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## Original Article

# New forms of political participation. Changing demands or changing opportunities to participate in political parties?

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**Abstract** In the past 30 years, party membership has dropped significantly across Europe, whereas other forms of political participation have developed. I first show how political parties have sought to be more attractive by lowering the cost of membership and creating new selective incentives (such as the right to vote in internal ballots), leading to a convergence of party rules across European parties. To understand the logic behind such reforms, one needs to take into account the broader political context and I focus on the United Kingdom to show how competition between and within parties provided the justification for changes that mostly aligned them with organisational myths. The third part argues that such changes in opportunities to participate in political parties contribute to explain why membership has continued to fall. This article draws on extensive qualitative research (including my own) conducted in and on political parties in the United Kingdom and France to provide a new account of membership recruitment crisis that contrasts with the traditional emphasis on supply/demand.

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During the past 30 years, electoral participation has declined more or less sharply and regularly in many European democracies (Mair *et al.*, 2004), and partisanship (that is to say identification with and loyalty towards a party) has followed a generally downward trend (Dalton, 2008, p. 37; 181; Whiteley, 2011). Figures show a decline in membership of trade unions as well as a spectacular decline in the number of members of political parties in most countries across Europe (Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010). During the same period, political parties have lost a million members in France or in the United Kingdom (a 68 per cent decline between 1980 and 2008) and about 1.5 million in Italy. Scandinavian countries have lost over half of their membership during that period. Nowhere is the loss inferior to 25 per cent

(Van Biezen *et al.*, 2012). The success of alternative parties and cause groups, and the concomitant decline in trust in the institutions and actors that have been central to the establishment and success of representative government, raises questions about the failure of political parties to perform their traditional functions (Lawson and Merkl, 1988). Originally, many parties did not worry exceedingly about declining memberships: figures were known to have been both unreliable and inflated in the past; activists were increasingly seen as potential electoral liabilities; voluntary work was no longer vital to ensure electoral victory as most of the campaigning was being centralised and increasingly reliant on political communication consultants (Norris, 1999a).

However, from the 1990s, the expression of public concern for the emerging ‘crisis of representative institutions’ was complemented by highly publicised campaigns of recruitments accompanied by a wave of organisational changes. In their renewed effort to attract members, European parties from all sides have lowered barriers to membership and diversified the range of selective incentives they could provide to the point of blurring parties’ boundaries (through new supporters networks and/or primaries). For over 20 years now, parties have sought new ways to attract members and most have adopted strikingly similar measures. However, the balance sheet is disappointing. Why such a failure?

Scholars have sought to explore whether these evolutions are the consequence of a disinterest in politics altogether (Mayer, 2010) and have underlined how non-institutional forms of participation have become more prevalent (J. W. van Deth, 1997; Norris, 2002; Cain *et al.*, 2006; Dalton, 2007; Barnes *et al.*, 2007). It has been argued that forms of participation have changed. Although collective forms of engagement (such as membership of political parties, forming a group, or taking part in activities such as strikes, public meetings and rallies) have become less popular, new parties, not-for-profit organisations and cause groups have experienced growing success. An argument usually put forward is that society has changed and that, as a consequence, new modes of engagement have emerged. Ion argued that a shift in forms of mobilisation took place in the 1980s/90s (Ion, 2001; Ion, 2005): activism had been characterised by the predominance of mass membership organisations; the individual actor sought a collective identity and a long-term commitment in hierarchical organisations, where the local and national levels were integrated through federations. On the other hand, new forms of participation are now characterised by *ad-hoc* mobilisation: membership is *distanciée, à la carte*. Contemporary political activism reflects the ‘individualisation’ of societies (Mayer, 2010, p. 248). Citizens are analysed as increasingly critical (Norris, 1999b), or as cynical, over-stretched with work and leisure, disengaged from the public sphere (Hirschman, 2002). More positively, rather than a simple disengagement from politics, new individualised forms of collective participation have become more prevalent. The evolution is manifest in the growth of politically motivated consumer behaviour (Micheletti *et al.*, 2006; Dubuisson-Quellier, 2009) and an array of forms of



participation stimulated through Information and communications technology (ICT) and social networks (Micheletti and McFarland, 2011).

Many studies on political participation share two traits: they presuppose an analytical distinction between demand and supply of political participation and tend to focus on the former; they take the individual citizen as the unit of analysis. In other words, citizens' attitudes and behaviours are responsible for the evolution of forms of participation. As a consequence, these analyses tend to privilege explanations in terms of how citizens approach politics and thus overlook the extent to which supply shapes political participation (Norris, 2002). Surprisingly, little attention has been paid to institutions as determinants of political participation.

Changes in the opportunities to participate in politics ought to be taken into account if one wants to fully understand how, despite decades of efforts to remedy it, the spiral of demobilisation that has affected political parties seems far from being halted. The thesis I develop in this article is that political parties have increasingly sought to attract 'individualised' citizens, much in the manner than protest businesses have done, and thus targeted individuals whose identification with the organisation, and thus loyalty to it, was limited; whose desire to commit and devote more than disposable income was also limited; whose participation was often restricted to a two-way communication with the leadership (ballots, consultations and newsletters) with few opportunities to socialise with others (and therefore to become politicised). In contrast with most of the existing literature, I argue that party organisations themselves have affected participation and are now faced with the problematic and unintended consequences of their efforts to woo 'individualised voters'. I start by analysing how the opportunities to join and be active have changed in similar ways in several European parties. I then reflect on how organisational changes have been justified and how, despite temporary successes, the promise of re-engaging citizens has not borne fruit. I then use the United Kingdom to contextualise the changes: there, political parties are well established and have enjoyed high levels of legitimacy, loyalty and trust. However, since the 1970s, the parties that had dominated the Westminster system have faced electoral volatility, falling turnout, declining levels of trust and a 'spiral of demobilisation' (Whiteley, 2009a). Compared with their (inflated) numbers of members in the 1950s, they appear strikingly weakened, despite engaging with particular enthusiasm in a process of 'individualisation'. Finally, I discuss lessons to be learnt about how we approach the question of changing modes of involvement in political parties.

