so acute for the Conservatives in the 2020 parliamentary election. At least in part this was because of the exercise in openness and reaching out beyond its circle of 'usual suspects' of supporters that took place during the 2018 open primaries.

What the open primaries certainly did was to cobble together an impressive Conservatives–liberal voter coalition. This not only stood Šimonytė in good stead in the first round of the presidential election, but also forged a bond of political sympathy at the grass-roots level between the Conservatives and the two liberal forces—the Liberal Movement (*Liberalų sąjūdis*) and the Freedom Party (*Laisvės partija*). It served as the template for the Conservatives–liberal coalition following the 2020 parliamentary election.

This is not to say that the open primaries resolved all the problems linked to, and born out of, the Conservatives' image problem. The ranking of the Conservatives' parliamentary list in preparation for the 2020 election highlighted a problem which had taken many years to grow but hove into view only then: the growing divergence between the party membership and the party electorate. Paradoxically—but perhaps understandably—while the Conservatives' party organisations were growing increasingly isolated and becoming more and more traditionalist, strident and radicalised, the Conservatives' electorate increasingly included a growing number of younger, more liberal voters. Things came to head in the summer of 2020: the party's parliamentary candidates' list, as ranked by the party membership, contained an unusually high number of divisive, radical and nationalist political figures in the top 20 slots. When the list was submitted to ranking by actual voters, however, it transpired that the Conservatives' electorate tended to favour more moderate and liberal figures.

The underlying problem is a result of a trend whereby the party membership is becoming more radical and insular even as its electorate expands in the liberal direction. This is happening at least partly because rigid institutionalised party structures are not suitable for the networked and fluid twenty-first century social reality. The open primary election mechanism may have shown a way out of the dilemma. By bringing external stakeholders into party-political processes and decisions, it could bridge the gap between the perspectives of party members and those of outside supporters, and replace the rigidly delineated and circumscribed model of political party community with an open-ended, fuzzy and flexible one which would be in considerably less danger of becoming isolated from the life and trends of the surrounding society.

Thus, the 2018 Conservatives' open primaries may have unintentionally functioned as an experiment in creating the model for a novel, open-ended, flexible and networked type of political organisation, better suited to twenty-first century social realities. However, the promise and the potential of this experiment remained unfulfilled—no systematic changes, either in the by-laws or in the policy of the party, were introduced to bring the external stakeholders, or supporters, closer to the party's everyday functions. No networked community was created, and supporters' involvement in the political processes of the Conservatives remained, at best, episodic. The promised reforms to rejuvenate the party were not carried out, and the promises were largely forgotten in the tumultuous 2020–4 period during which the Conservatives were part of the coalition government: dealing with Covid-19, the Belarusian hybrid attack on the Lithuanian borders using weaponised migration, the massive Chinese economic sanctions following the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius and Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine took precedence.

Episode two: the 2025 party leadership election

Fast forward to 2025. The divergence between the internal (party members') and the external (voters') ideological outlooks did not become a major political problem for the party in 2020, but it did become one in 2024. Following the 2024 parliamentary election defeat—which was fairly predictable, given the volatility of the Lithuanian politics and the difficulties faced by the Conservatives–liberal coalition government—Gabrielius Landsbergis resigned from party leadership. Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė, universally seen as the natural next party leader, chose not to run, citing exhausting prime-ministerial duties as her official excuse (while her private aversion to party politics was whispered as the unofficial real reason). The party leadership election—which followed the open primary model, with registered supporters allowed to vote for the party leader alongside fully paid-up party members—opened the field to new candidates.

The candidate preferred by Šimonytė (and the Conservatives' moderate wing), Monika Navickienė (aged 44), the erstwhile minister of social affairs and labour and a community-minded, warm and engaging politician, popular among party members,

was hobbled by a corruption scandal involving a free flight for her and her family to Dubai on a private jet in the company of a shady semi-related businessman.[64] Thus, the duty of representing the moderate–liberal wing of the party fell on Radvilė Morkūnaitė-Mikulėnienė (41), deputy speaker of the Parliament, an honest, dutiful, earnest and straightforward politician of the younger generation—with, however, low energy levels and the permanent air of a second-in-command.

In the leadership election, she had to face Laurynas Kasčiūnas (43), the outgoing minister of defence and co-leader and mastermind of the nationalist and traditionalist wing of the Conservatives. The latter did not have the support of the then-party leadership, but was able to mobilise outside movements—such as the football ultras, of which he was a long-standing and proud member, and various nationalist groupings, some of them not Conservative voters as a rule. These movements may not have been very numerous per se, but they represented small, cohesive, well-organised vocal minorities with huge mobilisation power. Their joining with the fairly limited number of registered Conservative supporters would significantly tilt the balance.

On the other hand, the more liberal and moderate Conservative voters were, by that stage, rather disenchanted by the lacklustre moderate candidate, as well as by the inevitable end-of-term squabbles between the Conservatives and their Freedom Party and Liberal Movement partners in the government. Hard numbers are impossible to come by, but the impression persists that liberal voters' registrations for the leadership election were rather lukewarm.

One has to add, on top of that, that most of the party organisations, with the exception of the party branches in Vilnius and a handful outside it, were heading in a more right-wing nationalist direction even prior to this.

Thus the result of the party leadership election should not have surprised anyone: at the polls, which took place on 9 February 2025, Laurynas Kasčiūnas came out on

64 G. Zulonaitė, 'Lithuania's Social Security Minister Resigns Over Links With Fintech Co', *Lrt.lt*, 12 June 2024, accessed at https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2295838/lithuania-s-social-security-minister-resigns-over-links-with-fintech-co.

top, with 13,488 votes, or 78.49% of the votes (out of 17,184 votes cast). In terms of turnout, 10,119 registered party supporters and 7,065 full party members took part in the vote; it is interesting that supporters outstripped party members by 43%. Morkūnaitė-Mikulėnienė received 2,942 votes.[65]

The paradox is that Kasčiūnas, as the hard right/traditionalist/nationalist leader, will have to work with the parliamentary Conservative faction, which is dominated by the moderate–liberal wing of the party, as the parliamentary party's composition was largely determined by the choices of an urban, young, well-educated and socially liberal electorate.

And so . . .

These two instances in which the open primary mechanism was adopted—allowing non-party members to vote to select the presidential candidate and the party leader—illustrate the contrasting outcomes which may ensue from such innovations.

On the one hand, opening up the party selection procedures to outsiders generates interest among party voters and society in general. It helps to capture public attention and broadcasts the message that the party is open and innovative.

On the other hand, open primary elections facilitate the mobilisation of support from external, often more radical groups (which are not even a given party's voters), allowing them to interfere in, if not hijack, the electoral outcome of party leadership elections—and, in the long run, the party's political identity.

Underlying causes and the outlook for democracy

To summarise, over the past decade and a half, CEE parliamentary parties have generally seen persistently low or falling membership. Unlike many Western parties with lingering mass grass roots, CEE parties rely more on leaders, donors and campaign

65 TS-LKD, 'TS-LKD pirmininku išrinktas Laurynas Kasčiūnas', *Tsajunga.lt*, 9 February 2025, accessed at https://tsajunga.lt/aktualijos/ts-ldk-pirmininku-isrinktas-laurynas-kasciunas/.

professionals. Shared regional traits include a distrust of formal parties, patronage-driven mobilisation and the personalisation of politics. At the same time, new organisational forms—from multi-tiered memberships to movement-style campaigns—are emerging as parties adapt. Members today are valued more as loyal cadres or volunteers than as financial backers or ideological masses. While parties continue to explore multiple ways to engage supporters (e.g. membership, friend/donor statuses, online communities), neither elite control nor unfettered internal democracy alone is a panacea. In short, internal party democracy in Central and Eastern Europe offers the opportunity to build stronger bonds between parties and society, but carries risks of radicalisation and fragmentation if not carefully managed. Simply amending by-laws is inadequate; deeper cultural change and safeguards are also needed to make member empowerment truly beneficial. Reviving party life likely requires both attracting members through meaningful participation and accountability, and providing them with clear incentives (e.g. policy influence, career paths, community) for active involvement.

Unlike in Western Europe, where political parties are more institutionalised and embedded in political and cultural traditions, as well as in the social fabric, the political reality for parties in Central and Eastern Europe is much more fluid. It is a comparatively new—and often distrusted—political reality, and party membership has not acquired the force of an intergenerational habit.

Therefore, new trends in society affect political party membership in Central and Eastern Europe to a greater extent. Political parties in this region are similar, to an extent, to the plants with shallow roots described in the Gospel parable quoted as the epigraph to this chapter: they are faster to adopt new trends, but also less resilient to external factors. The new trends in question are the replacement of real social networks (which were not strong in Eastern Europe anyway, albeit to varying extents) with virtual social networks and the fragmentation of communities. These trends are reflected in the virtualisation of political party connections, as well as in the potential mismatch—the growing chasm—between actual party membership and party voters.

However, what is happening in Central and Eastern Europe may be a portent of things to come elsewhere, for instance in Western Europe, where entrenched structures act, to an extent, as inhibitors on new trends. This delay mechanism, which impedes democratic political structures and institutions (such as political parties) from catching up with societal developments, is the biggest challenge to democracy today—and requires the most leadership and vision.

The underlying—and worrying—reality is the systemic obsolescence of the fundamental features of democracy. To function, the democratic political system assumes that a number of fundamental features are in place, including political parties, understood as real, physical communities of shared values; peaceful, rules-bound political competition; a competitive, but ultimately cohesive media landscape; as well as a public arena, united by a commitment to truth. However, this assumption—which is sometimes even enshrined in the laws and constitutions of democratic polities—relies on nineteenth-century social and cultural realities that have since undergone irrevocable change. In other words, those who framed the fundamental rules of the democratic political system took it as axiomatic that the following features of the social order will exist forever: real social networks and a communal structure to society, bound by strong links of civic solidarity; a diverse, but fairly coherent and authoritative media landscape; a public arena to act as a neutral playing field; the presence of public authorities that act as arbiters of value and truth; and a commitment to virtuous behaviour and truth, both among the population in general and among the political elites. Yet we see that all of these axioms are crumbling and mutating beyond recognition as we speak.

Therefore, democracy needs to be cardinally rethought if it wants to deliver on its vision of inherent human dignity and political rights in the twenty-first century. In particular, the political party structure needs to be rethought and evolve to take into account this new social reality if political parties are to continue to function as the political channels of representation, self-expression, commitment and protection of interests, while also responding to the new reality of socialisation and social interaction in the digital age.

This is not to devalue live interaction, but rather to accord it a proper place, given that it is the highest expression of value for younger generations. In practical political party terms, this means no more sitting through bureaucratic agenda items at monthly party branch gatherings, becoming bored out of one's mind: all such matters should be processed and voted on digitally. Rather, the requirement for personal presence should be dedicated to energising political action or meetings which deliver personal value and meaning.

Episodicity and gaming the system emerge as the principal threats in the virtual involvement. This does not mean that there are no solutions: without thinking too systematically about it, one could propose that voting rights are acquired through party supporters building a track record through consistent responses, participation and contribution: just as in the computer games beloved by the younger generations. Political party membership should be reimagined as a new game app for the Millennial and subsequent generations—a kind of political Tinder, but not just for a one-election stand.

However, in the long run, in my—admittedly, conservative—view, technical experimentation can only do so much. Democratic polity needs leaders—politicians—who are committed to democratic values, to protecting democratic standards, and who can translate democratic precepts and values into the changing and mutable everyday language of their co-citizens. These leaders must also be prepared and willing to communicate these precepts and values to them—through channels that reach the citizens where they are—and go out of their comfort zone to be with them, wherever they may be. Democratic polity also needs serious, workable policies that reflect voters' needs—and parties which, when they come to power, actually implement those policies, with real results that bring tangible changes for their voters.

Only thus can the crisis of political will be overcome, the narrative of democracy be recreated and the institutions of democracy rebuilt anew.

Party Membership in the EU's Waiting Room

Between Participation and Patronage

Teona Lavrelashvili

Across much of the EU, political parties are experiencing declining membership, dwindling voter turnout and eroding public trust.[66] In stark contrast, political parties in the EU's candidate and potential candidate countries—particularly in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership—still dominate political life with seemingly robust membership rolls and centralised structures. But behind these figures lies a deeper problem: the persistence of party membership as a tool of political patronage rather than democratic engagement.

In Serbia, for example, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS, Српска напредна странка, Srpska napredna stranka) claims hundreds of thousands of members, granting it unrivalled grass-roots reach.[67] In Moldova and Albania, dominant parties similarly boast a large membership, especially in rural regions and public institutions. However, these memberships are often motivated less by political conviction and more by pragmatic incentives, such as a job in the public sector, a building permit or the ability to 'get things done'.[68]

This raises a crucial question for the EU's relations with the accession countries in the context of its enlargement policy. Can the Europeanisation process foster democratic (intra)party development, or does it risk entrenching the status quo by tolerating clientelist political structures if they deliver stability?

This article explores political party membership across the EU accession countries, assessing whether it functions as a channel for democratic engagement or remains embedded in systems of patronage and reward. It also examines how the EU enlargement framework—particularly through conditionality—and the influence of European political families shape these dynamics.[69]

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66 S. Guerra and F. Serricchio, 'Need a Little Love? Go South: Patterns of Trust Across EU Member States', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 33/2 (2025), 633–52.

67 N. Burazer, *Nations in Transit 2024: Serbia* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2024).

68 Albanian Helsinki Committee, *Report on the Political Use of Public Administration in Electoral Campaigns* (Tirana, 2021).

69 T. Lavrelashvili, 'The European People's Party's Engagement With Its Sister Parties in Serbia and Georgia', Ph.D. thesis, KU Leuven, 2022.

The reality of party membership in accession countries

The EU's accession countries—comprising the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) as well as the Eastern Partnership trio (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine)—present a paradoxical picture when it comes to political party membership. On paper, these countries often display far higher party membership densities than their EU counterparts.[70] In reality, however, political engagement tends to be transactional rather than ideological, and internal party democracy remains underdeveloped. Formal affiliation with a party frequently serves as a shortcut to employment, access to services or political influence—rather than as a channel for civic participation.[71]

Serbia offers the most striking example. The ruling SNS reportedly counts over 700,000 members, representing more than 10% of registered voters[72]—an extraordinarily high figure compared to EU norms. This membership base allows the party to exert control over public institutions and municipalities, blurring the line between state and party. The public sector has expanded under SNS rule, with party members and sympathisers disproportionately represented in state and municipal jobs. This politicisation of public administration risks undermining meritocracy and deepening institutional dependence on political loyalty, thereby eroding the autonomy of state institutions.[73] The Socialist Party of Serbia, once dominant, has maintained membership numbers fluctuating between 65,000 and 195,000 in recent years, though it now plays a junior role in the ruling coalition. The concentration of such large party memberships—especially within SNS—has supported the gradual erosion of political competition, characterised by legal compliance on the surface but extensive party–state capture beneath.[74]

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70 E. Van Houte and P. F. Ribeiro, 'Country or Party? Variations in Party Membership Around the Globe', *European Political Science Review* 14/3 (2022), 281–95.

71 P. Kopecký et al., 'Party Patronage in Contemporary Democracies: Results From an Expert Survey in Twenty-Two Countries From Five Regions', *European Journal of Political Research* 55/2 (2016), 416–31.

72 Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2024 Country Report: Serbia* (Gütersloh: BTI, 2024).

73 S. Tomić and D. Pavlovic, 'Blatant, Not Latent: Patronage in Top-Level Appointments in Serbia', *NISPAcee Journal of Public Administration and Policy* 16/1 (2023), 181–209.

74 Ibid.

In *Albania* precise party membership figures are rarely publicly disclosed, yet overwhelming evidence shows that the Socialist Party's influence extends far beyond electoral success and into public institutions. It has repeatedly been documented how party affiliation—and even membership—functions as a de facto requirement for public-sector employment and access to administrative favours.[75] These dynamics are particularly pronounced at local levels, where public servants are often pressured to participate in party activities, such as canvassing ahead of elections. More recently, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe noted in its 2025 parliamentary election observation report that these elections were 'competitive and professionally managed' but marred by 'widespread misuse of public resources and cases of pressure on public employees'.[76] Investigative journalism and analysis by civil society have described the Socialist Party's patronage networks as a 'well-oiled machine' that reinforces its dominance, particularly through state employment and contract allocation.[77]

In *Montenegro* official membership figures are seldom disclosed for the Democratic Party of Socialists. Nevertheless, the party is known for having built deeply entrenched patronage networks over its three decades in power, effectively blending party and state institutions.[78] In this period, party affiliation often served as a gateway to public-sector employment and access to state resources, reinforcing the party's dominance well beyond election cycles. The party entrenched itself within the administrative structure of the state, forging a dense network of personal loyalties that shaped appointments, promotions and access to public resources. Belonging to the ruling

75 Albanian Helsinki Committee, *Enhancing Election Integrity and Political Party Sustainability: Strengthening Citizen Oversight and Accountability* (Tirana, 2024).

76 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 'Albania's Parliamentary Elections Competitive and Well Run But Lacked Level Playing Field', Press release (12 May 2025), accessed at https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/590610.

77 F. Nahzi, 'Free and Fair? Albania's Flawed Election Reflects Worrying Global Trend', *Balkan Insight*, 13 May 2025.

78 C. Laštro, F. Bieber and J. Marović, 'Mechanisms of Dominance: Understanding 30 Years in Power of Montenegro's Democratic Party of Socialists', *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 71/2 (2023), 210–36.

party became a de facto requirement for professional advancement, especially in the public sector.[79] The system functioned as a hybrid regime in which formal democratic institutions coexisted with informal mechanisms of control. Patronage extended deeply into public companies and even private economic life, reinforcing the perception that the state and party were indistinguishable.[80]

In *North Macedonia* the practice of filling public service roles with party loyalists is deeply embedded in administrative routines. State institutions are staffed disproportionately by individuals with explicit allegiance to governing parties, creating structural barriers to merit-based recruitment. Surveys indicate that nearly 78% of citizens believe party affiliation is a key criterion for public-sector employment.[81] The VMRO-DPMNE,[82] the main centre–right party and current governing force, claims to have been between 90,000 and 100,000 members as of 2023–24, according to party statements. While these figures are self-reported and not independently verified, they are consistent with trends across the Western Balkans, where party membership is often tied to access to jobs and administrative favours. In a country with approximately 1.8 million registered voters, such numbers would mean the party includes around 5%–6% of the electorate, a proportion far above typical EU levels.

Bosnia and Herzegovina stands out in the wider region for having levels of reported party membership that are much higher than the EU average. Academic and policy sources estimate party membership to be around 17% of the electorate,[83] which is

79 Ibid.

80 M. Bešić and B. Baća, 'One Client, Four Votes: Ethnopolitical Clientelism and Its Socioeconomic Consequences During State Capture in Montenegro', *Acta Sociologica* 68/2 (2024), 161–82.

81 Civil Service Reform Centre (North Macedonia), 'Public Perceptions of Patronage in Public Employment, Survey Results' (2023); Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2023: North Macedonia* (Washington, DC, 2023).

82 Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство, Vnatrešna makedonska revolucionerna organizacija – Demokratska partija za makedonsko nacionalno edinstvo).

83 F. Bieber, 'Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans', *East European Politics* 34/3 (2018), 337–54.

significantly above the EU average of under 5%. This high membership rate reflects the country's dense political mobilisation and the prominent role of parties in social and political life.

Political mobilisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is deeply influenced by ethnic segmentation. Participation patterns vary among ethnic groups, with higher involvement reported among Serbs and Bosniaks than among Croats, reflecting the country's complex post-war political landscape. The legacy of the post-war settlement and the dominance of ethnonational parties have created a system in which parties often act as gatekeepers to employment, administrative favours and public contracts.[84] Consequently, formal party affiliation frequently functions as a pathway to career advancement, particularly in the public sector and state-owned enterprises.

Kosovo's party system remains formally pluralistic but is shaped by post-war legacies, elite dominance and patronage networks. Traditional parties such as the Democratic Party of Kosovo, Democratic League of Kosovo and Alliance for the Future of Kosovo have long relied on informal clientelist ties, using membership as a means to access public jobs or contracts rather than fostering programmatic participation.[85] Internal decision-making is typically centralised, and party leaders wield strong control over appointments and candidate selection, leaving little room for grass-roots influence.[86] The rise of Vetëvendosje brought expectations of a more participatory model. While this party has promoted anti-corruption and citizen engagement, it has struggled to escape the logic of political centralisation. Senior appointments remain politicised, and the party's internal structure mirrors the top-down dynamics of its predecessors.[87] Reliable membership figures for Kosovo's parties are scarce or unavailable, and no independent verification mechanisms exist. This opacity reflects broader weaknesses in party transparency and accountability.

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84 Organization for Security and Co-operation/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Election Observation Reports* (2023).

85 Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2024 Country Report: Kosovo* (Gütersloh: BTI, 2024).

86 T. Wille, 'Bureaucracy and the Everyday Practices of Contested State Diplomacy: The Paradigmatic Case of Kosovo', *Review of International Studies* 50/1 (2023), 190–208.

87 J. Bliznakovski, 'Clientelistic Linkages in the Western Balkans: DALP II Expert Survey Evidence', *Annals of the Faculty of Law in Belgrade* 72/4 (2024), 611–46.

In *Moldova* the political landscape has shifted significantly with the rise of the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS, *Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate*). Unlike its predecessors, PAS has invested in political professionalisation through internal reforms, candidate transparency and civic education, positioning itself as an alternative to clientelist networks. It introduced merit-based candidate selection, enforced term limits, and promoted participation by young people and women. The party strengthened transparency by requiring asset declarations and ethics commitments, and it adopted a strict code of conduct to combat internal corruption. PAS also invests in civic education and training, in this way fostering a new generation committed to democratic values and public service.[88] Its electoral breakthrough in 2021 is widely interpreted as a public rejection of the oligarchic structures associated with the Democratic Party and its former leader, Vlad Plahotniuc. In terms of membership, PAS reported 12,602 members, while the Party of Socialists claimed 14,220 and the Liberal Party 10,600.[89] These figures, though modest by regional standards, are self-reported and have not been independently verified.

Georgia's political landscape is not shaped by mass party membership but by informal loyalties and strategic alignments. Figures for those with formal, dues-paying membership status are rarely published, and parties function more as elite-driven networks than democratic organisations. About one-third of voters express partisan attachment, mostly to the current governing party, Georgian Dream, with weaker support for the opposition. But much of this support is negative in nature, based more on rejecting alternatives than endorsing a programme. Georgian Dream's base is strongest among older, rural and public-sector populations, groups often embedded in patronage structures. Meanwhile, nearly half of Georgians say no party represents them, underscoring the weak institutionalisation and low trust in parties.[90]

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88 *European Party Monitor*, 'Party Passport – Moldova' (KU Leuven, 2023).

89 M. Focșa, *Financing of Political Parties in the Republic of Moldova: 2023 Retrospective* (Moldova: EPDE, July 2024).

90 *Public Attitudes in Georgia: April 2024*; T. Khoshtaria, 'Results of the 2008-2024 Caucasus Barometer surveys' (CRRC-Georgia, 2023), accessed at https://crrc.ge/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/cb2024_presentation_2024.07.18_web.pdf?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAAR3o7HNLuEVTX25-VzPlISYjPwDy-GXroveZwpUP9VBQ1FZbCq6_V8HmXQEk_aem_9TH8kOOX1MyVG9axU1hRyg.

Rather than building participatory organisations, Georgian Dream has fused state and party functions, using control over resources and appointments to entrench its dominance. This model has left little space for genuine political competition, especially outside urban centres. New movements such as Droa! and Girchi – More Freedom have introduced more open and participatory practices but remain largely confined to urban elites in Tbilisi. The result is a fragmented, centralised party system where innovation struggles to break through entrenched clientelistic and informal structures.

Ukraine's party system remains fluid and weakly institutionalised, with formal membership largely symbolic. Even Servant of the People, which swept the 2019 elections on a wave of public discontent, did not evolve into a mass-membership party. Instead, it quickly centralised around President Zelensky and a narrow leadership circle, functioning more as an executive vehicle than a participatory political organisation.[91] Like its predecessors, Servant of the People lacks strong grass-roots structures, internal democracy and a stable ideological orientation. More broadly, Ukrainian parties are often short-lived electoral platforms built around individual figures or business interests, rather than being enduring institutions rooted in civic engagement.[92]

This organisational fragility is compounded by widespread distrust of parties, driven by perceptions of corruption, self-interest and elite capture. Patronage continues to influence access to political and administrative posts, but it is less systematised than in other accession countries due to the volatility of Ukraine's party landscape. These challenges have been further exacerbated by Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, which has heightened executive centralisation and placed immense pressure on democratic institutions. Since the 2014 Maidan Revolution, civic initiatives and watchdog groups have become important vehicles for reform and public mobilisation, operating outside formal electoral structures. However, these structures have not yet coalesced into programmatic political forces.

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91 S. Bielashko, 'Ukrainian Political Parties in the Times of War", *National Interest* 5/3 (2025), 34–44.

92 N. Boyko, *Nations in Transit 2023: Ukraine* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2023).

Despite national variation, political party membership across the EU accession countries reveals several shared patterns. First, party membership is often seen less as a form of civic participation and more as a pathway to practical benefits, such as public employment or administrative access. This is particularly evident in the Western Balkans, where reported membership rates are high by European standards but frequently reflect clientelist dynamics rather than active engagement. In contrast, membership levels in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia tend to be lower, though formal affiliation still plays a limited role in shaping political life. Second, the reliability of membership data remains a challenge across the region, with figures typically self-reported and seldom independently verified. Third, most parties continue to face difficulties with internal democracy—decision-making tends to be centralised, and opportunities for meaningful grass-roots involvement are limited. As a result, political parties often operate more as elite-driven networks than as participatory institutions, even where reformist efforts are underway.

EU accession policy and party politics: a limited toolbox?

The EU has substantial influence over the political trajectories of candidate countries, primarily through conditionality, pre-accession assistance and the broader incentive of future membership. These tools have successfully driven legal harmonisation and institutional reform. However, their reach is more limited when it comes to shaping the internal life of political parties—how they recruit members, ensure internal accountability and build democratic structures. While accession monitoring covers the formal aspects of party regulation—such as laws on party financing, electoral transparency and gender quotas—the deeper, informal mechanisms that underpin party systems, including patronage, clientelism and centralised control, often remain outside the scope of explicit EU scrutiny.

As a result, candidate countries may meet formal benchmarks while preserving illiberal or opaque party practices. Ruling parties with extensive loyalty-based membership networks can comply with technical criteria while continuing to operate as dominant

political machines. Chapters 23 and 24 of the *acquis*, while central to EU conditionality, focus primarily on the judiciary, anti-corruption and fundamental rights—not on internal party democracy.[93] That said, evidence suggests that the Commission's screening reports are increasingly attentive to party functioning, especially where clientelist practices threaten democratic competition.[94] Evaluations have been dealing more systematically with issues such as internal candidate selection, politicised appointments and the party capture of public institutions. Yet, EU conditionality seems adaptive, and tends to intensify its political focus in response to domestic regimes with low pluralism or entrenched informal networks.[95]

Still, this evolving practice lacks a formal anchor. Unless the internal functioning of parties becomes a more explicit part of the accession framework—through either an expanded interpretation of existing chapters or a clearer link to the Copenhagen criteria—the EU's impact on party reform will remain uneven. Due to these limitations, complementary channels of influence are becoming increasingly important. Chief among them are the European political families (Europarties). Unlike institutional EU actors, these parties can engage more directly with the political behaviour and cultures of national parties.

Europarties and the politics of party building in the accession countries

In the context of EU enlargement, the Europarties have become important but often under-analysed actors. These parties provide a unique platform for transnational cooperation, the diffusion of norms and political socialisation. Among them, the European People's Party (EPP) has maintained the most extensive and sustained

93 Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, *Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the Enlargement Region, 2021–2027* (Skopje, June 2022).

94 Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, *2024 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, Communication, COM (2024) 690 final (30 October 2024).

95 T. Klingebiel, 'Shifts in EU's Political Conditionality: Comparative Insights into Democratization Policies and the EU's Normative Power During Enlargement Processes', Bachelor's thesis, University of Gothenburg, 2025.

engagement with parties across the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries. Through party-to-party partnerships, ideological alignment and affiliated foundations, the EPP has played a key role in supporting democratic reformers and promoting a pro-European political culture in the neighbourhood.

The EPP's network in the region is both wide and deep. In Serbia it includes not only the ruling SNS but also the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians—both associate members. In North Macedonia the long-standing EPP partner VMRO-DPMNE has remained a central actor. Democratic Montenegro and the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina also maintain close EPP ties. In the Eastern Partnership, the EPP supports European Solidarity, the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reforms and Batkivschyna in Ukraine; the United National Movement and European Georgia in Georgia; and in Moldova the PAS, which is currently in government.

This extensive network reflects not only geographic reach but also strategic ambition—positioning the EPP as a key shaper of party trajectories across the region. Yet reach does not automatically translate into reform. Europarties often play a dual role: on the one hand, they act as vehicles for norm transmission and political modernisation, and on the other, they are instrumentalised by national actors seeking international recognition without necessarily enacting internal reforms.[96] EPP affiliation has also notably helped to elevate enlargement on the EU agenda—especially in the cases of Ukraine and Moldova—by empowering reformist actors and mobilising support within the European Parliament. In some cases the EPP has acted more ambitiously than institutional actors such as the Council, pushing enlargement discussions forward even when intergovernmental consensus has been lacking.[97]

For its part, the Party of European Socialists maintains affiliations with governing parties such as the Socialist Party of Albania, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia and the Democratic Party of Socialists in Montenegro, as well as the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina. While these ties contribute to

96 Lavrelashvili, 'The European People's Party's Engagement With Its Sister Parties'.

97 Ibid.

maintaining a pro-European orientation, the Party of European Socialists' engagement is often characterised as reactive and event-driven, lacking the strategic depth and institutional continuity of the EPP.[98]

Renew Europe, which succeeded the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE), supports liberal parties such as the PLDM and DA Platform in Moldova, and works informally with emerging actors in Georgia (e.g. Strategy 21). However, its influence remains limited by the absence of governing affiliates and weaker organisational structures in the region. The European Greens, while growing in Serbia and Bosnia through parties like ZLF, focus primarily on grass-roots mobilisation, civil society and opposition politics, rather than structured party-building.[99]

It was against this backdrop that the revised Regulation (EU) no. 1141/2014[100] on the statute and funding of European political parties and foundations was adopted in June 2025. It introduced a landmark reform that may significantly reshape relations between Europarties and their non-EU partners, including those in enlargement countries. The updated rules strengthen transparency, curb foreign interference and—for the first time—clearly define the scope of permitted cross-border activities. Notably, parties from candidate countries may no longer pay membership fees to or hold voting rights within Europarties. However, this shift also clarifies and depoliticises the basis for affiliation, ensuring that it is grounded in shared values rather than financial contributions.

From a strategic perspective, these reforms may actually enhance the role of Europarties in enlargement. By eliminating financial entanglements and requiring

98 M. Elbasani and S. Š. Šabić, 'Rule of Law, Corruption and Democratic Accountability in the Course of EU Enlargement', *Journal of European Public Policy* 25/9 (2017), 1317–35.

99 F. Bieber, 'Party Families and Europeanization in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership', in A. Elbasani and F. Bieber (eds.), *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A Failure of EU Conditionality?* (Cham: Routledge, 2023).

100 European Parliament, Revision of Regulation on statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations, *Legislative Train Schedule* (14 December 2025), accessed at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-a-new-push-for-european-democracy/file-statute-and-funding-of-the-european-political-parties-and-foundations.

formal declarations of adherence to EU values, the new rules give Europarties greater scope to align, monitor and support the development national parties. Joint activities—previously surrounded by legal ambiguity—are now explicitly permitted, offering new tools for political mentoring, youth exchanges and civic education across borders. For the EPP and its affiliated organisations, this creates renewed opportunities to embed democratic norms, promote programmatic convergence and invest in long-term capacity building.

Yet, the debate is far from over. The loss of voting rights and prohibition on financial contributions from non-EU parties, as introduced by the June 2025 reforms, has prompted concern. Some argue that this may diminish the incentive for candidate and neighbouring countries' parties to engage meaningfully within the Europarty framework, potentially reducing their sense of ownership and influence.[101] However, this risk appears limited and overstated.

First, national parties in enlargement countries have long recognised the strategic importance of Europarty affiliation, which extends far beyond voting rights. Affiliation brings legitimacy, access to expertise and networks, and strong symbolic alignment with the EU's political mainstream. These benefits remain intact. For many parties, especially those aligned with the EPP or the Party of European Socialists, affiliation serves as a critical marker of their European orientation and reformist credibility—both domestically and in Brussels. Symbolic legitimacy and access to transnational platforms often matter more than formal voting power within the Europarty.

Second, the socialisation function of Europarties is not confined to formal roles. It is shaped by regular interaction: through training programmes, joint campaigns, policy platforms, youth networks and personal relationships. This two-way engagement has consistently proven to be a more powerful driver of ideological convergence and democratic learning than procedural inclusion alone. Thus, the quality and intensity

101 European Parliament, 'Deal on New Rules for European Political Parties and Foundations', Press Release (17 June 2025), accessed at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20250613IPR28914/deal-on-new-rules-for-european-political-parties-and-foundations.

of interaction between non-EU party representatives and Europarties is unlikely to diminish—particularly where there are mutual investment and a shared political culture.

In fact, the new regulatory framework may even strengthen this dynamic. By removing transactional pressures and formalising value-based criteria, it shifts the focus towards principled and strategic cooperation. For Europarties that are serious about supporting democratic development in candidate countries, this opens up new space to shape political behaviour and expectations more effectively—not through enforcement, but through socialisation, agenda-setting and shared political work.

Conclusion – the EU's blind spot: party reform

Across the EU's enlargement region, political party membership remains both widespread and deeply ambiguous. While many parties boast large formal memberships, particularly in the Western Balkans, this often reflects systems of political patronage rather than democratic engagement. Party affiliation frequently serves as a pathway to public employment or administrative favours, undermining internal party democracy and hollowing out citizens' trust.

The EU's enlargement policy, though effective in driving legal and institutional reforms, has proven less capable of transforming party politics. Conditionality has only limited reach into how parties function internally, a situation that allows loyalty-based networks to persist under the surface of compliance. In this gap, Europarties have become increasingly relevant actors. Their influence varies, but their transnational networks offer affiliated parties legitimacy, visibility and access to the EU mainstream.

The 2025 revision of the Regulation on Europarties may prove a turning point. It clarifies the terms of affiliation and opens new space for principled cooperation. Despite concerns, this framework is unlikely to discourage meaningful engagement. Europarty membership still brings symbolic and strategic value—particularly for parties seeking reform credibility.

To truly shift the balance from patronage to participation, the EU and its political families must go beyond superficial indicators and engage more directly with the political structures that shape democratic resilience. If the goal of enlargement is not merely to expand the Union's borders but to reinforce its democratic foundations, then the internal functioning of political parties deserves far greater attention.

The Question of Party Membership for European Parties

Individual or Collective?

Peter Hefele

In recent decades the role of party membership has undergone a fundamental transformation in European party systems. Gone are the times of mass parties and formal membership, which formed the cornerstone of the post–Second World War revitalisation of European democracies.[102] In the diverse European party world, European political parties, or Europarties, are a comparatively new phenomenon, as they represent unique transnational organisations[103] operating within the EU's institutional framework. What does party membership mean in those organisations? Are their challenges similar to those of national parties? What developments have we observed in recent years? And what changes can we expect in the years to come?

This chapter will analyse the current situation, the legal framework and experiences with new forms of membership among Europarties. Considering both their size and innovative approaches, we took the European People's Party (EPP), the Party of the European Socialists (PES), Volt and the European Greens (EGP) as instructive cases.

Between party-parties and direct membership

Traditionally, membership of mass-party organisations has been seen as essential to mobilising and legitimising participatory democracy under the conditions of modern mass societies. To stem the tide of declining (formal) party membership, national parties have tried various new approaches, such as more flexible, multi-speed or light membership; and supporter-based and digitally enabled models.[104] Success, however, has been relatively limited on the national level. And given the specific circumstances of Europarties, these approaches face even more difficulties. Some analysts even question the necessity of maintaining a broad, formal and direct membership base

102 I. van Biezen, *Political Parties in New Democracies: Party Organization in Southern and East-Central Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

103 N. Brack and W. Wolfs, 'European Political Parties: Poorly Identified Political Bodies?', *Institut Jacques Delors* (30 May 2023), accessed at https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/partis-politiques-europeens-2/.