## **A New Model of Party: The 'Inclusive' Organisation?**

Scholarship on political parties has involved reflecting on models of party organisations. Analysts worked on broad traits, such as schematic hierarchical structures, resource mobilisation, patterns of electoral competition of campaigning and so on.

These models sought to theorise the relationships between parties and civil society (which they were supposed to represent) or analysed parties as brokers (between civil society and the state). They dealt with organisations that derived their structures from their national political, cultural and institutional environment as well as from their ideological sources of inspirations (Seiler, 2003). Looking back at this research we find a succession of ideal types: starting in the nineteenth century with the elite and the mass party models (Duverger, 1992) to the more recent cartel party (Katz and Mair, 1995) through the electoral-professional party (Panebianco, 1988), the catch-all party (Kirchheimer, 1966), the party as a stratarchy (Carty, 2004; Bolleyer, 2012) or as a business firm (Hopkin and Paolucci, 1999). These blueprints helped to make sense of these organisations, despite their idiosyncrasies and the variations in their context. In practice, despite ideological proximity sometimes, the organisations mostly ignored each other, shared very few rules and developed along path-dependent routes.

However, we are now facing an unprecedented convergence of party rules (W. P. Cross and Katz, 2013; Gauja, 2013b). Across Europe, the last two decades have seen political parties from left to right and centre engage in organisational reforms that share striking traits. The similarities transcend national and ideological boundaries even if idiosyncrasies persist. The recent reforms have tended to involve the introduction of rules that have contributed to alter the ways political parties attract and engage members. In the early 2000s, two shifts were evident: efforts to recruit members involved shifts in the very definition of membership (Gauja, 2013a); the selection process for electoral candidates and for the party leadership were no longer the preserve of a small ‘selectorate’ and were progressively being opened to wider sections of the party (Scarrow and Kittlison, 2003, p. 69). By 2003, a quarter of the 74 parties tested by Scarrow and Kittlison in 18 countries invited members to vote for the leadership – the shift was more prevalent among established parties (Scarrow and Kittlison, 2003, p. 71).

### **From the ‘Classe Gardée’ to the Targeting of Individual Members**

The mass party organisation was characterised by its penetration of society. It recruited members who identified with the social class (or segment of civil society) that the party was supposed to represent. Party members paid dues and were integrated, to various degrees, in the local party organisation. The party provided opportunities for socialisation, sociability and loyalty (Campbell, 1987; Pudal, 1989; Kertzer, 1996). In some cases, membership was indirect or correlated with association with other organisations.

Historically, many political parties, like other collective action organisations, have mobilised members through social networks – be they neighbourhoods, families and friends, factory floor and trade unions, social clubs, churches and so on. They drew



from a *classe gardée*. They relied on feelings of identification with a social class or a social group and such feelings sometimes ran through families. In some parties, new members had to be introduced and formally accepted by others: there could even be a vetoing process. People knew the local party secretary to whom they paid the monthly stamp even if they did not attend party meetings. Such practices contributed to factionalism and to the emergence of exclusive group cultures – often male dominated and leading to the development of jargon, modes of interacting and framing. The resources offered by (non-virtual) social networks are no longer available to the same extent to political parties for a variety of reasons including social and geographic mobility, challenges to ascribed identities, cognitive mobilisation and growing self-confidence in one's own political opinions. Moreover, the inwardness that such modes of constructions afforded could be detrimental to the ability of parties to recruit members (and by extension supporters and voters) beyond traditional networks and social classes that were themselves shrinking.

Contrasting with this idealised model, electoral-professional, catch-all or cartel parties were built on a civil society that was dealigned, that is, no longer voting for political parties along strict class lines. These parties, emerging in the age of the mass media and at a time when class structures were being redefined and challenged, sought to appeal to the median voter (Downs, 1957). They progressively turned to communication professionals, who claimed an expertise in techniques of political mobilisation and contributed to displace the voluntary but often unqualified work of party activists. Downward trends in membership had been identified; however, despite regular calls for recruitment drives, it is not clear whether parties effectively tried to revert the trend through the 1980s. In fact, there were good reasons to believe that activists were reluctant to accept newcomers. Factions, where they played a role such as in the French socialist party, were suspicious of each other and of anything that could unsettle the balance of power in federations or in local groups.

However, electoral-professional or catch-all parties could not afford to restrict their reach to specific (and sometimes closed) groups and aimed at attracting unattached, disaffiliated, floating voters through mass communication techniques. As voluntary campaigning work seemed less important to secure electoral victory, parties had little incentives to maintain large membership and risk being held accountable to them. The law of curvilinear disparity (May, 1973) – which held that party activists are more ideologically extreme than party supporters – was more or less taken for granted.<sup>1</sup> One could argue that party elites let the party-on-the-ground drift (Katz and Mair, 1995; Katz and Mair, 2002).