104 S. E. Scarrow, *Beyond Party Members: Changing Approaches to Partisan Mobilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); E. van Haute and A. Gauja (eds.), *Party Members and Activists* (London: Routledge, 2015).

and argue that electoral professionalism[105] and digital outreach are increasingly prevailing over grassroots membership.[106] These trends might explain why, among other reasons, in most Europarties there is currently no strong demand for opening party membership to individuals. In addition, national parties are struggling to get used to a 'double-layered' membership for legal reasons and a loss of financial resources. Therefore, they do not strongly support the idea of making European party membership available to individuals.

Europarties as institutional mixed bags

Europarties differ significantly from national parties in their legal structure, function and constituency. Quite recently they have been acknowledged and institutionalised by European legislation, in particular by Regulation (EU, Euratom) No. 1141/2014 and its 2019 evaluation report and amendment.[107] Their organisational models remaining elite-driven, they are often described as 'umbrella' or 'federated' structures. Thus, the EPP, like most other Europarties, is a party of parties.[108] Direct and meaningful involvement of citizens is limited, and most Europarties do not provide systematic paths to individual membership.[109] This problem hints at a much larger and deeper one: creating a truly European public.[110] This should be one of the foremost objectives

105 R. Boyd, *Electoral Professionalism and the 2004 Australian Federal Election Campaign*, BA Honours thesis, Edith Cowan University, 2006, accessed at https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons/1187/.

106 van Haute and Gauja, *Party Members and Activists*.

107 European Commission, *Evaluation Report Pursuant to Article 38 of Regulation 1141/2014 on the Statute and Funding of European Political Parties and European Political Foundations*, COM (2021) 717 final (25 November 2021), accessed at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX-:52021DC0717.

108 L. Bardi, 'Parties and Party Systems in the European Union: National and Supranational Dimensions', in K. Luther and F. Müller-Rommel (eds.), *Political Parties in the New Europe: Political and Analytical Challenges* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 293-321.

109 W. Gagatek and S. van Hecke, 'Towards Policy-Seeking Europarties? The Development of European Political Foundations', in W. van der Brug et al. (eds.), *Uncovering EU Politics: A Multidisciplinary Introduction* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

110 R. Koopmans and B. Pfetsch, 'Towards a Europeanised Public Sphere? Comparing Political Actors and the Media in Germany', *European Journal of Communication* 6/3 (2003), 277; J. E. Fossum et al., 'Governing Diversity in the Multilevel European Public Space', *Ethnicities* 24/1 (2023), 3, doi:10.1177/14687968231158381.

of Europarties. However, as the European Commission points out, 'Those obstacles prevent them from fulfilling their mission to "contribute to forming European political awareness and express the will of citizens in the Union"'.[111]

Legal and regulatory dimensions of membership

Therefore, can we blame the legal framework governing Europarties for this lack of representation? Not really! A deeper look into those regulations reveals that they offer little guidance on how membership should be structured or enabled. There is a strong focus on minimum requirements for transparency, democracy, and gender and geographic representation. However, the aforementioned evaluation report does not address the lack of individual membership at the European level, and nor does it call for substantial reforms. But this should not be an excuse for non-action as this ambiguity could grant Europarties a greater space to advance and develop new practices, from highly formalised membership schemes to looser supporter networks.

Internal democracy and the role of members

The reasons for this deplorable lack of inclusion and representation must lie elsewhere. One decisive factor is the area of internal party democracy. There is a large consensus at the national and, even more, subnational level on the importance of involving members in decision-making—even if, in practice, massive deficits persist.[112] However, Europarties generally offer only limited opportunities for this kind of participation. Some, such as the EGP, have already experimented with online voting and open consultations. But in most Europarties, national delegations and parliamentary elites[113] are the ones in control. This disconnection from a locally based membership has severe consequences, notably during the campaigning or the

111 European Commission, *Evaluation Report Pursuant to Article 38*, 7.

112 W. P. Cross and R. S. Katz (eds.). *The Challenges of Intra-Party Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

113 S. E. Scarrow, P. D. Webb and T. Poguntke (eds.), *Organizing Political Parties: Representation, Participation and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

election of candidates for the European Parliament, and it is one element of growing concern about EU democratic deficits.[114] As long as members of the national member parties lack strong, substantive membership of European-level organisations or other forms of direct influence, their motivation to engage in European elections will remain limited and guided by national issues. Further, the procedures for electing candidates primarily serve the interests of national or regional parties and their leadership.[115] Europarties are also far from following any common standards in this respect. As shown by the discussions and shortcomings of transnational election lists[116] or the Spitzenkandidat method,[117] 'Europeanisation' as a goal of these projects has failed, not least because they were not firmly anchored in cross-border grassroots party organisations.

Membership and political identity building

The idea behind the creation of Europarties was for them to serve as vectors for European identity and political socialisation, instilling and fostering a pan-European consciousness through participation beyond national party organisations.[118] However, this hope has so far remained largely unfulfilled—not only for (potential) party members but also for ordinary citizens. Most Europarties remain peripheral in citizens' political

114 Z. Enyedi, 'Democratic Backsliding and the Future of Democracy in Europe', *Perspectives on Politics* 16/4 (2018), 1067–74.

115 E.-M. Euchner and E. Frech, 'Candidate Selection and Parliamentary Activity in the EU's Multi-Level System: Opening a Black-Box', *Politics and Governance* 8/1 (2020), 72–84, doi:10.17645/pag.v8i1.2553.

116 M. D. Crego, *Transnational Electoral Lists: Ways to Europeanise Elections to the European Parliament*, European Parliamentary Research Service, Study PE 679.084 (Brussels, BE, March 2021), accessed at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/679084/EPRS_STU(2021)679084_EN.pdf; C. Verger, 'Towards Transnational Lists in 2024?', *Institut Jacques Delors* (14 June 2022), accessed at https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/vers-des-listes-transnationales-en-2024.

117 S. Kotanidis, *Spitzenkandidaten or the Lead Candidate Process: Ways to Europeanise Elections to the European Parliament*, European Parliamentary Research Service, Study PE 749.776 (Brussels, BE, June 2023); D. Braun and S. A. Popa, 'This Time It Was Different? The Salience of the *Spitzenkandidaten* System Among European Parties', *West European Politics* 41/5 (2018), 1125.

118 Z. Lefkofridi and A. Katsanidou, 'A Step Closer to a Transnational Party System? Competition and Coherence in the 2009 and 2014 European Parliament', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56/6 (2018), 1462.

lives and consciousness; they do not cultivate a stronger attachment or identification.[119] Unlike national party organisations, and due to the lack of local structures, they do not participate in everyday interactions with their voters. They often remain behind the veil of the national party and fail to become a distinct and distinguishable factor of political identity building. Each European election shows a deplorable lack of visibility of the European dimension since in the first place both candidates and party members represent their national party.[120]

Digitalisation and the rise of alternative models

In recent years, on the national and European levels, many have seen digitalisation as a beacon of hope and a 'magic wand' for overcoming the challenges of dwindling traditional membership. More than ten years ago, some were already predicting the end of formal structures and collective political identities and their replacement by digital platforms.[121] Since then much progress in digitalisation has been made on the national level. On the European level, however, only newly emerged Europarties, such as Volt, have systematically employed a digital-first approach and put pan-European activism above traditional membership. Traditional parties have adopted similar models to remain competitive and to be attractive to younger, mobile and politically networked generations. Despite some success, we have not seen strong spill-over effects on membership reforms or towards increasing direct involvement at the European level.

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119 *European Parliament*, 'EP Spring 2024 Survey: Use Your Vote – Countdown to the European Elections', Special Eurobarometer EB045EP (April 2024), accessed at https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3272.

120 S. Hix and K. Cunningham, 'Still Second-Order National Elections? Evaluating the Classic Model After the 2024 European Elections', *West European Politics* 49/3 (2024), 1–22, doi:10.1080/01402382.2025.2499992.

121 P. Gerbaudo, *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

Case studies: the EPP, the PES, Volt Europa and the EGP

How have European political parties reacted to the challenges of membership described above? Are there new models which can show a way for better involvement of European citizens?

We chose *four Europarties*—the EPP, the PES, Volt and the EGP—and analysed their approaches to membership, engagement and organisational structures. Table 1 in the Appendix gives a short overview of *all parties represented in the European Parliament* in its current makeup for the 2024–29 legislature.[122]

EPP

Structured as a federation of centre–right national parties, the EPP is the largest and most traditional Europarty. To date it has not offered individual membership at the European level. Its primary stakeholders are member parties, affiliated foundations and sub-organisations. In this sense, citizens are members only through national member parties, which reflects the EPP being a 'party of parties'.[123] Participation is restricted to national representatives, and digital engagement is not yet an integral or relevant part of the internal procedures. The primary form of membership for European citizens, then, is through national political parties. The only exceptions are Members of the European Parliament elected on EPP-affiliated lists, who are considered individual members. However, this status is functional rather than participatory in a true sense. In this respect the EPP is behind the efforts of other Europarties—such as the PES or EGP—to experiment with more participatory models, including individual

122 *Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations*, 'Registered Parties', accessed at https://www.appf.europa.eu/appf/en/parties-and-foundations/registered-parties; I. Hertner, 'United in Diversity? Europarties and Their Individual Members' Rights', *Journal of European Integration* 41/4 (2018), 487–505, doi:10.1080/07036337.2018.1513500.

123 S. Greco, 'European Identity and European Political Parties', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 32/1 (2023), 172–86, doi:10.1080/14782804.2023.2208531.

memberships. Europarties such as the EPP risk remaining elite-driven networks rather than representative organisations. The pressure to democratise will increase, and the call for new forms of participation will become louder. Proposals for reforms include dual-membership systems (national and European) and open digital platforms to allow individual citizens to engage directly with European-level party politics. One factor that should not be forgotten is the tension between the two roles of Europarties. Are Europarties acting to support the European Parliament's groups, or are they vehicles for transnational political engagement?

PES

In terms of deeper engagement, PES statutes have found an interesting solution. All members of PES member parties are automatically members of the PES. In addition, an individual can register as a PES activist. As members of a PES member party, these activists can establish local groups at various levels, such as city or regional groups. The resulting network of PES activists allows individuals to contribute in a flexible way to promote PES policy agendas and activities. However, activists do not (yet) possess voting rights within PES decision-making bodies. This topic is constantly debated, as many PES activists are calling for more substantial participatory rights. Currently, these networks lack the power to push through a successful revision of PES statutes.

Volt Europa

Founded in 2017 as a new attempt to live up to the promise of being European, Volt represents a new model of political movement.[124] At present it is the only political organisation that offers direct individual membership to citizens across EU countries. Moreover, Volt acts under one transnational structure and one political programme. To make direct involvement on a pan-European level possible, Volt uses digital tools and platforms extensively for mobilisation, internal deliberation and campaign coordination.

124 K. Knodel, *A Party-Typological Classification of Volt Europa: Between Digital Party and Movement Party?* BA thesis, University of Würzburg, Preprint, February 2023, doi:10.13140/RG.2.2.12140.44163.

It also provides a much wider space for internal democracy, through which individual members can participate in policy formation and leadership elections with full voting rights. Being part of a pan-European political entity is explicitly mentioned in the statutes of Volt's national branches.

While this new type of Europarty needs further empirical research in terms of motivation, internal structures and programmatic development, Volt Europa demonstrates that a truly pan-European party model can achieve both electoral and organisational successes. The party systematically targets pro-European and younger voters, which limits its potential electorate. Its base of highly educated and engaged members explains the high levels of motivation and engagement.[125]

As Volt is not officially registered as a European political party by the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations, it remains a relatively small actor with limited institutionalisation. Nevertheless, its steady progress, professionalisation and extension to new member states—in particular in South and Southeastern Europe—as well as its growth at the subnational level show that Volt has become a distinctive new element of Europe's party system and political discourse.

EGP

Like the PES, the EGP currently stands between traditional and new party models. It is still a federation of national Green parties and does not offer direct individual membership. The party has also been experimenting with new forms of engagement, the most important one being the Individual Supporters Network. This network serves as a platform for cross-border collaboration and grassroots engagement. Members can propose resolutions and amendments at EGP Council meetings. However, they do not have any voting rights. Members can also take part in online consultations and the development of manifestos, which show that the party has adopted a more participatory approach within an overall structure that remains federal in character. The

125 See S. Otjes and A. Krouwel, 'The Nuclear Option: Voting for the Pan-European Party Volt', *European Union Politics* 24/4 (2023), 726, doi:10.1177/14651165231193814. There is still a lack of empirical research on Volt, as development in the national branches is quite diverse.

EGP is an example of a broader development towards a kind of hybrid organisation, gradually integrating grassroots activities to nourish a pan-European identity.[126]

Conclusion

This analysis has shown that there is a diversity of membership forms among Europarties. They range from traditional, elite-centred models (EPP) and hybrid-participatory forms (PES and EGP) to full transnational integration (Volt). These differences reflect the specific histories of the various political families, ideological orientations, deeply entrenched interests (not least among the national member parties) and varying concepts of what EU-level party democracy should look like.

It is not surprising that the parties have no clear consensus on how traditional forms of membership (or non-membership) should be replaced or reconceptualised. Digital-native parties such as Volt are pointing to alternative paths. However, their political influence remains weak, and similar initiatives on the national level (e.g. the German Pirates) have already failed. The legal and organisational frameworks of the EU both enable and constrain innovation in party membership. But this is no excuse for Europarties not to explore new, uncharted territories of individual party membership.

At the core of the future development of European parties lies the challenge of increasing the participation of membership beyond the boundaries of national party structures. Without a clear(er) commitment by national parties to the option of a multilayered membership, European political parties will always lack a genuine legitimisation and will be unable to create a motivational momentum on the ground. Campaign-related activities before the European elections are no substitute for continuous engagement during a legislative cycle—for example, in programmatic work. This work cannot be left to the few Members of the European Parliament in their large constituencies. The idea of specific support networks, as partially realised

126 I. Hertner, 'Unity in Diversity? Europarties and Their Individual Members' Rights', in O. Costa and N. Brack (eds.), *Les élections européennes 40 ans après* [The European Elections, 40 Years After] (Brussels: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2019), 243.

by left-leaning and Green parties, is a feasible first step. A simple dual membership alone is not a remedy. It could create—in the worst case—more friction in terms of membership control and loyalty, not to mention conflicts with national party legislation.

It is more than evident that the topic goes beyond party politics, pointing to the unsolved question of extending democratic representation at the EU level. Quite remarkably, the Conference on the Future of Europe[127] did not mention the issue of new forms of party membership in its reform proposals.

Recommendations

It must be allowed that as long as federal structures with strong national member parties prevail, further Europeanisation of individual party membership will be limited. All the same, recommendations now follow on ways in which Europarties can foster a more direct engagement of European citizens within their organisations.

- Directly including individual citizens in central party projects remains key to creating a common sense of belonging to one European political family. These projects include drafting party statutes, basic platforms and election manifestos.
- The sub-organisations (for youth, seniors and workers) of Europarties play an underestimated role, as they can target specific segments of European societies and have a long tradition of pan-European engagement.
- In particular, centre–right parties lack a culture of political activism and need to invest much more in support structures in academia and civil society. Such cross-national networks are weak at the national level and do not exist at all at the Europarty level. With their large network beyond party structures, European political foundations bear the responsibility for remedying this situation.
- European parties must convince their national member parties to change their

127 European Parliament, *The Future of Europe: Report on the Final Outcome* (2022), accessed at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20220509RES29121/20220509RES29121.pdf.

statutes and allow for double membership. In some cases, national legislation would have to be adapted.

- National parties' communications often lack a truly European 'recall value', a problem that is not restricted to election campaigns for the European Parliament. Communication strategies must significantly enhance the visibility of 'Europeanness', not as a simple 'add-on' but as an inseparable part of contemporary national party work.

Appendix

Table 1 compares the individual membership structures of all Europarties currently represented in the European Parliament. We assessed *seven dimensions* to gauge the levels of access, participation and organisational innovation available to individual European citizens.

Table 1 Comparative summary of Europarties' membership models

Party dimension	European People's Party	Party of European Socialists	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	European Green Party	Volt Europa	European Conservatives and Reformists	Patriots for Europe	Europe of Sovereign Nations
Type of membership structure	Federation of national parties	Federation with activist network	Federation (individual membership discontinued in 2023)	Federation with Individual Supporters Network	Direct individual membership	Federation of national parties	Federation of national parties	Federation of national parties
Participatory rights of individuals	No direct individual rights	Consultative rights via activists	Previously limited rights; now discontinued	Consultative rights via supporters	Full participatory rights	No direct individual rights	No direct individual rights	No direct individual rights
Organisational integration	Through national parties	Through national parties and activists	Through national parties	Through national parties and supporters	Full integration	Through national parties	Through national parties	Through national parties
Formal role in party governance	Indirect via national parties	Indirect via activists	Previously limited; now discontinued	Indirect via supporters	Full governance rights	Indirect via national parties	Indirect via national parties	Indirect via national parties
Pan-European identity emphasis	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Core feature	Limited	Limited	Limited
Membership accessibility	Through national parties	Through national parties	Through national parties	Through national parties	Open and accessible	Through national parties	Through national parties	Through national parties
Innovation in member engagement	Moderate	Moderate	Previously moderate; now limited	Moderate	High	Low	Low	Low

Source: Data from party statutes; author's compilation.

Party Membership and Party Democracy

Exploring the Dilemmas of Giving Away or Taking Away Power From Party Members

Thibault Muzergues

In May 2025 the French political party The Republicans (Les Républicains, LR), the French member party of the European People's Party, experienced something of a renaissance: after a long and steady decline, the party recorded a large increase in its membership. To be precise, the total number of members tripled, from 44,000 in January 2025 to more than 122,000 in May.[128] Of course, this spectacular increase (which is still far from the levels seen during the heyday of the party in the mid-2000s) had a cause, and some may explain it as being a result of the solid leadership of Michel Barnier during his tenure as prime minister or that of Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau, now president of the party. Both of these factors indeed contributed to putting LR back at the forefront of French politics and obviously increased its appeal. However, the main reason why so many flocked to take up or renew their membership was more prosaic: membership meant having the right to vote in the primary election for the leadership of the party, which was being contested between Bruno Retailleau (who also led the LR group in the Senate before becoming interior minister) and Laurent Wauquiez (who headed and still presides over the LR parliamentary group in the National Assembly, France's lower chamber).