From the 1990s, a number of political parties changed their views of membership and took a more proactive view on the benefits in terms of legitimacy and image that the evidence of a large body of supporters could yield. They rediscovered the importance of members as 'ambassadors in the community' (Scarrow, 1996; Martin and Cowley, 1999, p. 43). Recruitment had been a predominantly local endeavour, but the development of ICT now created the opportunity to build membership databases.

The centralisation of means of contacting members allowed parties to bypass local party secretaries and gatekeepers. Recruitment campaigns were launched, inviting potential members to contact national headquarters and to subscribe by direct debit or credit card. The idea was that a large membership would not only bring in financial resources (though these were no longer vital in countries with generous public funding), but that it would also provide competitive advantage over political opponents in terms of image. To increase the attractiveness of membership, special offers were rolled out. A number of parties reduced membership dues, created temporary discounted rates (for students, retirees, unemployed, married couples ...) or permanent low fees. Others advertised selective incentives exclusive to members such as newsletters (originally in print, later electronic), regular direct mail from the party headquarter and special benefits such as invitations to meet politicians during dedicated events (Carty and Blake, 1999; LeDuc, 2001).

## **Democracy and Participation as Incentives**

In the past 20 years, political parties have also introduced rules that combine direct, deliberative and participatory procedures and have presented these reforms as participatory incentives designed to respond to new demands for individual participation. One can argue that such changes were partly inspired by the successes of new parties and social movements, which demanded increased participation and contested the bureaucratisation of established parties. Green parties presented themselves as electoral competitors at the turn of the 1990s and put participatory democracy high on their agenda. Their demands echoed a growing interest for new forms of participation within the academic community and within social movements.<sup>2</sup>

In many cases, the introduction of such democratic procedures came about despite, or against, party traditions. For instance, social democratic parties tended to be organised as pyramids, culminating in a sovereign congress of delegates, which was trusted to debate at regular intervals programmes, strategies and to elect the executive committee. This latter group then elected the national secretary, a position often functionally distinct from political/parliamentary leadership. Democracy was seen as paramount but thought as operating through delegations and strict mandates. Delegates at party congresses were expected to defend their faction's or their constituency's line in debates and vote accordingly. The figure of the dedicated activist was revered. Local groups met to choose party 'secretaries' (rather than leaders) and delegates to the regional federation or the national organisation. In many cases, only people present at the selection meeting took part in a process that did not always involve a plurality of candidates, nor secret ballots. Candidates were usually picked by local or regional committees from a pool of local activists, according to factional affiliations and balance. The imposition of candidates, particularly so of outsiders, by the centre was strongly resented. On the other hand, parties on the right



of the political spectrum usually did not consider internal democracy as a valuable organisation principle. Leaders ‘emerged’ (Faucher, 2003) or sometimes imposed themselves through charisma. Decision making was highly centralised and candidates could be picked by constituency-based or national committees (Norris, 1995a; Haegel, 2012).

To paint with a very broad brush, one could distinguish parties that valued intra-party democracy and saw it as the product of delegatory procedures and parties that privileged other sources of legitimacy. Neither tradition conceived of the party leader – if they accepted the principle of such a function/role – as being directly elected by party members. Many did not envisage that activists – let alone members – could vote to select candidates (Kenig, 2009a) or, if they did, that such ballots could be a secret. This is, however, becoming a prevalent pattern, even if the widening of the selectorate for the election of party leaders is often a staged affair. It is first opened to a wider selected party agency such as the party congress (such as for the German Social Democrats or Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands), then to the membership (Scarrow, 1997; Carty and Blake, 1999; LeDuc, 2001; Rahat and Hazan 2001; Cain *et al.*, 2006). In France, the French Parti Socialiste (PS) held its first membership ballot for the selection of the *Premier Secrétaire* in 1995; the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) has held similar elections since 1997.<sup>3</sup> The Danish Social democrats, the PASOK, Irish Labour, the Dutch Labour and Liberal parties, the Portuguese Socialists and Social Democrats, the British Conservatives and Liberal Democrats have opened the leadership selection to party members (Kenig, 2009b).

Internal ballots (closed primaries) are becoming common through European countries for the selection of candidates (Bille, 2001; Pennings and Hazan, 2001; Kenig, 2009a); some parties are now going further and experimenting with open primaries. This is a bold change on a background of longstanding resistance to a practice linked by many European partisans to the weakness of American parties. After years of regional experimentation, the Italian left has organised national primaries since 2005. The French socialists organised semi-open primaries for the selection of their presidential candidate in 2006 and fully open ones in 2011 (Dolez and Laurent, 2007; Lefebvre, 2011); its example was followed by the UMP for the selection of the Paris mayoral candidate for the 2014 municipal elections. The results of such elections, however, can be unexpected: when the Spanish Socialist party or Partido Socialista Obrero Español organised a primary election in 1998 to choose its candidate for Prime Minister at the 2000 elections, the party secretary was defeated in favour of a low profile rival (Hopkin, p. 354).<sup>4</sup> There are also primaries organised in Finland, Denmark, Spain and Greece (Sandri and Seddone, 2012, p. 1). In 2009, the Conservatives held their first (and so far only) fully open primary election in Totnes to select their parliamentary candidate.<sup>5</sup>

Reforms have also included policymaking procedures and the organisation of deliberations. Ballots on policies have been organised by a number of political parties and for the adoption of electoral manifestos. The introduction of secret ballots in

parties where there was no such tradition has contributed to focus the attention on the individual member, as opposed to factions and organised groups. It has restricted the influence of activists, particularly when these are conducted by post or online, or when the vote is held at a special local meeting or at separate events.<sup>6</sup> Such an atomistic approach to participation is a common trait of contemporary parties and associated with cartel parties (Carty, 2013, p. 19; W.P. Cross and Katz, 2013). In parallel, other measures have generalised more participatory procedures whereby members are invited to join in policy deliberation. Although most rely on special or routine events such as *universités d'été*, conventions, topical conferences, *états généraux*, policy forums, the development of ICT and social networks has encouraged more daring initiatives and 'listening' consultative exercises (Gauja, 2013b).