In fact, if one looks closely at membership of France's political parties (but also those of parties in other countries such as the UK), it seems to soar regularly ahead of two events: first, when there is an election looming, as parties need to recruit new members before mobilising them during the campaign; and second (and perhaps more importantly), when there is an internal election in which party members (and party members only) are allowed to vote. While this may sound like a truism, this shows how interlinked party membership is with internal democracy: for some people, the main (perhaps even the only) reason to join a party is to have a say over the platform and, in these days of the heavy personalisation of the political scene, over the choice of the party leader or candidate.

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128 *France.info*, 'Les Républicains ont triplé le nombre d'adhérents depuis le mois de janvier, juste avant l'élection du nouveau président', 24 April 2025, accessed at https://www.franceinfo.fr/politique/les-republicains/laurent-wauquiez/les-republicains-ont-triple-le-nombre-d-adherents-depuis-le-mois-de-janvier-juste-avant-l-election-du-nouveau-president_7208529.html.

Giving voters a say over the destiny of their own party—and in particular its leadership—may seem like an obvious proposition. However, it has not always been the case, especially among parties on the right in countries such as France and Italy, where strong individual rivalries and the tradition of *caudillismo* (or *condottiere* behaviour) have often made internal democracy seem a messy business. This is because internal party democracy comes with its own risks—one of them being the loosening of party discipline and the subsequent weakening of party coherence, which can ultimately result in negative consequences in election results. Political leaders have therefore always had to balance members' legitimate aspirations to have a say in the life of their party (i.e. internal democracy) with the need to maintain and sometimes enforce party discipline (i.e. through party centralisation). And while finding the balance between these two objectives has always been tricky, it has been made more difficult with the emergence of new types of engagement between parties and citizens, short of full membership but meaningful enough to make sympathisers and donors feel like stakeholders in the life of the party.[129] This evolving relationship between party democracy and party discipline from the membership perspective will be the subject of this chapter. In turn, the chapter will look at the rise and fall of intra-party democracy, the advantages and difficulties related to opening up such processes to non-party members and the lessons learned from the newest trends in party development (in particular the rise of memberless parties[130] and of technocratic candidate selection processes). The chapter will conclude by drawing some conclusions about how European People's Party member parties should best address these tensions.

The rise of the member–decider

The idea that party members should have a say in the life of their party is, of course, not new. In fact, party democracy (including for members) has always been

129 For more on this subject, see T. Muzergues, 'The Changing Face of Political Party Membership: More Diverse, Less Committed', in this volume.

130 Ibid.

a feature of political party life in the three mainstream political traditions of European politics, namely Christian Democracy, Social Democracy and liberalism. However, there has always been a tension between this need to give members a say in the life of their party and the requirements of party efficiency, which requires strong discipline, and this was particularly true in the age of the democratisation and massification of politics. In the early twentieth century, Lenin theorised, under the name of 'Democratic Centralism', the idea of an ironclad party led by an elite, whose debates were kept far from the public eye and whose orders had to be followed strictly, whatever they were. These ideas were also present on the right, in particular in the interwar period, where fascination for Fascism and then Nazism led many conservative parties to adopt some form of *Führerprinzip*, seeing mass party politics not as an exercise in democracy but as one defined by top-down political organisation. On both the left and the right, this emphasis on executive power over democratic principles has continued to define the political debate throughout the West's political history, which has centred on these two very different conceptions of the nature of party membership. Should party members be merely the subjects of political parties, that is, the foot soldiers and instruments for its success? Or, on the contrary, should they be the real owners of the party, deciding everything from the party line to the leadership and even the identity of the candidates?

This historic tension between democracy and discipline is a defining feature of almost every Western political party since the start of the Cold War, even in those parties most centralised and prone to authoritarianism. After all, the line to adopt when confronted with a momentous event is always matter for discussion and has the potential to cause major splits within a party, which must be avoided. In the 1970s, the Communist parties of France and Italy, for instance, allowed much more internal debate and voting, while ultimately keeping control of the most important features of their development (and eventually reversing course when this strategy did not produce the expected results).[131]

131 See, for example, S. Courtois and M. Lazar, *Histoire du Parti communiste français* (Paris: PUF, 1995), 381–94.

Since the 1980s, however, the shift has been towards a greater demand for democracy, which has often been granted by the party to its members. This is the result of the massive societal changes introduced by the baby-boomer generation after 1968, as they demanded more participation and horizontality in the organisation of society. Many historical political parties reacted by giving their members more of a say not only in party decisions, but also in policymaking, with the rise of the citizen–expert in the 1990s and 2000s putting pressure on parties to allow even more participation.[132]

In other words, from the point of view of members, intra-party democracy became not only about the right to vote on policy, party leadership or candidates (features that many suspected could be decided in advance by the party leadership because of its capacity to organise large groups of voters), but about active participation in the very elaboration of the party platform. In many ways, this dispossessed party elites of their power—power which had already been checked by demands for more votes on party leadership and candidates. However, party elites were somehow able to accommodate this trend: the process remained controlled as most discussions happened behind closed doors (avoiding the embarrassment of having to defend policies deemed too radical in the eyes of the wider public), and party platforms often remained obscure documents that few people, including journalists, ever read in their entirety. Better, then, to let off steam by giving members more of a say in intra-party programmatic discussion—if only because kept them busy during pre-campaign periods and motivated them to do more on the ground.

Open or closed primaries? Empowerment and dispossession

The most salient aspect of party democratisation, however, came with the general movement towards having party members decide on their party leadership—not in staged congresses where the results are known in advance due to the influence of well-organised

132 For a more general reflection on the rise of the citizen–expert and its effect on governance, see E. Krick and A. Meriluoto, 'Citizen Experts in Participatory Governance: Democratic and Epistemic Assets of Service User Involvement, Local Knowledge and Citizen Science', *Current Sociology* 70/7 (November 2022), 967–73.

factions (the only uncertainty residing in the margin of victory) but in actual primaries where competition is, if not encouraged, then at least considered normal (instead of being a more or less intolerable dissidence). In many ways, the move towards party primaries is also the result of the post-1968 cultural revolution in the West, with the US elections of that year providing a blueprint for things to come. The 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, which ushered in the selection of unpopular Vice-President Hubert Humphrey in a process that was anything but transparent, was nothing short of a disaster. This was seen both immediately, with major riots occurring on the margins of the convention, and in the longer term, as the open show of division and dissent showed the Democratic Party to be out of touch with the preoccupations of ordinary Americans and hopelessly divided, paving the way for Nixon's victory. The McGovern–Fraser Commission which was asked to look into modernising the party following the defeat, concluded that in many places in America the Democratic Party was 'an autocratic, authoritarian organization' that engaged in the 'shameful exploitation of the voter'.[133] The result was a profound reorganisation of the party and its democratisation, notably through the introduction of primaries in each state, not only to designate the delegates that would choose the party candidate for the next election, but also for the candidates standing for state and local elections.[134]

Thus, in the US, a large shift towards adopting primaries took place (by 1975 all but five states had adopted the presidential primary model), and it was not long before the idea of delegating party leadership and candidate selection directly to the citizens crossed the Atlantic and was adopted in Europe, where primaries and internal elections became much more common. One of the last major parties to adopt this idea on the right was the UK Conservatives, which in 1998, following their historic defeat a year earlier in the general election, adopted the principle of having their leader elected by party members (after pre-selection by the parliamentary group).[135]

133 A. Cohen and E. Taylor, *American Pharaoh: Mayor Richard D. Haley – His Battle for Chicago and the Nation* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2001), 521.

134 For more on this, see D. Scaduto, 'Candidate (S)election in the United States: From Backroom Deals to Public Forums', in T. Muzergues and D. Scaduto (eds.), *Standing Out From the Crowd: Political Parties' Candidate (S)election in the Transatlantic World* (Washington, DC: International Republican Institute, 2022), 94–103.

135 See A. Bowie, 'Candidate (S)election in the United Kingdom: A Dynamic Approach for the Conservative Party', in T. Muzergues and D. Scaduto (eds.), *Standing Out From the Crowd: Political Parties' Candidate (S)election in the Transatlantic World* (Washington, DC: International Republican Institute, 2022), 55–61.

Of course, the primary-based candidate selection process has its own flaws, and detractors have not been shy to point out its weaknesses. Even though it is more democratic than the backroom deals that were often the norm before its adoption, the primary system does not guarantee peace within the party, as party feuds and internal divisions are now openly publicised, while decision-making is left to the party members. The latter are a small number of people compared to the electorate and tend to be more politicised, but they are also (even if this is sometimes rather exaggerated) more radical than the public at large.[136]

To resolve the issues caused by holding primaries, again following the American example, some parties have adopted an 'open primary' system, that is, a primary open not only to party members, but to all citizens willing to register themselves as belonging to the political family. This system was first adopted by the Italian left in the mid-2000s. It was then utilised by the French centre–left in 2011 and the centre–right (only once) in 2016, and also by the European People's Party member Homeland Union—Lithuanian Christian Democrats (Tėvynės sąjunga – Lietuvos krikščionys demokratai) in 2019. While the principle of open primaries remains a hotly contested issue in France, it has become the norm for both Italy's main centre–left Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD), and Lithuania's Homeland Union.[137]

A priori, the open primary system seems more democratic than the closed system, as it allows far more voters to take part in the selection process. However, it also represents a real diminution of the power of party members. While voting rights have not been taken away from the members, what is their real decision-making power when, as in the case of the French LR open primary in 2016, they comprised (at the time) 235,000 members out of the more than four million who voted? This relative dispossession[138] can be tolerated if the masses choose the same individual as the base (i.e. the membership), even though that is no guarantee of victory—as the case of François Fillon in LR's 2016 primary shows. But it becomes a much bigger problem

136 See T. Bale, 'Persuading Us to Join; Convincing Us to Stay: Party Members' Perspectives on Recruitment and Retention', in this publication.

137 See M. Adomenas, 'Shallow Roots: Political Membership Trends and Prospects in Central and Eastern Europe', in this publication.

138 R. Lefebvre, 'Les primaires : entre désillusion et expérimentation', *LaVieDesIdees.fr*, 12 April 2022, accessed at https://laviedesidees.fr/Les-primaires-entre-desillusion-et-experimentation.

when the larger pool of citizens (who constitute a sizeable portion but nonetheless a minority of the general electorate) votes against the wishes of the party, as in Italy in 2023 when PD primary voters elected Elly Schlein as their new secretary general, while party members had opted by a rather large majority for her rival Stefano Bonaccini.[139] This result has produced tensions that continue to undermine the PD to this day—all while the party is generally suffering from entrenched, long-term divisions over ideology as well as personality.

The de-democratisation of parties

In some ways therefore, it could be argued that the democratisation of party life and the continued expansion of the voting franchise for candidate (s)election has actually had the paradoxical effect of disempowering party members—and has therefore been unhelpful for party officials trying to recruit new members, with the promise of party democracy being a major argument used to convince people to sign up, at least in some countries (France's LR being one example among many). Furthermore, while the craze for open primaries has often led to political parties gaining a clear advantage in the polls ahead of crucial elections (e.g. Romano Prodi's The Union/L'Unione, predecessor of the PD, in 2006; François Hollande's French Socialist Party/Parti socialiste in 2011–12), the original hype has not always been followed by victory, as unsuccessful presidential candidates François Fillon (France, 2017) and Ingrida Šimonyte (Lithuania, 2019) can attest. The same can be said, of course, for the winners of closed primaries. To return to France's example, LR resorted to a closed primary to select its candidate for the presidential election of 2022. However, Valérie Pécresse, the candidate ultimately chosen by the party members, led a lacklustre campaign that ended with her receiving just 4.78% of the votes (by far the worst results for the French centre–right in the presidential elections since the introduction of universal suffrage for this position in 1962). This was despite Pécresse being a decent

139 Results are available on the website of the Democratic Party. For the members, see PD, 'Pd, I dati definitivi dei congressi di circolo' (20 February 2023), accessed at https://www.partitodemocratico.it/news/pd-i-dati-definitivi-dei-congressi-di-circolo/; for the general results see PD, 'Primarie PD: i risultati definitivi' (27 February 2023), accessed at https://partitodemocratico.it/primarie-pd-i-risultati-definitivi/.

candidate who made few mistakes during the campaign itself, other than giving an uninspiring opening speech at her campaign inauguration. What is more, the hype generated by open primaries in terms of media coverage has tended to plateau and then decrease over the long term—as the PD has learned over the past 10 years.

Party members' frustration—particularly on the centre-right—has sometimes led to requests from them to return to a closed primary system—as happened between 2017 and 2022 in France. But the challenge presented by new, sometimes memberless, challenger parties that hide a very top-down approach behind the veneer of an officially horizontal structure (allowing them the agility to recruit candidates from civil society rather than from among the usual suspects) has sometimes led party leaders to take a different decision. Indeed, if the best way to get candidates that 'look like the electorate' and can therefore compete for their vote is not by having them elected by a small portion of the electorate, then why bother with primaries? This shift started in the late 2000s, when the UK Conservative Party under David Cameron enforced the selection of 'A-list' candidates from minority groups and women in safe constituencies—a move that did not go down well with party members, whose right to choose their candidate had been trampled on in the process. In the end, some of those disgruntled by the move switched their allegiance to the then-marginal UK Independence Party of Nigel Farage, while those who stayed eventually obliged Cameron to water down his efforts.

More recently, the recentralisation (and de-democratisation) of candidate selection has found new life in a novel technocratic approach, consisting (at least partially) of outsourcing the selection of candidates country-wide to a casting committee (as Emmanuel Macron's On the Move!/En Marche! did in France in 2017) or to human resources specialists. The latter approach was partially used in Greece by New Democracy (Néa Dimokratía) under the leadership of Kyriakos Mitsotakis after he took control of the party. This brought fresh blood from civil society into New Democracy, but it also partially disempowered party members, who now not only found themselves with less influence over the selection of their candidates for national posts but also had to endure more competition for elected positions from newcomers with little

or no history in the party. The fact that Mitsotakis's team managed these tensions is testimony to his capacity for leadership, but the tensions also showed that this strategy of bureaucratising candidate selection was tricky because it took power away from the members and therefore potentially upset the balance between intra-party democracy and party discipline. Perhaps the fact that, in the cases of both New Democracy and the Conservative Party, this technocratic approach was coupled with a surge in the party's popularity and eventual election to government also helped party members accept this partial loss of control.

The way forward: a decision with—or without—representation

After a long period of democratisation and the diffusion of power within political parties, party members now find themselves in a much weaker position—one where the decisive power they once held has either been diffused, taken away or limited to areas of party life that matter little to people outside it. In some ways, this is a return to past practices, when, under the veneer of internal democracy, it was actually the party leadership that decided the organisation's destiny, with very little input from the membership, which had to put up or else shut up. But it is also testament to the success of memberless parties, and the difficulties that (some) political parties have today in finding a purpose for recruiting and retaining members: today, one does not need to hold a party card to become an activist[140] (particularly online), and increasingly (though not in all countries), parties select 'civil society' candidates from outside the party, thereby weakening the value of party membership. This, in turn, has obvious consequences for finding the balance between intra-party democracy and the discipline needed for effectiveness, with the latter often claiming a decisive advantage in party leaderships' decision-making. After all, in these days of online campaigning, party members—at least in terms providing 'boots on the ground'—may not be as necessary in the short term as they once were.

140 For more on this topic, see P. Webb, M. Poletti and T. Bale, 'So Who Really Does the Donkey Work in "Multi-Speed Membership Parties"? Comparing the Election Campaign Activity of Party Members and Party Supporters', *Electoral Studies* 46 (2017), 64–74.

Of course, this is also part of a larger trend in public opinion towards acceptance of a less restrained executive authority, which then makes it easier for the powers that be to leave less space for deliberation and deliberative institutions or mechanisms in the public debate. But supporters of more intra-party democracy should not despair. If anything, the tripling of LR's membership ahead of the internal elections for the party's leadership shows that citizens are still interested in joining political parties provided that they are given something in exchange—in this case, the right to choose their leader. People are still interested in (and responsive to) being given the power to decide, and this also holds advantages for party leadership. In LR's case, despite being weakened in 2024 by a depletion in the number of its elected representatives and major divisions, the surge in membership allowed the party not only to solve its leadership problem but to replenish its coffers. This is, in itself, an argument for giving power to paid-up party members.

The Changing Face of Political Party Membership

More Diverse, Less Committed

Thibault Muzergues

Over the past half a century, political parties have been confronted with two major revolutions in terms of their membership. The first was the end of mass membership in the 1970s and 1980s, to which parties have more or less managed to adapt over the past 50 years. The second, more recent, is the rise of memberless parties, that is, political parties with an extremely limited number of members (one, two or three, or the minimum required for the grouping to be legally recognised as a party and compete in elections). The ideological diversity of these new, memberless parties, coming from the far right (e.g. Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom/Partij voor de Vrijheid[141]), the far left (e.g. Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France/La France Insoumise[142]) or the centre (e.g. Emmanuel Macron's On the Move!/En Marche! in 2017[143]), shows that their emergence is neither an accident nor a phenomenon linked to new ideologies. If anything, this trend is linked to new parties which are, by definition, more agile than old, institutionalised parties. Thus their emergence offers important lessons for traditional parties in terms of how they manage party membership: not by getting rid of it altogether—as other chapters in this publication have shown, members are still a valuable resource for parties—but by offering the public more diverse forms of membership and ways of getting involved in party life.

Hanging on to an almost one-size-fits all membership scheme and seeing it as the alpha and omega of political life may have been a winning strategy for Nicolas Sarkozy in 2005, when he took control of the then main centre–right French party, Union for a Popular Movement (Union pour un mouvement populaire, UMP). Thanks to his focus on recruitment, party membership soared to 370,000 members—an impressive number for France, and more than three times the size of the UMP before he took over. This revival of the party, orchestrated by Sarkozy and his team, was a major factor in the rise of his candidacy during the period 2005–6, and prepared the

141 G. Voerman and K. Vossen (eds.), *Wilders gewonen: 15 jaar reuring in de Nederlandse politiek* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2019).

142 C. Berlaïch and O. Pérou, *La Meute: Enquête sur la France insoumise de Jean-Luc Mélenchon* (Paris: Flammarion, 2025).

143 S. Maillard, 'En Marche! est-il un mouvement ou un parti?', *La Croix*, 6 April 2017, accessed at https://www.la-croix.com/France/Politique/En-Marche-mouvement-parti-2017-04-06-1200837564.

ground for his successful election campaign in 2007. Interestingly though, when he returned in 2014, after a hiatus following his defeat in the presidential election in 2012 and catastrophic in-fighting inside the party that caused membership numbers to dwindle to 110,000,[144] Sarkozy tried to copy–paste the winning formula by focusing almost solely on party membership, announcing the very ambitious objective of reaching 500,000 members.[145] Even though this managed to bring back some of the lost members, the operation was still a (relative) failure, as the party had only reached 235,000 members in 2017[146]—double the numbers from when Sarkozy took back control of the party, but a long way from the original objective. With hindsight, this failure to reach a rather optimistic objective was not necessarily caused by its ambitious nature, but by the difficulty the party leadership had of thinking of party members in a new, more flexible way. Around the same time, Emmanuel Macron's On the Move! claimed to have more than 400,000 party members. This was a controversial claim because, as in the US, members had simply signed (most often, digitally) an affiliation form and had not paid any membership fees. They were not, therefore, legally members, but were counted as such by Emmanuel Macron's party—and like for Sarkozy in 2007, these 'members' were to prove valuable in ensuring their champion's election in the 2017 presidential elections.

The success of Macron's 'quasi-member' status and the subsequent transformation of On the Move! into Renaissance, wherein membership is linked to the payment of a fee, is very telling of the direction in which party membership is likely to head in the future. This chapter will try to help the reader understand why, first by establishing why it has become much more difficult for political parties to achieve large membership models, before looking in more detail at the model of 'pure' memberless parties and

144 V. Vergnaud, 'Les effectifs de l'UMP fondent', *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 16 July 2014, accessed at https://www.lejdd.fr/Politique/Selon-Alain-Juppe-il-y-a-150-000-militants-a-l-UMP-soit-deux-fois-moins-qu-il-y-a-un-an-676365.

145 M. Théobald, 'UMP : Nicolas Sarkozy vise les 500 000 adhérents en 2017', *L'Opinion*, 13 December 2014, accessed at https://www.lopinion.fr/politique/ump-nicolas-sarkozy-vise-les-500-000-adherents-en-2017.

146 'De l'UMP à LR, quinze ans d'histoire mouvementée', *Challenges*, 18 June 2018, accessed at https://www.challenges.fr/politique/de-l-ump-a-lr-quinze-ans-d-histoire-mouvementee_595075.

how traditional parties have reacted, often by reflex rather than as a result of a deep rethink. I will conclude by offering a potential strategy for those political parties that wish to both retain traditional membership and expand their base.

Understanding the new membership crisis

To understand the crisis of attractivity that traditional parties (across the political spectrum) experienced during the 2010s, several explanations can be put forward. The first is the relatively low attractivity of traditional parties following the financial crisis of 2008, following which the public saw them as part of the problem rather than the solution.[147] While it is clear that traditional parties suffered from their proximity to power in the crunch moments of the euro crisis, losing many voters to fringe and new parties (many of which did not have members), one cannot explain the relative disaffection for party membership only on these grounds. Indeed, even though some countries, such as the Netherlands and France, showed sharp decreases in the numbers of traditional party members during the euro crisis,[148] the long-term gradual decrease in the membership of Germany's Christian Democratic Union (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands, CDU) continued unabated,[149] while the People's Party (Partido Popular, PP) in Spain did not register any decrease in membership over the period 2009–13—although this was an isolated case in an otherwise gloomy situation for Spain's political parties.[150] The diversity of cases and evolutions indicates that there was not a direct correlation between loss of confidence in the general

147 For more on this subject, see the first publication in this series on the continued relevance of political parties: T. Muzergues, R. Le Quiniou and A. Braun (eds.), *Why We Still Need Parties: The Resilience of Europe's Political Parties Explained* (Brussels: WMCES, 2023), as well as T. Muzergues, *Postpopulisme* (Paris: Éditions de l'Observatoire, 2024).

148 See A. Siegman, 'United in Fragmentation: Political Party Resilience in the Netherlands', in T. Muzergues, R. Le Quiniou and A. Braun (eds.), *Why We Still Need Parties: The Resilience of Europe's Political Parties Explained* (Brussels: WMCES, 2023).

149 'Number of CDU party members in Germany from 1990 to 2021', *Statista*, accessed at https://www.statista.com/statistics/955496/cdu-membership-development/.

150 J. L. Fernández López, 'El PP dice que sus afiliados aumentan a pesar del descalabro que le pronostican las encuestas', *El Diario*, 15 September 2013, accessed at https://www.eldiario.es/politica/afiliacion-partidos-politicos-crisis-partido-popular-psoe_1_5799531.html.

public and loss of membership, and one therefore has to admit that the crisis of the 'parties with members' model has much deeper roots, which are more sociological than anything else.

Unsurprisingly, the deepest and strongest cause is the origin of the previous crisis of membership, the one that put an end to the mass membership model of the immediate post-war years. With the progressive weakening (after 1956, 1968 and 1989) of all-encompassing ideologies offering individuals a higher collective goal for humanity, many seem to have concluded that political party membership per se was not worth the money and the energy, and decided to focus on other activities—including civic ones. This is why party membership dropped sharply in the 1970s and 1980s, alongside large communities of purpose (the factory and its trade unions on the left, faith communities and their tight-knit networks on the right) giving way to a much more atomised, individualistic society.

As a result, our Western societies have since undergone a continuous process of atomisation, to the extent that French sociologist Jérôme Fourquet has talked of the 'French Archipelago',[151] the 'archipelisation' of society whereby communities are now living side by side, with little bridges between them, as part of a more fractured national entity. After continuously promoting diversity in public policy, politicians now have to face the consequences, including the impact on political party structures. With so many different (and conflicting) interests at play, it has become increasingly difficult to build large coalitions of interest in catch-all parties—the very groupings that had historically relied on mass membership to justify their existence and role in society. After all, if one follows Max Weber, the primary function of a political party is to aggregate and represent the interests of sections of societies in the political debate and bring these sections to power.[152]

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151 J. Fourquet, *L'Archipel Français: Naissance d'une nation multiple et divisée* (Paris: Seuil, 2019).

152 W. G. Runciman, *Weber: Selections in Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 43–56.

In archipelised societies such as ours, the question then arises as to what a party can do if societies have become too diverse for these interests to be articulated. The answer is often the end of the 'big tent' parties, with them being replaced by single-issue parties such as the Greens (at least originally), and entrepreneurial parties, whose existence relies solely on the personality and charisma of one political leader.[153]

Throughout the years, some citizens have therefore tended to see it as less and less 'useful', or at least 'purposeful' to join large political parties and take part in intra-party debates, often preferring to become active in civil society organisations with different models of involvement that do not necessarily include membership. This trend has been strengthened by the emergence of new information media: in the 1970s and 1980s, the emergence of multi-channel television contributed to create the trend of 'zapping' from programme to programme, from cause to cause (to defend civil society organisations) and from political party to political party during successive elections. As one was no longer 'married' to a party because one belonged to a certain social class, it became easier to switch one's support from one party to another, and it therefore made even less sense for individuals to become members of a political party, considering that over the year one's support for it might decrease significantly. In that case, why bother paying a membership fee, particularly if there was no direct benefit attached to it (in terms of socialisation or, in some cases, networking/job opportunities), only constraints (such as having to leaflet on the party's behalf or take part in heated discussions about obscure political themes)? Needless to say, the advent of the Internet and then social networks pushed this logic to another level, as they created ever smaller niches of interest and cultural reference, leading to the further atomisation of society and more activist rabbit holes that citizens could disappear down without needing the help of a political party to organise and push a narrative on the public square.

153 See V. Hlousek, L. Kopeček and P. Vodová, *The Rise of Entrepreneurial Parties in European Politics* (Cham: Palgrave, 2020).

Finally, the societal model offered by social networks, with their horizontal interactions, and the possibility offered by open platforms, such as Twitter, to campaign online without the supervision of a political party (or at least with the illusion of no supervision) contributed to making parties less relevant in the eyes of people, even those who wanted to play a role in politics and society. All these trends explain why memberless parties started to pop up in Europe's political landscapes in the 2000s, and subsequently registered some major successes in the 2010s.

The ascent of memberless parties

One particular change introduced by social media was to have a particularly important role in the rise of memberless parties in the early 2010s: the shift from a pay-per-view to a 'data-per-view' model. Traditionally, or at least since the 1980s, many cultural business models belonged to the first category: to use a service or access it, one had to pay for it—this is the model used by cable TV, for example. Social media, however, introduced a different model: to access Facebook or Twitter, for example, there is no need to pay—the only thing that is asked is that the user shares as much data as possible, so that this data can then be sold to advertisers. In other words, the platforms are not after the user's money per se, but after their data, which is then monetised in myriad ways, some of which the wider public is not even aware of.[154]

Political strategists took note. And so while older parties were busy, after the success of the Obama campaign, launching their own social media platforms (which always cost a fortune and rarely lasted more than a couple of years), many new parties on the far right, far left and centre started to offer membership without a fee. This is what allowed On the Move! in France to claim, in just a few months, the 400,000 members discussed earlier in this chapter—it followed a model used by the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle) in Italy. The barrier to entry was very low (one only

154 See, for example, S. Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019); and C. Krohn, *Bombarded: How to Fight Back Against the Online Assault on Democracy* (Issaquah: Made for Success, 2020).

had to give a name, postal and e-mail address, as well as a telephone number), but what the campaign team was really after was an entry point to quickly build up its database with the idea of gathering as much data as possible in order to transform these, via a ladder of engagement, into action. All would then be invited to take part in online and offline debates, some would be mobilised as activists, others would give money to the party and some would be selected as candidates for the legislative elections. In other words, the new model enabled parties to access all the resources that traditional members usually delivered (money, activism, pools of candidates) without having to actually deal with any of the issues surrounding membership. Because it was free, people entered into a loose relationship with the party, giving it data and sometimes money (a 'give' button is ever-present in every communication), participating in general assemblies and online forums, and sometimes voting to confirm the party's platform or candidate list—but that was it. Far from bringing people closer together—and closer to power—the loose membership model was actually the politically correct way to build up a memberless party, relying on data to build strength, without having to be held to account by stakeholders, precisely because the relationship was looser.

One touches here on the main reason why so many edgy, new political parties have proposed a model for a political party (or 'movement') that does not have actual, *de jure* members: control. When there are no members, there is no need to introduce internal democracy, and power can remain concentrated in the hands of a few leaders, who can change electoral (and political) strategy as they please, without having to report to members. They are also able to enforce the top-down party structure, sometimes under the veneer of a horizontal format. This was clearly the case for the Five-Star Movement in Italy under Beppe Grillo (as the structures and the data were actually owned by a private company, Casaleggio & Associates, which was in charge of running the participative social media),[155] and perhaps even more so in the case of Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France. Journalists Charlotte Belaïch and Olivier Pérou have shown how the French left-wing firebrand and his entourage have built a structure completely submissive to their will, from which Members of

155 See M. Canestrari and N. Biondo, *Il Sistema Casaleggio – Partito, soldi, relazioni: ecco il piano per manomettere la democrazia* (Milan: Ponte alle Grazie, 2019), 12–30.

Parliament and volunteers can be expelled at will. Its power is derived from the fact that there are only three members (a president, a secretary and a treasurer), just enough to meet the legal requirements in France. The only way to become a *de jure* member of the party is to be approved by a majority of three-quarters of all members (which in a group of three means everybody), something that is unlikely to happen.[156] Behind the participatory mask of these parties that often invite citizens to 'join' them, and beyond the veneer of formally horizontal structures based on social media participation and activism, the reality is often that memberless parties are actually much more hierarchical and less democratic than traditional parties. But what they lose in democracy they gain in agility and focus, as activists are asked to communicate the message, not take part in its creation as well. In Central Europe, where membership levels were often low to start with—and the centralisation culture equally strong—the emergence of new parties has often followed the same model, with entrepreneurial parties such as ANO or Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) in Czechia deliberately limiting the numbers of members in order to keep tight control over their operation and positioning.[157]

Lessons learned for traditional parties

Traditional parties could not fail to react to the success of memberless parties, with their formal horizontal structures and online activism, and in many cases they have reacted by focusing less on membership recruitment per se, but instead on enlarging their donor base and, in some cases, recruiting sympathisers who pay no membership fee and have no right to vote in internal elections. However, these adaptations have often been made ad hoc, without an overarching strategy or theory for the recruitment and management of the new 'stakeholders', who think of themselves in many ways as being members of the political family without necessarily actually being adherents of the party.

156 C. Belaïch and O. Pérou, *La Meute: Enquête sur la France insoumise de Jean-Luc Mélenchon* (Paris: Flammario, 2025), 72–3.

157 See M. Adomenas, 'Shallow Roots: Political Membership Trends and Perspectives in Central and Eastern Europe', in this volume.

By now, most traditional parties have internalised the idea (for better or worse) that recruiting members is no longer the alpha and omega of their success outside of elections. This can be seen on their websites, which often show membership as one of several options available to citizens to 'join' the movement. To take an example from within the European People's Party family, in the case of the Spanish PP, pushing the 'join' button on the homepage allows you to choose between 'affiliation' (i.e. becoming a *de jure* member), donating or just subscribing to the newsletter. For its part, the French Les Républicains and the German CDU propose that visitors to their homepage either 'become a member' or 'donate' to the party—in the case of the CDU, the 'donate' button is actually more prominent than the membership button, which gives a hint as to the importance of non-member donors to the party. In Italy, in the weeks that precede the sending of tax returns, the most visible button on Forward Italy's (Forza Italia) website is not the membership link,[158] but the red and white button that invites taxpayers to opt to give 0.2% of their yearly income tax to the party—an option permitted to any taxpayer in Italian law who wishes to direct a small amount of their taxes to a particular non-governmental organisation, political party or church.

The corollary to the lesser importance of party members is the increased desirability of donors, hence the presence (and sometimes the prominence) of the 'give' button on most parties' websites across Europe, alongside—but sometimes more prominent than—links to get involved (i.e. give data) and formally join. As we explored in the previous Martens Centre publication dedicated to political parties,[159] fundraising has taken a much larger role in the life of political organisations—not only as a way to acquire more resources for political action (although this is the main function), but also because being able to count on an 'army' of donors, and in particular small donors, has become a convincing argument in itself. Indeed, everybody has internalised the

158 This, in fact, is lost at the top of the webpage, along with links to the party's social media pages, interestingly enough.

159 See T. Muzergues (eds.), *Financing Politics in Europe: A Political Party Roadmap for More Transparency and Effectiveness* (Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2024), in particular, the chapter on fundraising.

idea that money is the sinews of war, to use Cicero's often-quoted phrase, and in a world where fully fledged political party membership might be a scary prospect to some (whether those fears be of being singled out as a party member or simply of not having the time to take part in the party's activities), becoming a donor can be an interesting alternative. In other words, whereas a party member is often expected to contribute by giving his or her time to the party (whether in terms of propaganda/campaigning activity or through taking part in debates), a donor can contribute with money—and does not expect to get anything in return, apart from tokens of appreciation ('gift accelerators' in the professional lingo) and, of course, good results in elections and the implementation of policy programmes when the party is in power. The downside, of course, is that when good election outcomes do not result, donors tend to desert more rapidly than party members, who retain a loyalty that is much stronger (hence the focus that fundraisers also place on building some donors' loyalty, albeit that this will always remain inferior to that of party members).

But what about those who cannot (or are not willing to) give either time or money to a party, and are looking for a looser relationship with the political family they support? They can give their personal data. This may not be expressed so clearly as this in the various ways in which some parties have started to work recently, by providing less-demanding modes of affiliation, but this is certainly the intended goal. This relationship falls short of full membership, but it is nonetheless the start of a conversation between the individual and a party. Even if this 'only' translates into a regular vote in elections (although this remains the ultimate goal of political parties, from a practical perspective), it is enough to create a relationship that can (and should) be cultivated by party headquarters. To return to the Spanish example, the PP's website offers visitors the option to subscribe to its newsletter (albeit the minimum level of engagement), but also offers two types of membership: full (i.e. paid) membership, which opens the way to voting rights inside the party, and sympathiser (i.e. unpaid) membership, which does not involve voting rights but opens the way to a looser relationship. The latter could, in turn, be transformed in the future into something more active, through regular on- and off-line engagement. It should be

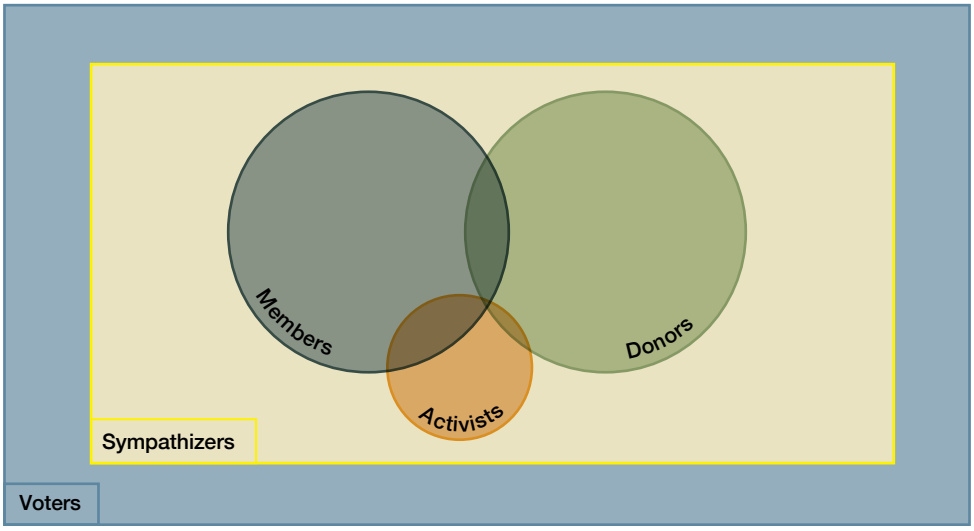
noted that the example of the PP, while very institutionalised, is not necessarily uncommon: during the 2010s, the UK Conservative Party proposed introducing the status of 'friend' of the party, similar to a sympathiser of the PP. And of course, the status is reminiscent of that of the 'fellow travellers' that Western intellectuals close to the Communist Party but unwilling to join enjoyed during the early days of the Cold War, in particular in France (*les compagnons de route*) and Italy (*i compagni di strada*). It might be, in the end, that most citizens interested in politics today have become 'intellectuals' and have decided that belonging to a party does not make much sense in a society that prizes liberty above all else.