Rules may change in the hope that this will maintain popular linkage but without guarantee that it will work. The impact and effectiveness of such consultations remain to be demonstrated and members themselves are often cautious. Indeed, despite claims that inclusivity would increase democracy, there is evidence that neither widening of the selectorate, nor ballots or consultations, have contributed to a decentralisation of power (Katz, 2001; LeDuc, 2001; Pennings and Hazan, 2001; Kaufmann *et al*, 2003; Kenny, 2009). Observers expected that participation would decline over time as party members realised that reforms have left their individual influence more or less unchanged (Hopkin, p. 348). Moreover, these new opportunities have met limited enthusiasm and parties are at pains to mobilise members (Gauja, 2013b). This is manifest in declining turnouts (Olivier, 2003, p. 770; Faucher-King, 2005, Chapter 9).

Why have such changes been introduced? Are similar reforms proposed because they work or because they are ready-made responses? I argue that this evolution reflects a shift in democratic norms according to which parties' successes are judged as well as arguments in the electoral competition. Indeed most of these reforms have started in parties that had found themselves in opposition, before spreading through to competitors (W. Cross and Blais, 2012). Reformers 'recognised the political salience of the nature of participation opportunities within parties and used perceived popular pressure to justify rule changes that expand the set of intra-party decision-makers' (Scarrow and Kittilson, 2003, p. 75). In truth, isomorphism, that is to say the incorporation of societal organisational myths, should make us reflect on the cultural/ideological/political/social background in which the reforms have been introduced.

Research on policy feedback invites us to take into account how policies influence the resources of the people they target as well as affect their interpretations of their role in society. They show how policies define the political community and contribute both to the determination of group membership and the eventual activation of such groups. 'By shaping citizens' encounters with government, the design and implementation of public policy constitute important forces shaping citizen's orientations toward the institutions and policies of government' (Mettler and Soss, 2004, p. 62). How does this affect attitudes towards the main actors of representative institutions? It may not be easy to analyse the chain of causes and effects, the



extent to which a policy responds to popular demands, anticipates them or becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that creates the attitude it was supposed to respond to. However, it seems heuristic to reflect on the impact that policies might have on political culture, such as attitudes to participation and party membership. The argument is that when parties have focused on recruiting a specific type of member they have actually contributed to transform what party membership meant.

Rather than search for causal relationships between stimuli and types of changes (Harmel and Janda, 1994) or a theory of party change (Rihoux, 2001), I want here to place change in context. There are many policy developments that would be worth investigating when considering the evolution of social and civic norms in Europe, the growing culture of political cynicism and changing patterns of political participation. My objective is not to demonstrate a causal relationship that is impossible to prove but to reflect on changing attitudes to politics as we knew it, and in particular changing attitudes to political parties.

### **Contextualising the Individualisation of Party Membership**

The United Kingdom is an interesting example for a number of reasons. Britain is not an isolated case when it comes to a crisis of trust in political institutions (Stoker, 2006, Chapter 2) or changes in modes of participating in politics; however, political parties have benefited from a long and stable history as well as a fairly brutal collapse in trust since the 1980s. They have maintained a central role in the parliamentary system. They have also engaged fairly early in the changes discussed above and have taken quite radical decisions. In other words, some of the reforms introduced in the past 20 years stood in sharp contrast with each party's tradition. Such rapid changes were brought as a response to the perception of a crisis: British aggregate party enrolment collapsed from 3.4 million in the 1950s to about 800 000 members in the mid-1990s or a mere 1.3 per cent of the electorate in 2005 (Marshall, 2009, p. 11). Electoral participation reached a low point of 60 per cent in 2001 and electoral dispersion has increased markedly.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, surveys of civic and political engagement show a striking evolution. The proportion of British people who believe that 'citizens have a moral duty to engage in local political life' has fallen from 70 per cent in 1959 (Verba and Almond, 1963) to 44 per cent in 2000 (Pattie *et al*, 2004, p. 272). In 1959, only 6 per cent of those questioned declared themselves in favour of passivity; in 2000, the figure was 18 per cent. On the other hand, attitudes have changed regarding the areas where government is supposed to intervene and where citizens can make a difference (Whiteley, 2009b, p. 252). The picture that emerges is that of an evolution of the forms of engagement (Pattie *et al*, 2004; Henn *et al*, 2005), rather than a decline in interest in politics.<sup>8</sup> While they are shunning collective forms of participation, Britons seem to engage increasingly in individualistic political acts

(Pattie *et al.*, 2004, p. 78), especially indirect (micro politics) or individualised forms of political action (Pattie *et al.*, 2004, p. 266).<sup>9</sup>