What next? A more diverse membership offer for a more diverse public

The general disaffection with political parties and the unwillingness of many citizens (including those interested in politics) to become fully fledged party members has certainly become a major challenge for traditional legacy parties, which now find themselves outflanked by new types of political organisation that use the strength of their memberless model (whether that model is in plain sight, as for the Dutch Party for Freedom, or is more disguised, as for Unsubmissive France) to enforce higher agility and internal discipline. However, there is always room to turn weakness into strength, and parties have started to adapt by proposing, although sometimes unconsciously, new relationships with individuals. These are often looser associations, which can be summarised as part of a three-tier relationship system, with all levels expressing support for the party: while sympathisers give their data, donors give their money and members give their time (and a fixed, yearly contribution, which is the entry-point for acquiring voting rights), as well as a more tangible commitment to the party. Of course, these statuses are not exclusive: one can contribute both time and money to the party, and at all levels one gives one's data. But these levels are specific enough to be thought of differently—and for the groups that belong to these categories to be treated in more individualised ways.

In the age of digital politics, societal archipelisation and differentiated relationships, where some citizens are actually looking for a much more profound relationship with organisations such as the church or political parties, it is important for the European People's Party's member parties to understand two things. First, party members are actually an asset that they have and that the newer, memberless parties do not have. And second, that individuals perceive the relationship that exists as the result of membership of a political party in different ways, which in turn means that parties need to create different sorts of statuses and, of course, relationships, with the various categories of people who are ready to offer their support. As, for example, the PP has done in Spain, this can be achieved by offering different types of affiliation, with full membership giving voting rights, while the sympathiser status runs alongside that of unaffiliated party activist or donor. Each of these groups follows its own logic and therefore should be treated in a specific way. This is, thankfully, relatively easy thanks in part to the existence of social media and artificial intelligence, but also due to the historical local structures that traditional parties have—structures which give a new, social meaning to political engagement. The figure and table below summarise how these different groups interact with each other and what expectations each group should have towards the others. In any case, parties must present these different ladders of engagement to those people ready to support them—not only as a means of acquiring more resources (whether financial, time or data-based), but also to create deeper, more personalised (some would even dare to say 'à la carte') relationships in order to ensure their loyalty in the long run, as in the end these people are their voters.

Figure 1 Recap of the different groups/statuses a party can engage with and their relationships to each other



Note: These relationships are not mutually exclusive, and are sometimes complementary.

Table 1 Recap of the various supporter groups a party may have, the nature of their relationship with the party and the expectations on each side

Status	Nature of the contribution to the party	Expectation from the party's perspective	Expectation from the group's perspective
Member	Time and (usually small amounts of) money	• Payment of an annual subscription • Attendance at party events/social life	• Social life through the party • A say in the life of the party (policy debate, leadership/candidate selection etc.) • Sense of belonging to the political project
Donor	Money	• Gifts and donations (regular and/or large donations, resulting in specific status in donor clubs)	• Involvement in the life of the party (policy debates, meetings with politicians etc.) • Sense of belonging to the political project
Activist	Time (for activist activity)	• Contribution to controlled offline campaigning actions (phone banks, canvassing etc.) • Online activism in as controlled an environment as possible	• Regular communication from the party about actions to be taken/ positions to be defended • Sense of belonging to the political project
Sympathiser	Data	• Data released willingly by the sympathiser • Increased participation in the future (triggered by regular communication and call to action)	• Regular information about the party • Sense of belonging to the political project

Persuading Us to Join, Convincing Us to Stay

Party Members' Perspectives on Recruitment and Retention

Tim Bale

Wherever you look, whether in Europe or elsewhere, party membership appears to be on the decline. True, there is some evidence that this decline may be flattening out.[160] Membership also seems to be holding up better in countries where clientelism and patronage are rife—and where, as a consequence, belonging to a party can be the key to gaining access to state resources and opportunities for career advancement.[161] But in mature liberal democracies, where graft and corruption are for the most part held in check, parties risk becoming little more than Potemkins—organisations whose appearance belies a rather depressing, rather empty reality.

This is not necessarily their fault, at least in any direct sense. Indeed, in many cases the widespread decline in membership seems to have occurred in spite of the best efforts of parties of all shapes and sizes to arrest and reverse it—often over decades. Indirectly, of course, parties may have a case to answer, in the sense of no longer providing either the inspiration or the public policies that their supporters, potential and actual, once looked to them for. And some (though probably fewer than is commonly thought) may have been guilty of assuming that the rise of mass and then social media means they no longer need members even at election time. Even then, however, the *demand side* of party membership—the extent to which parties themselves want members—would only be part of the equation. The *supply side*—the willingness on the part of ordinary citizens to belong to, and to keep belonging to, political parties—matters too.

At its most basic, then, what we are dealing with here is a recruitment and retention problem—perhaps even a recruitment and retention crisis. Fewer folks are joining political parties, and, even when they do, many do not stay for long. To understand why, we have to start by looking at what motivates people to join in the first place and then at what might lead them to leave. Fortunately, surveys conducted by scholars (including the present author) since the late 1980s provide some important clues—not least because the data they provide comes from members themselves.

160 V. Sierens, E. van Haute and E. Paulis, 'Jumping on the Bandwagon? Explaining Fluctuations in Party Membership Levels in Europe', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 33/2 (2022), 300–21.

161 See the chapters by Teona Lavrevashvili and Mantas Adomenas in this publication.

Recruitment

Comparative work, based on studies conducted a decade ago in ten European democracies, suggests that '[p]arty members everywhere are generally motivated by policy incentives and political values, rather than by private benefits and, to a lesser extent, social norms'.[162] And this is supported by repeated surveys conducted in the UK (where membership has fallen from nearly 10% of voters in the mid-1960s to barely 2% today) by the Party Members project, run out of Queen Mary University of London and Sussex University in 2015, 2017, 2019 and 2024.[163]

From that research it is clear that, although there is rarely only one factor that drives people to get involved, the main reasons why people join come through again and again:

- They want to support their party's policies (often in general, but sometimes because they feel strongly about a particular issue with which it is associated) and/or want to oppose the policies put forward by a rival party or to offset the influence of what they regard as a powerful but malign social or economic actor. These motivations can be summed up as *collective policy incentives*.
- They feel a need to express their attachment to their party's principles and/or their belief in its leader/s—which might be called *expressive incentives*.
- They believe that democracy itself requires active rather than merely passive support—in other words, *altruistic incentives*.

Often running alongside all of these is the feeling among members that *somebody* has to do this or, to put it another way, 'If I don't do it, then who will?'

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162 A. Gauja and E. van Haute, 'Conclusion: Members and Activists of Political Parties in Comparative Perspective', in E. van Haute and A. Gauja (eds.), *Party Members and Activists* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 193.

163 T. Bale, P. Webb and M. Poletti, *Footsoldiers: Political Party Membership in the 21st Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

There is, however, another motive that matters, even if not quite so much: the desire to involve oneself in political activities (running from debating policy to going 'on the doorstep' to get out the vote). This is intrinsically enjoyable, at least to those who take part in them, and hopefully leads to interacting with like-minded people. These are known in the jargon as *selective process incentives*.

There are also some people—albeit a smaller minority than is commonly assumed—who join a party because they believe it will enhance their career prospects and/or because they would like one day to be elected to public office. These *selective outcome incentives* are relatively unimportant, even compared to what are called *social norm incentives*, which drive those who join a party because of the influence of family, friends and colleagues.

It is crucial, however, not to ignore the socio-demographic factors that mean that some people, irrespective of incentives and motivation, are more likely to join a party than others. These can, of course, be inferred by looking simply at the composition of parties' memberships, which tend to skew towards older age groups, towards men rather than women, towards the better- over the less-educated and towards the middle rather than the working class. But they can also be teased out, as we have done in the UK, by surveying non-members alongside members and then comparing those who decide to join a party with those who strongly support particular parties yet do not go so far as to join them.[164]

Surveys of this kind confirm our assumptions about the importance of gender, education and class, although not age. But they also reveal that members do tend to be less moderate than non-member supporters: those who belong to left-wing parties are more left-wing than those who merely support them, while members of right-wing parties lean further to the right than those who, despite their support for those parties, do not actually join them. Interestingly, however, social liberalism is

164 T. Bale, P. Webb and M. Poletti, 'Why Do Only Some People Who Support Parties Actually Join Them? Evidence From Britain', *West European Politics* 42/1 (2018), 156–172, doi:10.1080/01402382.2018.1479921.

more widespread among members than it is among non-member supporters, even on the right of the political spectrum—possibly because social liberalism, unlike its opposite, is associated with the right to participate.

The comparison between members and their co-partisans who do not go so far as to join the party they support reveals, too, that members are distinguished by a stronger sense of *efficacy*—that is, the feeling that they can actually achieve something politically, either as an individual or by being part of a collective or both. That, of course, returns us to the realms of the socio-demographic since efficacy tends to be associated with being male, better educated and middle class. And these are all characteristics that provide people with the resources (or social capital, if you will) that make it more likely that they will exercise voice and that, when they do, they will be listened to by those in power.

All this holds obvious lessons for political parties. *First*, since policies and principles matter a great deal, they need to think twice before abandoning them for short-term electoral gain, or at least recognise the trade-offs involved. And even if they decide to make those trades, their negative impacts might be minimised if they continue to play up their differences with their opponents. *Second*, they need to persuade people that joining them gives people the opportunity to signal to others their worldview and their values—and a leader who appears to share and be able to articulate them is worth their weight in gold. *Third*, they should emphasise that by joining, people will be playing a vital part in our democracies. *Fourth*, they should make as much as they can of the variety of activities that members can get involved in, as well as the fact that members will be doing whatever they decide to do with a group of people with whom they will find they have a lot in common: these activities can, the parties should add, provide opportunities to learn transferrable skills (e.g. public speaking, running a meeting); the chance to stand for elected office might be worth mentioning, too, although it should not be over-emphasised. *Finally*, they should do as much as they can to get existing members to try to persuade their family, friends and colleagues to give membership a try.

Getting their members to recruit others, however, will require parties to counter what the same research reveals are some fairly widespread negative assumptions and stereotypes held about membership—even by people who are favourably disposed (at least ideologically) to political parties. These emerge when we ask non-member supporters why they *think* some people join parties. For one thing, they underplay the role that support for the party's policies and principles, as well as their commitment to democracy, plays in members' decisions to join. For another, non-member supporters believe that all or most party members derive intrinsic pleasure from involvement in party life, see career or material benefits as important, and are embedded in a social network that draws them into the party. Furthermore, they also tend to overstate the time commitment that party membership involves—possibly because, in the media, at least, the words 'member' and 'activist' are used interchangeably—when, in fact, research shows that a substantial minority (and in some cases a majority) of members do little or nothing for their parties even during election campaigns.

By challenging these negative narratives about membership—perhaps by encouraging members to talk more about the realities of membership wherever possible—political parties may be able to persuade more people to join them rather than merely support them at a distance. To suggest that, however, is not to ignore the fact that, as research has shown, people do not have to be members in order to help their preferred party out at election time. Indeed, given that, in absolute terms, parties clearly have far more supporters than members, it may well be the case in many countries—as it is in the UK—that, on balance, they get as much if not more out of non-members than members at election time, especially when it comes to less-intensive activities.[165]

This does not mean, of course, that parties can or should relax about their recruitment problem. Members, we should remember, are more than merely foot soldiers at election time—or indeed simply sources of legitimacy and finance. At least some of them do voluntary work for the party all year round, and, at least in parties which enjoy a degree of internal democracy, they play a role in policy formation and candidate and

165 T. Bale, P. Webb and M. Poletti, 'So Who Really Does the Donkey Work in "Multi-Speed Membership Parties"? Comparing the Election Activities of Party Members and Party Supporters', *Electoral Studies* 46 (2018), 64–74.

leadership selection. In so doing, they help to connect parties to society and ensure that their platforms bear at least some resemblance to whatever groups and ideals they claim to represent, thus limiting the extent to which they can become brands run by elites for their own and for our collective convenience.

That said, parties should not beat themselves up too much about their failure—in most cases, anyway—to halt or reverse the long-term decline in membership they have experienced. They are swimming against the tide of secular trends over which they have no control. The explosion of alternative leisure and cultural activities that came with the consumer capitalism and mass affluence which characterised the postwar boom and has continued ever since meant there was less reliance on parties to provide people with a social life. And the accompanying erosion of class and related partisan loyalties made them less relevant, too—as did the decline (slower in some countries than others, admittedly) of patronage and clientelism.

This is not to argue, however, that parties should reconcile themselves to some sort of death spiral. After all, there are parties—some old, but mostly new—that have been able to buck the trend, mainly by being led by a charismatic leader and presenting themselves as insurgents and disruptors that reject 'business as usual' and (in characteristic populist fashion) 'the political class'. Examples would include, on the left, Greece's Syriza and Spain's Podemos, as well as the British Labour Party, which, under Jeremy Corbyn, enjoyed a massive boost in membership after 2015. Examples on the other side of the political spectrum would include a slew of populist radical right parties all over Europe—most obviously in Italy and, more recently, in Germany, with the Alternative for Germany party. Moreover, by far the fastest-growing party in the UK is Nigel Farage's Reform UK—an organisation that, even though it is now seeking to establish a network of 'conventional' local branches, might be seen as an example of the way belonging and activism are being redefined in the digital era. Such a model may lead to what the academic Susan Scarrow calls 'multi-speed membership parties', characterised by varying levels and types of affiliation and contribution.[166]

166 S. E. Scarrow, *Beyond Party Members: Changing Approaches to Partisan Mobilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). See, also, P. Gerbaudo, *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy* (London: Pluto, 2018); and A. Gauja, K. Kosiara-Pedersen and K. Weissenbach, 'Party Membership and Affiliation: Realizing Party Linkage and Community in the Twenty-First Century', *Party Politics* 31/2 (2025), 207–16.

Here, however, we run into a couple of problems, the first relating to change over time, the second to definition.

As anyone with any familiarity with some of the countries and parties just mentioned will immediately attest, past performance is no guarantee of future performance. All too many of the parties that have experienced phenomenal growth in membership have subsequently gone on to experience rapid decline, sometimes when they change their leader or lose an election, sometimes after entering or supporting government—the point at which inspirational, even fiery rhetoric has to give way to hard, even humiliating choices.

And then there is the question of what exactly constitutes membership, Reform UK being an obvious case in point since its members are legally and essentially donors to (and not shareholders of) a limited company over whose leadership, operation and policy positions they would appear to have very little genuine control.[167] While the party continues to ride high in the polls and, since the general election is presumably some way off, feels under no great pressure to produce a detailed platform, this may not matter. But should its popularity begin to fade and/or it decides to put together a manifesto rather more convincing than the one on which it fought in 2024, then those who have joined it since then may well find their enthusiasm waning or turning to frustration. All of this brings us to the other challenge that parties face when it comes to membership: even if they do manage to recruit more members, how do they keep them?

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167 J. Mortimore, 'Reform UK's Murky Corporate Structure Raises Legal Red Flags, Experts Warn', *Byline Times*, 24 March 2025, accessed at https://bylinetimes.com/2025/03/24/reform-uk-corporate-structure/. See, also, Reform UK's new constitution, accessed at https://reformuk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Reform_UK_Constitution.pdf; and R. Takver, 'Reform Chair Zia Yusuf Accused of "Power Grab" Through New Constitution', *DeSmog* (7 May 2025), accessed at https://www.desmog.com/2025/05/07/reform-chair-zia-yusuf-accused-power-grab-new-constitution/.

Retention

Perhaps because the decline in party membership has largely (and probably quite reasonably) been put down to fewer people wanting to join them than was previously the case, there is actually far less research into why those who, once upon a time, did join but then decided to leave. Less, however, does not mean none. A study of Austrian party members, for example, found that the more strongly they felt about ideology, the less likely they were to leave their parties, unless they perceived a mismatch between themselves and their party.[168] This chimed with research from Sweden which found that those members who were less ideologically aligned with their parties were more likely to consider switching parties.[169] Ideological disagreement has also been shown to matter to Danish party members entertaining the idea of quitting.[170] And earlier research on the UK was able to explain the exit of Labour members when Tony Blair was prime minister. The effect of socio-economic factors, it turned out, was minimal; instead, disappointment with the party's performance in office, and level of involvement in party activities emerged as important predictors of quitting. Once again, though, ideology played a part: left-leaning members were more likely than their right-leaning counterparts to leave the party. Nor was their departure solely a cost of governing—the opposition Conservative Party also lost many members in 2006, possibly reflecting a large-scale rejection of David Cameron's 'liberal Conservative' modernisation project.[171]

More recent research on seven parties in the UK was conducted as its Labour Party's membership initially surged and subsequently fell under veteran left-winger Jeremy Corbyn. This has given us a slightly more detailed picture by surveying

168 M. Wagner, 'Why Do Party Members Leave?', *Parliamentary Affairs* 70 (2016), 344–60.

169 A.-K. Kölln and J. Polk, 'Emancipated Party Members: Examining Ideological Incongruence Within Political Parties', *Party Politics* 23/1 (2016), 18–29.

170 K. Kosiara-Pedersen, 'Exit. Why Party Members Consider Leaving Their Parties', Paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research General Conference (Prague, September 2016).