It is interesting to place such changes in the context of three decades of public policy informed by public choice and by asserting the superiority of the market over other forms of political and social organisation. Since the 1980s, there has been a succession of white papers and political speeches advocating a consumerist approach to politics and public services. During the Thatcher years, the ‘citizen as consumer of public services’ and the taxpayer (who seeks to maximise the efficiency of her taxes) were opposed to the ‘scrounger’ (who lives off various benefits). Consumer choices were construed as inherently liberating because they could empower individuals through their purchases. The transition to New Labour did not lead to a reappraisal of this explicit model and, indeed, contributed to naturalise it. Public policy praised the merits of the pursuit of individual self-interest and presented it as democratic and non-ideological: Tony Blair frequently used the language of enlightened individualism as a justification for his policy proposals. Thus, the egoism of the citizen–consumer engaging in decisions that concern him/her personally made it possible to encourage individuals to take responsibility, and to exercise their freedom (as consumers) by intervening on the supply side or mobilising in a community framework.<sup>10</sup> The citizen–consumer became a leitmotif of policies and was often unquestioningly taken as synonymous with liberalisation and democratisation. Such behaviours were presented as solution to the political malaise because they were seen as facilitating a more ‘responsive politics’ (Faucher-King and Le Galès, 2010, p. 133). They were encouraged through an array of policy instruments (mostly incentives and punishments) designed to help individuals act instrumentally.

The promotion of the citizen–consumer has contributed to naturalising the rationally instrumental actor as a model for analysing individuals’ behaviours. Moreover, this approach challenged traditional forms of political action and rested on faith in an ‘invisible hand’ regulating economic and political conflicts (Hay, 2007, p. 57). It reflected an ideological shift that affects the ways British citizens can think about involvement in politics and about political actors. Unsurprisingly, discourses placing individual choices at the centre of the democratic system are now pervasive. Critical academic literature on the topic started to appear in the late 1990s and proliferated during New Labour governments (Espiet-Kilty and Whitton, 2006; Bevir and Trentmann, 2007; Clarke *et al.*, 2007; Needham, 2007; Greener *et al.*, 2009), and there is a wealth of literature on consumerism that finds no equivalents in other countries. The sudden British enthusiasm for audits of all sorts including citizenship and participation (Power, 1999; Strathern, 2000; Pattie *et al.*, 2003; Hansard Society, 2009) reflects a similar shift.

The focus on individualisation that is particularly interesting is the not-for-profit sector, as it parallels what happened in parties and has been well analysed. In the United Kingdom, charities and the voluntary sector have long been seen as crucial for modern democracy. Their importance lies in the way they contribute to an image of



pluralism and personalised participation tailored to individual demand (Balazard, 2012). They were at the heart of the vibrant civic democracy advocated by New Labour and they hold the key to the success of David Cameron's Big Society project. It has been argued that, along the multiplication of agencies, they contribute to depoliticisation because of their role in the co-production of public services (Faucher-King and Le Galès, 2010, pp. 112–115).<sup>11</sup> One measure of the success of large campaigning groups resides in their large memberships at a time political parties faced declining levels of mobilisation: the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds celebrated its millionth member in 1996. The fascination it exerted on parties was obvious on the party conference circuit (Faucher-King, 2005, pp. 221–227).

From the mid-1990s, the two principal British parties changed how they viewed their members and proposed to engage citizens and the techniques used echoed recent changes in the non-governmental sector (D. Fisher, 2006). Parties are complex organisations, resistant to change. Reforms are thus the outcome of competing internal strategies and interpretations of the prospects of the party in relation to its electoral rivals. Several arguments have been used to justify reforms and they shed some light on the rationales that were expected to have purchase, whether or not they were believed to address the problems that they were meant to solve. Isomorphism is also important as it relieves the organisation from justifying its peculiar modes of operation (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Parties in crisis, particularly when their structures are regularly decried as archaic, can be inspired to proclaim their commitment to 'modernisation' and 'democratisation' and to project into such positive terms whatever serves their purposes (Finlayson, 2003).

In 1994, the self-proclaimed 'new' Labour party launched a recruitment campaign aiming to attract members of the liberal professions, and of the middle and upper classes. Reaching outside their traditional networks was a testimony that they were an 'inclusive' organisation. Direct debit members were sought, partly in an effort to limit contact between the local activists' organisation and new recruits for fear that they would either intimidate and scare them away or contaminate them ideologically (Faucher-King, 2005, p. 208). Substituting contacts with activists suspected of being dangerously radical with information directly provided by the centre was a way of controlling internal pluralism and internal dissent. In contradiction with Old Labour and its reliance on collective mobilisation and the creation of internal counter-powers, it was argued that individuals rather than intermediary groups (the Constituency party, the socialist society or the trade union) had to be the focus of democratisation. This was of course a radical evolution in a party that did not accept individual members until 1918. Over the years, the influence of intermediary groups (mostly local parties and trade unions) was successfully downgraded through the transformation of the role of the annual conference, the creation of the National Policy Forum or efforts to transform the role of local parties (Russell, 2005a; Faucher-King, 2008). 'Modernisers' argued that a supportive mass organisation could be used to increase the legitimacy of the organisation through the staging of a

vibrant internal democracy. A large membership with vertical links to the leadership (through regular two-way communication) but little horizontal integration (without contacts with local activists) was expected to leave most of the decision making to the leadership (Labour Coordinating Committee, 1996) but to be easily mobilised on specific issues or campaigns. Labour went further and encouraged local parties to ‘abandon boring matters such as policy and become more fun places’ (Fielding, 2002, p. 141). A new (atomised) membership was expected to be more open to a plebiscitory organisation (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002, p. 214).