171 See P. Whiteley, 'Where Have All the Members Gone? The Dynamics of Party Membership in Britain', *Parliamentary Affairs* 62 (2009), 242–57.

members of several parties who had left but then rejoined them, along with people who had previously been members of parties but had since quit.[172]

When it comes to the first group, disagreement with their party's policies and/or with its direction and/or disappointment with its leader were mentioned as reasons for quitting by nearly one in four people. As for the second group (i.e. those who had left their party and had not belonged to one since), around a third of respondents placed disagreement with the direction of the party and disillusionment with its leader in their top three reasons. Another quarter said they did not feel they were contributing anything, and a fifth felt uncomfortable with the internal conflict and factionalism they had encountered. A similar proportion, incidentally, said they had quit after realising that, in fact, they supported another party more than the one they had belonged to.

But while what one might term 'principled' motives for leaving were clearly the most common reasons offered, it was also the case that what one might term 'process' reasons had played a part for some.[173] However, the proportion of members who mentioned, for example, that there was some kind of administrative problem (for instance, some difficulty getting the bank to pay their subscription) was vanishingly small. More common (but, even then, only in around one in ten cases) was simply forgetting to renew, being too busy, or needing to save money.

Obviously, parties should ensure that it is easy for people to retain their membership. But streamlining their administrative processes (e.g. sending reminders, facilitating bank transactions, etc.) and making membership as cheap and undemanding as possible will make only the most marginal difference to retention. Far more important than making the 'membership journey' as smooth as possible is giving people the sense that the party they joined is sticking to the ideals and policies that inspired them to join in the first place and (probably just as importantly) is led by people

172 M. Barnfield and T. Bale, '"Leaving the Red Tories": Ideology, Leaders, and Why Party Members Quit', *Party Politics* 28/1 (2020), 3–9.

173 See S. Power and K. Dommett, 'From Multi-Speed to Multi-Stream? Recognising the Motivations, Processes and Triggers Behind Party Membership', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22 (2020), 505–22.

who embody those ideals and advocate for those policies. Ideally, they should also stress the contribution that members make to the party and do their best to create a culture in which members can (to coin a phrase) 'disagree agreeably'. Borrowing from Hirschmann's classic work on responses to organisational decline, to keep members *loyal*, minimise *voice*, and, above all, to prevent *exit*, parties should endeavour, whenever possible, to adopt political positions that are most representative of the majority of their members.[174]

Conclusion

Advice, of course, is easy to give but harder to take—and even harder to put into practice, especially when that advice involves sticking with what can sometimes seem like outdated ideology, questionable policies and inflexible leaders. It is one thing for parties to learn what drives people to join and to leave them. But it is quite another, at least in the real world, where 'compromise with the electorate' is often unavoidable, to be able to operationalise it. That said, there are clearly some lessons—particularly around the affective and cultural aspects of membership, as well as the opportunities it can provide—that parties should take seriously. People need to see joining a party as an expression of their values, as a vital contribution to democracy writ large, as a chance to meet like-minded people and learn valuable skills doing things that only need take up as much time and effort as they can comfortably manage. And parties should never forget that word-of-mouth is the very best advertising.

Parties, then, may be swimming against the tide when it comes to attracting and holding onto members. But that does not mean they are somehow doomed to drown.

174 A. Hirschmann, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

Let's Party Like It's 2026

Reclaiming the Relevance of Individual Membership for Political Parties

Heidi Nordby Lunde

The first goal of political parties is to win elections. Their higher objective is of course to provide a means through which citizens can engage in political processes and influence the decisions that affect their lives. In a modern, heterogeneous society this can only be achieved by providing attractive platforms for members and voters with diverse backgrounds and interests who feel connected through a set of values and are willing to work for them.

Political parties play an essential role in promoting political ideas and policy issues to their members, mobilising them to take part in campaigns and elections. The members, for their part, can serve as an important source of feedback for the party to flag issues and adjust policies and messaging. A successful organisational dynamic connects the skills and networking that members and supporters can provide with the political processes and decisions involved in the party leadership. Having a political organisation with active community members helps the party stay in touch with the sections of society it is supposed to represent. And as a result, it can help nip populism in the bud by providing early warnings if, or rather when, issues arise. In this way, the organisation operates as a continuous feedback loop to generate ideas and develop new policies.

This, of course, is the dream of any political practitioner. In an era when the mass political parties are fading, party membership is dwindling, and more and more people are feeling disconnected from politics, political parties must find new ways to ensure that their organisation does not become a nightmare.

The Norwegian term for a volunteer is *frivillig*, which is made up of the words 'free' and 'willing'. You are not only free to choose but also willing to participate. True activists and volunteers share a passion that goes beyond paid positions. The goal for any member-based organisation is to harness the energy which fuels that willingness to participate actively by one's own free will. No paid practitioner or public relations campaign can ever compete with the strength of the free and willing.

The party is not over

The death of political parties has been predicted for more than fifty years. One such prediction appeared in 1972, when David Broder, a journalist for *The Washington Post*, published the book *The Party's Over: The Failure of Politics in America*.[175]

Broder wrote that in an era of rapid and accelerating scientific, technological, social and cultural change, the governmental and political systems had been operating in extremely slow motion, were unable to solve problems and were losing their capacity to act—to respond and to actively contend with the challenges that confronted the US. Some 24 years later, after seeing the political turbulence at the end of the century, Broder reiterated his thesis in an opinion editorial in *The Washington Post*: the party is indeed over.[176] Economic, geopolitical and generational changes had combined to apply brutal force to existing parties and voter coalitions, he wrote. One cannot help but wonder what he would think of the state of play today.

Broder was not wrong in his observations of change. Yet almost three decades after his opinion piece, political parties seem to be lingering on. Populist parties rise, and some fall, while others stay on and become a natural part of the political fauna. Some of them shift and change so much that they are hardly recognisable when compared to their original forms. But as the 2023 publication *Why We Still Need Parties*[177] clearly showed, despite the decline of the traditional mass parties, political parties are still bridging the gap between public engagement and political processes. The problem is that in an age of professionalised politics and rapid media cycles, party leaderships often focus more on message discipline, data-driven campaigning and media management than on cultivating internal democratic processes and grass-roots activism. In the age of TikTok, deadlines are flexible, the flow of information

175 D. S. Broder, *The Party's Over: The Failure of Politics in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

176 D. S. Broder, 'The Party's Over', *The Washington Post*, 10 August 1996, accessed at https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1996/08/11/the-partys-over/52f2a584-9b84-4573-8d56-4aa28abfaf14/.

177 T. Muzergues, R. Le Quiniou and A. Braun (eds.), *Why We Still Need Parties: The Resilience of Europe's Political Parties Explained* (Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2023).

endless and resources to respond limited. From the moment an issue goes viral and the party professionals manage to engage a caucus or the full organisation, the hype is already over and the opportunity is lost in the slow grinding of political and organisational processes. Yet, members and supporters want not only to be heard but also to be reckoned with. That can make them into both meaningful assets and an organisational headache.

With dwindling memberships and weakened grass-roots structures, parties risk becoming disconnected from the people they aim to serve. The strength of the mass party structure was representing a broad cross-section of people engaging in their local community. After all, the party provided not only a political platform for discussing politics but also a social platform for people to meet across generations, backgrounds and social status. Being connected through ideology, principles, values and beliefs provides a powerful base for both development and campaigning. The mass parties of yesterday had a different legitimacy than today's more streamlined, professionalised organisations. The new model poses a risk that parties and party leaderships might insulate themselves in a political bubble. If political processes, activities, consultations and congresses start feeling like hollow rituals, it could lead to disgruntled members and demobilisation—the opposite of the desired outcome.

A party of one

If the professionalised politics and rapid media cycles lead the traditional parties to emphasise message discipline, data-driven campaigning, and media management rather than nurturing internal democratic practices and grassroots activism, then why bother building a party at all?

New party initiatives sprout up all the time, and it takes time to build a national party organisation. Some parties do not bother with party democracy at all. One example is the Party for Freedom, the Dutch far-right party of which Geert Wilders is both the leader and sole member. It is easy to understand the efficiency of a party of one, with that one member calling all the shots. And successful campaigning in the 2023 Dutch general election won the Party for Freedom a quarter of the seats so that

it became the largest party in the House of Representatives. This put Wilders in the position of entering a coalition government, but he did not become prime minister due to a lack of support from the coalition parties. Perhaps it shows that a party of one has its weaknesses. This could, of course, be due to many factors, from real disagreements in policies to personal traits that make compromises hard, or often both. Tides can turn quickly, and popular or populist movements can peak and fall before they make an impact. Even stayers such as Wilders, who has undoubtedly made an impact on Dutch politics, encounter limitations when their role as a political outsider keeps them outside of the corridors of real power. In a party of one, the chain snaps when the leader, who is the link between the party's policies and the public, becomes the weakest point. That is when the organisational legacy of a traditional political party becomes a strength, with an organisational tree that has both historical roots and newly sprouted branches and leaves that keep it alive. Elected officials and volunteers that might number in the thousands can build lasting networks and forge compromises and coalitions both inside and outside the party that can withstand temporary setbacks. This model creates a sustainable political party, in contrast to one with a charismatic leadership, which fades over time and finally disintegrates into a party of none.

Harnessing engagement

A 2020 survey on living conditions in Norway,[178] covering volunteering, political participation and trust, shows that civic engagement in the Norwegian population is in fact increasing. While young people are taking to the streets to demonstrate, seniors are increasingly active on digital platforms. The decrease in party membership that we see across party lines and countries is not the same as a decrease in political engagement. Citizens are as politically active as ever—but outside traditional party structures. People are engaging through digital platforms, online petitions, protests

178 *Norway Central Bureau of Statistics*, 'Statistics on Volunteering, Political Participation and Trust, Survey on Living Conditions', updated 11 December 2025, accessed at https://www.ssb.no/en/kultur-og-fritid/organisasjoner-og-medlemskap/statistikk/organisasjonsaktivitet-politisk-deltakelse-og-sosialt-nettverk-levekarsundersokelsen.

or ad hoc issue-based movements. Just as the Internet has transformed business models, it is transforming political engagement by removing the middleman: it facilitates direct, often emotional, single-issue engagement, as opposed to the slower, more structured and compromise-driven practices of traditional political parties.

The survey showed that while only 1% of those aged 67 and older had written posts to influence a political issue in 2011, 9% had written posts or discussed social issues online in 2020. Interestingly, youth and young adults had gone in the opposite direction: for individuals aged 16–24, the percentage who had written political posts online fell from 20% in 2011 to 12% in 2020. The most popular form of activism for this group was participation in demonstrations. Seventeen per cent reported participating in demonstrations in 2020, compared to 11% in 2011. However, note that this high number may have reflected a particular hype rather than a long-term trend: the survey was conducted at the peak of Greta Thunberg's recognition and the widespread fame of her School Strike for Climate outside the Swedish parliament. The protest was widely covered, and young people around the globe joined her Fridays for Future strikes.

However, it is not only young people who take part in demonstrations, and people do not take to the streets only in support of climate issues—far from it. Eight per cent of the Norwegian population reported that they had participated in demonstrations in 2020. This is the highest number since the living conditions survey started tracking this form of political participation in 2011, and since then all age groups have increased their participation in demonstrations. The climate issue and the Black Lives Matter movement might have been the driving forces behind this increase, but other issues have followed and mobilised people to take to the streets—on the left (mostly over Palestine) but also on the right (with issues such as immigration offering powerful mobilisation themes).

The survey also maps participation in various organisations and volunteer work. About half of the Norwegian population are members of an organisation, and 4 out of 10 have done volunteer work for organisations. So, although there has been a

decline in political party membership, the numbers show that civic engagement and the wish to participate in voluntary work are still high in the population. Thus, the question becomes, How can political parties remain essential in this new environment and harness this more decentralised political energy?

The use of media platforms such as TikTok and a plethora of podcasts is also a driving force in the political debate, challenging mainstream media but also the traditional political parties. Not many manage to break through in terms of reach and followers through party channels. A new breed of talking heads with their own agendas has come out of nowhere and is influencing the political space in a way that few traditional parties have been able to copy or address successfully. With little moderation and few restraints, these influencers and the channels that host them fuel populism have been challenging the gatekeepers in the mainstream media by simply bypassing them online.

Is there a way for traditional political parties to harness the fired-up debates we see both online and in the streets and to use them to influence political processes today?

Deconstructing partitocracy

Even if political parties often are distrusted and accused of 'partitocracy'—the idea that the party elites and party processes are suppressing the organisational democracy—they do not seem to be withering away in the manner David Broder expected. They still serve important functions in the political process and should strive to stabilise and protect democracy through increasing political participation.

The party leadership and party professionals must avoid creating dynamics that lead to disengagement among ordinary party members. This means turning away from top-down leadership whereby major decisions are made by a small group at the top or through opaque processes no one outside the decision-making circle clearly understands. The shift from grass-roots members and part-time volunteers to political professionals, from advisors to pollsters and strategists, has also shifted politics from being value- or ideology-driven to being data-driven and image-focused.

Members may feel the party is run like a corporate brand, with the result that authenticity and ideological debates are being replaced by messaging and marketing. When national policymaking and campaigns become centralised and data-driven, rather than based on local feedback and experiences, local branches and members are sidelined and feel overlooked. In addition, the ideas and values that were formerly woven into the organisational fabric that holds the party together are often replaced by messaging aimed at specific voters for electoral gains. This can alienate members whose identity and activism are tied to the party's traditional or ideological values. And lastly, if the party treats members solely as foot soldiers during campaigns, without offering them real influence in political or organisational processes, their will to engage will surely dwindle. Activating members can provide the antidote needed against streamlined political professionals out of touch with the local communities and societies they should be representing. One might say that experienced members often act as the guardians of the party's soul. They can provide necessary correctives to attempts at streamlining and watering down messages. However, they can also act as museum guards, protecting established policies and organisational processes. It is tempting to invoke Edmund Burke by saying that striking the right balance between necessary renewal and modernisation while conserving well-founded party principles and procedures should be at the heart of any centre–right political organisation.

A Burkean path forward: preserving what works

As political life has accelerated—shaped by 24/7 media, professional political practitioners and data-driven campaigns—the traditional mass membership parties of old have been faced with the question of how to modernise without losing the loyalty and engagement of their core members.

Burke stressed that change should only be incorporated very gradually so as to preserve the core values and ideas embedded in the party structure. At the same time, operations should be professionalised so that the party can respond more rapidly without alienating the core members that sustain the party's institutional memory and legitimacy. For most parties in the European People's Party family, change has

already happened, with members feeling sidelined by top-down decision-making, party professionals' dominance, and streamlined messaging and campaigns.

The party of the people

Populist candidates often present themselves as men or women of the people, in opposition to 'elites' and 'the establishment'. But there is nothing contradictory about having established, well-functioning institutions, principles and values and standing up for 'the little man'. On the contrary, doing so is a prerequisite for safeguarding fundamental rights and fulfilling obligations to the citizens. This should be at the core of any plans to reform party structures so that they can better mirror how the citizens want to engage.

Parties serve as a bridge between citizens and the political system. But with dwindling membership and weakened grassroots structures, parties risk becoming disconnected and less representative of the people they aim to serve. How can the parties reconnect with local communities, supporters and activists to harness their engagement?

By getting them to participate more.

Rebuilding local presence

As mentioned earlier, parties used to provide a wider platform for engagement. They used to be a bigger part of people's lives. Parties need to re-establish themselves as community actors, which means more than canvassing and campaigning at election time. It means creating spaces—both physical and digital—where citizens can discuss local concerns, build networks and feel heard. Parties once had a presence in communities, through branches, unions, church groups and youth organisations. Reaching out and engaging with the local community instead of expecting the local community to engage with the party could help re-establish some of the legitimacy lost with falling numbers of members. This would mean recruiting through connecting directly with local voices and organisations, and attending their events instead of one-sidedly expecting them to show up at party events.

Building this community presence requires active members to engage not only in the party but also in the various hubs of the community. This can mean turning up for the Neighbourhood Watch group, engaging in the local football team or being an active community member in other respects.

Competing with populism without imitating it

Problems left unsolved cause populism, and promises not kept result in contempt for politics. Most people accept that complex problems cannot be met with simple solutions.

In the film *The Uncivil War*, Benedict Cumberbatch portrays the conservative political strategist Dominic Cummings, who was the campaign director for Vote Leave in the UK. In one scene Cummings is meets a couple in a run-down housing estate. No one has come knocking on their doors for years to listen to their concerns or opinions. When the campaigners tell the couple that Brexit can bring jobs to the community, they express their disbelief in the promises made by the politicians. But when the campaigners ask about foreign labour, something resonates with the couple—not because they are against migration or migrants, but because cheap labour has undercut wages and displaced the workers native to the area. The husband has not had a job in years, and the wife misses her old neighbourhood. Merely branding this sort of response as xenophobic, and not dealing with the root causes, leaves the flank open to populists who know how to use the elites' lack of understanding to their own benefit. Many people believe that this scene sheds light on one of the key reasons why Remain lost.

Mainstream parties should not mimic the populist tactics of using fear, uncertainty and division to present solutions. Rather, they should acknowledge those feelings of uncertainty and doubt when presenting solutions. In this context, members can be a great resource for political dialogue and communication. Broad parties will have members who either have experienced these feelings themselves or represent communities that have. Parties should let their members present the problems they face or hear about and help formulate answers that resonate with them.

Parties must become better at producing results, admitting mistakes and being transparent about dilemmas. Doing this creates credibility over time.

To compete with other political influences, parties must speak in a language that connects with people's everyday experiences and concerns. That does not mean abandoning nuance, but it does mean translating policies into possible solutions. The 'deal' in Green Deal should be to secure affordable heating through sustainable energy that also powers new jobs in a green economy. Again, 'economic reform' should address the need for political frugality with taxpayers' hard-earned money. Slogans must be turned into reality.

Encouraging members to be active and supporting the supporters

The party leadership and the candidates are important, of course, but putting the party member, supporter or activist at the centre of communication brings politics closer to home. A party member who is a nurse might be able to speak about the health issues in his own or someone else's life than a politician who was trying to describe these same problems. Some parties operate with subgroups or networks that connect people through their interests, rather than geography—women's networks, LGBTQ networks, and professional or theme-based networks. This could provide a broader base of people who can communicate on issues on which they have credibility. They can also interact with similar networks outside the party, connecting the party to the outside world.

Ensuring legitimacy is also about people being able to recognise themselves in the those who represent the party. But these representatives can be other party members and not only candidates. Effective political communication today requires storytelling, listening and dialogue—not just policy briefs.

Opening up the debate: embracing the digital townhall

Political parties have all claimed space in the digital world and have a presence on a variety of online platforms. However, while they may use social media as a loudspeaker to amplify their messages, many tend to look at social media merely as a necessary evil.

But these platforms can be used to bring internal debates and political dilemmas to an audience outside of the party. Parties should embrace internal diversity and encourage debates within their own channels. They should also try to enlist the help of or cooperate with new media outlets.

When prompted with the question 'How can political parties open up internal debates and embrace the digital townhall in a constructive way?', ChatGPT suggested this: 'To use Edmund Burke's cautious reformism as a lens: Parties should view the digital townhall not as a radical disruption, but as a modern extension of traditional democratic dialogue—gradually evolving the "party meeting" into the online era while preserving the core value of thoughtful deliberation.'

This is more easily said than done. There are participatory digital platforms that encourage 'thoughtful deliberation' without using tremendous amounts of human resources to cultivate it, but a gap still exists between open debates and decision-making. Constructive criticism and internal disagreements are signs of a healthy organisation and can provide a better understanding of the outcome of political and organisational decisions, as the debates themselves provide a background for dilemmas and compromises. Understanding the decision-making process is often a part of being willing to accept the decisions.

Blending digital participation with physical engagement in workshops or congresses can expand participation and give members a sense of ownership. Using online input to shape agendas for meetings, podcasts or other content gives a sense of influence.

Most importantly, parties must show members that their feedback influences decisions, which they can do by referring to the members' input and pointing out the related result. That said, a caveat is in order: the goal of thoughtful deliberation should not be an excuse for endless rounds of discussion. Even Burke had to put a full stop at some point in his stream of thoughts.

Rethinking membership?

In many parties the most controversial debate centres on the possible ways of being affiliated with a party. Most parties operate with a personal membership model, which requires only that the one pays the membership fee to be a full member with the right to participate in activities and events and to vote with a member's ballot. Many of the activities are organised through the local branches and caucuses or online.

Parties remain the main channel for democratic participation, by giving members a role in developing policies, selecting candidates and campaigning for them. As long as parties hold this position, it is hard to see how alternative forms of affiliation could be developed. There are already many ways to interact with both political parties and candidates: through donations, meetings, participating in open meetings and rallies, and interacting through social media. But parties could do better at facilitating ways for their members to create ad hoc organisations, pop-up events, issue-based task forces and short-term voluntary projects. In short, they should make the party the platform for the activities they currently sponsor or let party members be active on behalf of the party in platforms they are already a part of.

The party as an institution

Over time a democratic organisation will develop structures that can carry it through both successes and crises. But it also develops an institutional memory and competence that can broaden its opportunities and lead it to power—repeatedly. Its members serve as its living memory, passing on organisational and institutional knowledge to new members and new generations. Party members are more than

foot soldiers, campaigners and passive supporters: they keep alive the party history, with its successes and failures. They can also be an invaluable resource for new members and party practitioners, helping the party to avoid repeating past mistakes and passing on strategies that were once successful. The party leaders need to find a way to connect the challenges of being a modern political party with its historic mission and to make sure that new policies resonate with the ideas and values that shaped it originally.

Members are not just a part of the institutional memory but can help keep the party relevant by serving as part of a continuous feedback loop. Their input can enable the party to adjust its policies and its messaging according to the signals members receive when they canvass neighbourhoods, host discussions and promote policies over lunch at work.

Finally, members are essential for party renewal. It is not only the new generations that bring fresh ideas and new energy. Broadening the membership base to include people from all backgrounds and paths in life ensures an influx of ideas and, not least, representation and legitimacy.

Conclusion: parties as part of the social fabric of society

Democratic political parties should aim at stabilising democracy by facilitating political inclusion and participation. Even though the main goal of political parties is to win elections, they derive legitimacy not only from elections but also from their ability to act as tools for democracy. If the higher vision is also to provide a pathway for citizens to engage in political processes and influence the decisions that affect their lives, they need a place to learn to debate, organise and lead. In a diverse, modern society parties must connect people with diverse backgrounds and interests by providing a common ground in a set of political ideals and values that the people are willing to stand up for and work towards. Even as politics becomes more fragmented and individualistic, the communal aspect of political parties should be revitalised.

Modernising without losing the party's soul should be done in the Burkean spirit: by embracing change but respecting continuity. Strengthening the social fabric of society may be more important now than it has been in a long time.

Conclusion

Thibault Muzergues

‘Why bother investing in membership anymore?’ was a question often asked by party leaders across Europe (and beyond) during the consultations I led as part of my service to the International Republican Institute between 2011 and 2025. And as this publication has shown, the question is far from irrelevant: with the rise of memberless parties, some of them highly successful, is it really necessary or even relevant to commit resources (i.e. time, energy and money) to party membership if it is no longer an essential feature of a party? The question becomes even more pertinent if some examples show that one can win elections without having to deal with those pesky, sometimes highly demanding members. In other words, in the age of the hyper-professionalisation of politics, where volunteers can be replaced by bots and where the debate seems to have moved out of grass-roots politics and into the media circus, it may sound reasonable to ask whether there is a future in party membership at all. Are we all doomed to follow Geert Wilders’s model of a one-man-one-member party? Indeed, the question of memberless parties and the challenge that they pose to legacy parties is a recurrent theme that is not only being discussed in the hallways of the headquarters of European People’s Party member parties, but also in think tanks and among intellectuals—and it has been touched upon, one way or another, by practically all the authors of this publication.

It would be foolish to suggest that, like political parties themselves,[179] party members have proven indispensable to political success and should therefore be a central piece of any political endeavour. The sometimes impressive results of memberless parties, including over time (Wilders’s Party for Freedom/Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) will soon celebrate its twentieth anniversary; France Unbowed/La France Insoumise was established in 2016), and of parties that have deliberately sought to limit membership (such as ANO in Czechia or Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria Граждани за европейско развитие на България (GERB) in Bulgaria), shows that party members are not the alpha and omega for the success of a political initiative. In fact, as the

179 See our first publication in this series, on the resilience of political parties: T. Muzergues, R. Le Quiniou and A. Braun (eds.), *Why We Still Need Parties: The Resilience of Europe’s Political Parties Explained* (Brussels: WMCES, 2023).

extreme cases of the PVV and France Unbowed show, one can get elected—and even achieve major electoral successes—without party members. Indeed, not having to deal with members and their reasonable demands for accountability and inner-party democracy has its advantages, the prime ones being ideological flexibility and agility, which are certainly a plus in a world where the 24-hour news cycle encourages reactivity above everything else, including sometimes intellectual coherence.

And yet, as our authors have shown in this publication, not having members also has its downsides. Sure, the foot soldiers of old, who used to be the backbone of party membership, can sometimes be effectively replaced by bots and professional influencers, in the age when artificial intelligence and social media can create and disseminate messages with more accuracy and discipline than human beings. But nothing can replace these party members when it comes to building, over time, a community of people with shared interests and values, to bring to life a real, authentic institutional memory that can be passed on to the next generation of political activists. Nor can technology ensure the party leadership, which often gets lost in the day-to-day running of a party and/or the byzantine intrigues of political life, remains connected to society at large. In other words, political party members not only give life and authenticity to a political party, they also ensure that it is rooted in a sustainable set of values and policies that, in the end, ensure the survival of the party in the long term—as long as those values remain relevant for the electorate at large.

Members are both a blessing and a curse for political parties. They may not be a sine qua non for a successful political endeavour, but they are a valuable asset that is at the disposal of political parties, provided that the parties are willing to spend time and resources on them. Nor are members a simple luxury, like prizes that one would want to showcase in a glass cabinet (as proof of one's popularity), or a relic of the long history of the movement (something that today's voters often care little about). In fact, as we have shown in this publication, party members play a significant role in the life of the party, namely in the following ways:

- *Electoral mobilisation*. Representing the basis of a party's support, party members are the core of a political movement that has made the choice to include them. Indeed, any political campaign starts with them (before expanding to supporters and the electorate at large), and it is often the members who turn off the lights at party headquarters at the very end, win or lose. Certainly, today they can in some respects be replaced by bots and algorithms, but mobilisation through the latter is less authentic than that achieved by foot soldiers.

- *Fundraising*. Certainly, parties can (and should) pursue private donors, and these represent a substantial source of income for political parties.[180] But paid members provide their own, sometimes not-so-modest contributions to the health of a party's finances. They are often the most predictable source of non-state funding for a party and, when the going gets tough, every successful fundraising effort starts with a request to party members.

- *Supply of candidates and internal legitimacy*. Perhaps more than any other factor, what makes party members indispensable is that, despite appeals to civil society via technocratic (or party-leadership) candidate selection, they remain the most reliable pool of candidates a party can have. The more diverse the membership is, the more interesting the pool becomes when it comes to choosing the right person to run in an election. Party members also have the advantage of being familiar with how the party functions, and once elected, they are often more reliable and easier to manage than candidates recruited from outside, who may lack an understanding of how politics works. This is why successful political parties invest in their members, as the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands) does, taking the most talented members on a '*Ochsentour*' (or slog tour), a multi-year programme designed to transform members into successful candidates.[181] Furthermore, when the party decides to open up to intra-party democracy, the voice of the members gives democratic legitimacy to decisions, whether in terms of policies or candidate selection.

180 T. Muzergues (eds.), *Financing Politics in Europe: A Political Party Roadmap for More Transparency and Effectiveness* (Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2024).

181 See B. Höhne, 'Candidate (S)election in Germany', in T. Muzergues and D. Scaduto (eds.), *Standing Out From the Crowd: Political Parties' Candidate (S)election in the Transatlantic World* (Washington, DC: International Republican Institute, 2022), 43–54.

- *Institutional memory*. Finally, party members provide and pass on the human knowledge, at the micro- and macro-level, that a party needs to pass down to its new activists if it wants to thrive in the long term. This institutional knowledge may be practical, with the passing-on of specific advice for a better campaign (e.g. always start a canvassing exercise in a block of flats by knocking on the door of the highest flats), or it may be more spiritual, such as the passing-on of memories of past struggles, successful campaigns and defeats, thus transmitting the core values of the party from generation to generation—in other words this knowledge is both what makes a party an institution and brings life to it.

Put differently, party membership is probably the best guarantee for a political party that it will survive in the long term. The so far short (albeit growing) history of entrepreneurial parties led by one charismatic figure tends to show that the life of such parties often does not last beyond the political life of their founder.[182] The difference is often, aside from the passing of time, which inevitably creates legitimacy, whether or not the party has a solid membership base that allows it to move on from the loss of its most important member.

Perhaps the most fundamental reason why parties should continue to invest in their membership is the persistence of a demand for it. In fact, while much has been written (including in this publication) about the long-term decline in party membership, the days of acute crisis actually seem to be behind us. If long-term historical and sociological factors have made the times of mass party membership a thing of the past, general numbers have now stabilised, and former mass parties only have themselves, or rather the atomisation of society, to blame for their current losses. With the multiplication of parties—in particular niche and single-issue parties—over the past 20 years, membership numbers have stabilised overall, but have tended to migrate from the old catch-all parties to new, more focused (or agile) political

182 See J. Lentsch, *Political Entrepreneurship: How to Build Successful Centrist Political Start-Ups* (Cham: Springer, 2019), and V. Hloušek, L. Kopeček and P. Vodová, *The Rise of Entrepreneurial Parties in European Politics* (Cham: Palgrave, 2020).

movements offering something fresh. Sometimes, the reasons for this migration have been boredom and a desire to seek something new and more in line with the times. But more often than not, they have been the result of what party members have perceived as a distancing of the elites from the core values of the party, something that the party leadership therefore needs to consider carefully when hunting for new members, or trying to bring back its lost flock. In fact, values are the single most important driver behind an individual's decision to join or rejoin a party. There are, of course, other arguments to be considered, such as the desire to express attachment to a party's brand or its leadership, to express support for a particular policy or set of policies, or to participate in the great political adventure that is democracy; or even for the enjoyment of political activity for its own sake.. However, values drive political engagement, and this transforms into political commitment—a factor often overlooked when explaining party membership.

What is to be done, then? From the perspective of political parties themselves, the answer is *a lot*. Starting with the recognition that, even though members are not indispensable, they do bring more pluses than minuses for the health of a party *in the long term*. This may sound unconvincing for party leaderships that (rightly) obsess about the short-term objective of winning the next election, but think tanks are here to remind them that politics is a long-term game. Political parties actually do measure their success through long-term policy changes, which are measured not by winning one election cycle, but several.

The first trap to avoid is the belief that political parties should look for a return to mass membership. As we have seen during the course of this publication, this is not very likely due to major long-term historical and sociological factors. Nor is it necessarily desirable for democracy's sake: the examples of mass parties in Europe today, most notably in the Western Balkans, tend to show that mass membership is often the result of clientelist power grabs by political parties and their leadership, rather than the parties having a genuine mass democratic appeal themselves. Nor is large membership *necessarily* a sign of good health for the individual party in question: as the case of the Netherlands has shown, the most successful party in

the 2023 general election had a membership of one (Geert Wilders' PVV), while a party with one of the largest memberships (the far-right Forum for Democracy/Forum voor Democratie) is also one of the smallest in the Parliament.

Recommendations

Frustratingly, then, investing in membership is not a silver bullet when it comes to expanding the appeal of a party, or even nurturing our democracies—although in both cases, it rarely hurts. And likewise, there is no silver bullet to maximise the recruitment, retention and utilisation of party members. But while the case is unique for each party, the conclusions reached by each of our authors in the chapters of this publication allow us to conclude with a set of six recommendations that will help party leaders to *better* invest in their membership in the future. The recommendations are as follows:

1. *Diversify forms of membership and engagement*. The differing, often low levels of commitment that people feel towards politics mean that traditional 'one-size-fits-all' memberships no longer resonate with our increasingly diverse and fragmented societies. Parties should adopt multi-speed membership models (with options for full members, sympathisers, digital supporters, donors etc.), offering different levels of involvement and commitment. This approach is already being tested across Europe (East, West and Central), and should be generalised, particularly for historical parties that have sometimes been slow in responding to this diversification of demand for engagement.

2. *Reframe the membership offer*. Come for the shared values, stay for a clear set of offers: as we have seen, there are many reasons why people choose to join a party, but shared values are the most important, at least in most EU countries. Parties therefore need to rebrand membership as meaningful civic engagement—not only to defend democracy, but also to defend a clear set of values—while proposing a clear offer as to what membership (or the various forms of engagement) means for individuals in terms of what they get,

for instance, opportunities for skill-building, activism and social connection; rights to vote, to participate in certain meetings and so on.

3. *Harness digital platforms but maintain human bonds*. The digitalisation of everything in society means that parties do need to take social media, artificial intelligence and other new tools of communication seriously and use them as a way to keep their members informed and connected to the leadership. Experience in the long term, however, has shown that more often than not, the overuse of these new technologies has meant that the relationship between parties and their members has become more artificial and superficial. This has resulted in a loss of commitment—which is the basis of party membership and, one could even argue, of the social life of an organisation (political party or not). Party leaders therefore need to put offline social interaction back into the heart of their membership offer, to create the conditions for a party that is more responsive to their members' ever-evolving attitudes—and society at large. Community-building may not be the primary function of a political party, but a tightly knit community is the best insurance for a stable and reliable pool of voters.

4. *Strengthen internal democracy and member influence*. Evidence shows that people are more likely to join a party when they feel they have a real voice in leadership choices and policy debates. Membership surges often occur around internal primaries and leadership contests. Parties should therefore ensure transparent, participatory decision-making processes through the use of, for example, open primaries, online consultations and participatory policy platforms. Such processes strengthen legitimacy, build loyalty and counter the perception of parties as elitist or closed-off. In this sense, the rise of open primaries, which bypass the strict membership requirements of parties, should be viewed with circumspection: on the one hand, they are a way to open up the party's life to a new public, but they also have the potential to downgrade the benefits of the full membership offer.

5. *Address the risks of patronage and personalisation*. In some countries, especially in some (though not all) of the EU candidate countries, party membership is tied to clientelism, jobs and patronage rather than political conviction. This continues the tradition of the popular saying in Italy during its Fascist years, that the initials of the party, PNF, did not stand for Partito Nazionale Fascista, but for a membership *per necessità familiare*, that is, 'out of family necessity'.[183] This is hardly a sign of democratic well-being, and it undermines trust and weakens parties in the long term. To remain credible, parties need to refine their offer to the public, professionalise recruitment and enforce transparent, merit-based internal rules. In the end, what these parties lose in terms of individual members they will win back in terms of involvement, commitment and legitimacy among the wider public. When it comes to EU candidate countries, which are facing this challenge acutely, the Europarties in Brussels can and should play a role in encouraging (and then assisting with) this transition from the clientelist model to a more qualitative, transparent one.

6. *Finally, Europarties, and the European People's Party in particular, should look at modernising their membership model to increase their effectiveness and strengthen their role as actors in an ever-closer union*. Europarties have a role to play in professionalising and modernising their affiliated member parties in candidate countries so as to better prepare the latter for integration into the EU. But they should also look at their own membership rules, and what these entail, in terms of providing assistance both to member parties (as they are primarily the result and sum of their member parties' will and existence) and also to individual members. In this sense, opening up membership to individual citizens—which in turn would mean offering opportunities for them to express their commitment to and participate in the life of the party—would certainly be a way to make European politics more accessible to citizens, and thereby strengthen the European project.

183 See C. Duggan, *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy* (London: Vintage, 2013), 164.

Credits

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party, dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

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Party Membership is in.

Across Europe, traditional mass parties are under pressure from digitalisation, personalised leadership and new forms of political engagement. Party membership is often shrinking, always changing and, in some cases, being bypassed altogether. What does this mean for democratic politics?

Party Membership in Contemporary Europe explores how and why citizens still join parties, how parties organise participation in an age of volatility, and whether new membership models can renew democratic life rather than hollow it out. Drawing on comparative research and case studies from across Western, Central and Eastern Europe, the book examines elite-driven parties, clientelist networks, digital supporters, internal democracy and the rise of "memberless" movements. It also explains why traditional parties are right to still focus on party members - while some (new) parties do without them, party members remain indispensable for party democracy - and indeed for the long-term success of any political adventure.

Party membership may be stagnating, perhaps even declining in numbers, but it remains a critical source of political energy, legitimacy and resilience. For anyone concerned with the future of European democracy, the party membership question remains essential.

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for European Studies