The professionalisation of political parties (P. Webb and Fisher, 2003; Faucher-King, 2008) contributed to bringing modern marketing techniques, which meant that the party could target donors with limited time or inclination to participate, or instrumental actor (driven by a political career project) and shun the traditional identifier. Both the Conservative and the Labour parties simplified procedures for joining, thanks to the centralisation of applications, the creation of a national membership list and the use of electronic payment facilities. They have also adopted the language of rights and incentives and now focus on the member with the idea that there should be a direct communication link between the leadership and the members (Faucher-King, 2005, p. 210). The electoral and political successes of New Labour convinced the Conservatives that cosmetic changes to their organisations was necessary to erode the democratic advantage claimed by their opponents. The Conservatives adopted their first party constitution in 1998. They thereby created not only party membership but also membership rights. Until then, one joined local Conservative associations or clubs (the “National Union of Conservative Associations” was informally linked to the Parliamentary party and Central Office). The changes made it possible to organise ballots for leadership selection (in 2001 and 2005) as well as on specific policy issues. Overall, one can hardly say that members have gained much power, and if anything, centralisation has limited the autonomy of the volunteer branch. Internal ballots were organised in both parties to give credence to the idea of internal democratic accountability. However, the membership proved less easy to mobilise than expected, especially when little was at stake. For example, 27 per cent of the Labour individual membership took part in the key 1995 vote on clause 4 and 25 per cent in the internal elections for the National Executive Committee in 2000 (Faucher-King, 2005, pp. 207–208). When participation was higher, the parliamentary leadership secured support after excessively expensive internal campaigns. In these conditions, the party leadership preferred to keep the old rules (giving greater weight to the unions), particularly for the election of the national leader.<sup>12</sup> Mobilisation has been equally low in the Conservative party, under William Hague in the early days or more recently with 27 per cent turnout at the 2005 ballot on the statement of aims and value (Bale, 2008, p. 273).

The new focus on individual members has been used to justify rule changes. Labour and the Conservatives overtly offer selective incentives,<sup>13</sup> such as access to regular and exclusive information, opportunities to take part in a variety of



consultation efforts on policy initiatives or candidate selection, or to attend party events (conferences, fundraising and campaigning events with opportunities to meet ministers or senior politicians) themselves, professionally organised and often outsourced. The influence granted by these new rights is so limited that it is not clear to what extent they indeed play a role in recruitment or retention. However, more importantly, the idea of an instrumental individual chimed with the new dominant organisational myth, that is, the superiority of the business model as a form of organisation. New Labour was looking to demonstrate that it had become ‘modern’ and ‘professional’ (Faucher-King, 2008; 2009). The dominant consumerist language has become naturalised and politicians talked about what they can ‘offer’ in a political ‘marketplace’ (Russell, 2005b).

Studies of party members have been extensively conducted in the United Kingdom since the 1990s (Rüdig *et al.*, 1991; Whiteley *et al.*, 1994; Seyd and Whiteley, 2002; Whiteley *et al.*, 2006), and we now know a lot about who the members are, what motivated them to join or to leave their party. There is also evidence that a narrow rational choice approach, based solely on individualistic motives, fails to explain high levels of participation within political parties because it neglects social norms and affective attachments (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002, pp. 217–219). This points to the potentially essential failure of recent changes: it is unclear whether individualisation will be enough to give meaning to party membership and activism for those who are not primarily motivated by selective incentives and a political career (Ware, 1992; P. D. Webb, 2000). The concerted dismantling of what contributed to give meaning to party membership<sup>14</sup> may very well be contributing to the ‘spiral of demobilisation’ it is seeking to respond to (Whiteley, 2011).

As party membership numbers have collapsed further, new reforms have created opportunities for members of the public to join as ‘friends’ or ‘supporters’ (Gauja, 2009) and to take part in electoral campaigning<sup>15</sup> and consultations (via referendums or policy forums). It is not the first time British parties try to show that they are listening (one remembers in particular Kinnock’s *Labour Listens* campaign in 1987 or Hague’s £250 000 *Listening to Britain* in 1998). In 2004, the *Big Conversation* invited individuals to submit comments and suggestions on the issues of their choice to the New Labour government by internet or e-mail, text message, letter or telephone.<sup>16</sup> Despite its limited success, it was followed up by *Let’s Talk* 3 years later and *Fresh Ideas* in 2011. Labour and the Conservatives have sought to outsource deliberation and policymaking through new technologies as well as a flurry of political forums and focus groups. They justified their initiatives through a discourse of participation and/or deliberative democracy. Such consultations are part of a wider phenomenon that affects parties, as well as governmental agencies and public service providers and has led to a new industry of participation consultants (Miller, 2009; Lee and Romano, 2013). However, we can also analyse the very public outsourcing of policymaking as the side effect of parties’ lack of confidence in their membership, and whether it is representative of the general electorate (Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010).

In the United Kingdom, New Labour in power has openly challenged the legitimacy of its conference delegates, mandated by self-appointed party members, to oppose their policy choices (Faucher-King, 2005, p. 196). If everybody is in it for herself, it is no surprise that parties cannot trust their members. The belief that *homo economicus* is a description of human nature breeding suspicions (Hay, 2007) undermines collective identification processes that have been essential mechanisms for the integration of masses in the polity. Although the British fascination for the citizen–consumer makes the potential link more apparent, similar frames (‘organisational myths’ for Meyer and Rowan (1977)) are at play in other contexts.

Obama’s successful 2008 and 2012 campaigns have contributed to renew interest in civic society mobilisation beyond narrow party membership. Both the Conservatives and the Labour party have sought to draw lessons from the techniques that broad-based community organising deploys.<sup>17</sup> This has mostly manifested itself in speeches about community organising,<sup>18</sup> reforming the ways in which parties (and government) engage civil society. The extent to which these initiatives present a new departure is unclear, if only because changes still need to bear their fruit and be analysed. However, there are reasons to believe that broad-based community organising may not be the panacea as it retains a strong focus on mobilising individuals (Balazard, 2012) around issues that are close to them and systematically privileges campaigns that can lead to short-term victories.

## **The Diagnosis and the Cure: A Crisis of Traditional Form of Collective Participation**

Considering the crucial role of political parties in representative regimes, there are reasons to be concerned about their inability to attract or retain members. Experiences in the past 20 years show that it is unlikely that selective incentives or blurring the boundaries of membership (Gauja, 2013a) will be enough to bring people back in. Can one venture plausible explanations for the epidemic of reforms and the apparent consensus across party families?

The crisis of participation in representative democracies may be more than a free-rider problem and it would also seem fruitful to consider how opportunities to participate have changed. However, the once heuristic market analogy has become a taken-for-granted frame of analysis and we obliviously use the language of demand and supply, of individual incentives and costs, forgetting the priming effect of such vocabulary on our interviewees, let alone on our own thinking (Needham, 2003; Berger *et al*, 2004; Ramiro and Morales, 2012). We need to interrogate the languages of mobilisation that are available to participants when they think and talk about their involvement in politics. This applies to scholarship based on survey questionnaires as well as those using qualitative methods. ‘The literature on response effects makes it clear that survey questions do not simply measure public



opinion. They also shape and channel it by the manner in which they frame issues, order the alternatives, and otherwise set the context of the question' (Zaller and Feldman, 1992, p. 583).

It should not be a surprise that respondents invited to talk about individual reasons to mobilise or about individual actions tend to respond in terms of individualism and individualised practices at the expense of collective forms of political participation (Zaller and Feldman, 1992, p. 602). This is important as it reminds us that the data we rely on in our analysis are constructed, and how research methods in the social sciences do not capture the world 'out there' but also act as catalysts. If 'people do not merely reveal pre-existing attitudes on surveys, [but] to some considerable extent, (...) are using the questionnaire to decide what their "attitudes" are' (Zaller and Feldman, 1992, p. 582), we need to consider how individuals talk about their motives. People who explain or justify how they act choose specific repertoires, which are validated by the groups with which they identify (Wuthnow, 1993). The existence of a shared language is crucial for the communication and articulation of motives. Such codes are not randomly selected (Della Porta, 1992, p. 181) and are drawn from narratives that 'make sense'. Individuals pick a language – and a canvass of arguments – in relation to others and in the process they also assert group belonging (Faucher-King, 2010). The languages of political – and civic – participation have become increasingly dominated by references to self-interest and utilitarianism even when people talk about 'altruistic' involvement in charities or civic association (Wuthnow, 1993) to the extent that any deviation from this norm is now perceived as hypocritical or 'irrational'.

The 'language of motives' may ultimately convince actors that they do, or should, think in terms of their own self-interest (Eliasoph, 1998, p. 253f). To what extent are individualised forms of collective action in part at least a by-product of analyses and discourses that have focused on individuals' actions and systematically questioned alternative frames? It may be no coincidence that 'individualised' forms of participation appear at a time when one looks for them (Micheletti, 2003). Much research on the evolution of modes of participation has focused on the emergence of the critical citizen searching for *à-la-carte* engagement, the choosing individual (Norris, 2002; Ion, 2005; Dalton, 2008). We take for granted that social change affects the demand side and conclude that an individualised or personalised response is more likely to attract instrumentally rational actors, whereas participatory forms of engagement could deliver legitimacy and support.

I am not denying how heuristic analytic individualism has been in raising important questions about political participation, but in recent years the focus on instrumental rational individual actors leads us to ignore alternative lines of enquiry. We now have a wealth of data about party memberships in many European countries. Our approaches have contributed to highlight the importance of numbers and therefore the idea that size matters. We can draw sociological and ideological maps of members, produce measures of activities and classify motives. The models for

thinking about participation have been influenced by rational choice models and resource mobilisation approaches (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002; W. Cross and Young, 2004; Pedersen *et al.*, 2004; Saglie and Heidar, 2004; Morales, 2009; Van Haute, 2009). If one takes into account how such perceptions of activism and participation have dominated social sciences as well as society, it is not surprising that the solution for a spiral of demobilisation appears to involve either lowering the barriers to membership and creating selective incentives for potential members or offering little demanding modes of engagement.

Although recent research on electoral mobilisation has demonstrated the importance of personal contact in mobilising voters (J. Fisher and Denver, 2009), there is precious little on how political parties recruit members and supporters. We need to draw from the existing literature on recruitment and participation in social movements and their analysis of the professionalisation of the sector. The new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s challenged the professionalisation and bureaucratisation of party politics and demanded more deliberation and more participation. Forty years later, the sector is characterised by better organised, resourced, professionalised *ad-hoc* or permanent pressure groups investing new political arenas at the European, national and subnational levels (D. Fisher, 2006; J. W. V. Deth and Maloney, 2010). Their claim to legitimacy is linked to the numbers of people mobilised (in protests and demonstrations, or as members and supporters) as well as their political efficacy. The rapid expansion of the protest business was the product of proactive and targeted recruitment strategies that have been well analysed (D. Fisher, 2006; G. A. Jordan and Maloney, 2007; J. W. V. Deth and Maloney, 2010). These mobilisation techniques contribute to shaping the attitudes that lead to membership and thus can be used by organisations to choose the sort of member they prefer (G. A. Jordan and Maloney, 2007, pp. 83–85).<sup>19</sup> Such techniques have had an impact on their overall strategies: in recent decades, some NGOs have ‘evolved into low cost/low demand organisations to increase the likelihood that rational individuals will join’ (Jordan and Maloney, 2007, p. 83). Marketing strategies focus their efforts on members who are likely to content themselves with selective benefits (G. Jordan, 2010) and with preferential information on the lobbying activities conducted in their name. Groups, on the other hand, make few demands on their membership: contrary to the expectations of a good deal of the social movement scholarship, relatively few contemporary groups offer participation in the deliberative process. Rather, they are usually controlled by paid staffs and by oligarchies and are often run as businesses (G. A. Jordan and Maloney, 2007; J. W. V. Deth and Maloney, 2010). Such groups launch campaigns according to the prospects and constraints of political marketing by appealing to various professionals (Skocpol, 2002). Even though there are clear provisions in many groups to accommodate the small proportion of the membership who might prefer a more active involvement, the vast majority of their supporters do just that – they financially support the policies developed by the



permanent staff/elite (Maloney, 2009). In the United States, citizen's readiness to contribute financially favours groups for whom the issue of participation is not relevant, because they are content to mobilise supporters financially (Skocpol, 2004).

Such an evolution in the not-for-profit sector seems to mirror what has happened in political parties. The interpretation of the crisis as a demand side problem has led to marketing-driven responses in terms of individualisation and 'incentivisation'. Most of the initiatives introduced by parties to respond to declining membership stem from the assumption that the problem is one of costs/benefits ratio and that the solution lies in lowering barriers to individual participation. Just as the global market in consultants has contributed to a dominant approach to public administration reforms (Saint-Martin, 2001), the circulation of political advisors is likely to have played a role in the homogenisation of party reforms; however, there is very little research on such evolutions, with the exception of campaigning techniques (Thurber, 1998; P. Webb and Kolodny 2006; Negrine, 2007).

However, the impact on political parties is different because of the role they play in liberal democratic government. Low levels of loyalty and trust contribute to fixate parties on their need to be responsive to a volatile electorate. The idealisation of the golden age of mass parties amplifies concerns about small numbers of members. The analysis I have developed in this article invites us to rethink the 'spiral' of demobilisation. When we look at political behaviours as stemming from individual choices,<sup>20</sup> 'dis-embedded' from their social context (Sanders, 1998) – rather than as social processes marked by collective identities (such as social class, family, neighbourhoods ...) (Johnston and Pattie, 2006) – responses to perceived crisis are informed by such perspectives. Let us take the example of concerns for abstention: where they have been introduced, possibilities of voting by email or by post do not increase the participation of those targeted, that is, the poor, depoliticised and uneducated (Braconnier, 2010, p. 134). This disappointing outcome might be linked to an erroneous understanding of what voting means: an apparently individualised act, it is all the more collective as the voter is less politicised. Therefore, stripping the vote from its rituals or delocalising it (through postal ballots) may remove whatever collective stimuli remain (Braconnier, 2010, p. 135). The influence of the social context on voting involves more than conversations with strangers and needs to be understood in terms of a complex neighbourhood effect (Johnston and Pattie, 2006, p. 143).

When parties focus on issues at the expense of building a collective identity, they may inadvertently contribute to the very problem they seek to solve: demobilisation. The difficulty is of course that there is no going back to an idealised – and largely fantasised – age of stable and uncontested collective identities. Contemporary political parties cannot realign with social groups that no longer exist as such, but their efforts to regain trust and popular legitimacy might benefit from switching frames. Parties need to rethink first what sort of members and supporters they want before they devise strategies to engage and recruit them.

## Conclusion

In this article, I explored how new patterns of individualised political participation, or of disengagement, should be interrogated in the light of a political discourse that has become dominant over the years and has actively sought to produce new subjects, that is, entrepreneurial and competitive individuals (Andersson, 2010, Chapter 8). Public policies have rewarded such behaviours. Although the political feedback of such policies is near impossible to gauge exactly, it may be heuristic to consider it. When all actors are expected to seek the satisfaction of their needs and desires – and rewarded when they do, it becomes difficult not to read with suspicion the actions of those who claim they are driven by a collective purpose and a vision of the public good. The argument is not a nostalgic appeal to the golden days of mass political mobilisation, but an attempt to underline the connections between the emergence of an ‘anti-politics’ culture (Hay, 2007; Hay and Stoker, 2009) and the promotion of a particular model of human behaviour. If examples of individualised political behaviours seem to confirm the idea of politicians condemned to being responsive to the political demands of the ‘aspiring’ and consumerist middle classes, one can also highlight how political organisations have sought to mobilise instrumentally rational individuals and have, as a consequence, found it difficult to maintain stable memberships. There is a contradiction between the belief that mass membership is a sign of legitimacy and the undermining of partisan collective identities.

## About the Author

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## Notes

- 1 From the 1990s, empirical research has shown that the alleged gap between activists and supporters is generally much smaller than expected and these differences are limited to particularly salient issues (Kitschelt, 1989; Norris, 1995b; Narud and Skare, 2002). There is no evidence that the decline of membership has rendered parties less representative of their supporters (Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010, p. 836) and thus that this alone justifies the blurring of party boundaries.



- 2 Participatory and deliberative democracy sparked interest in the academic community, with a flurry of publications and experiments, and contributed to the emergence of a new industry of consulting activities at the local, regional and even national levels (Lee, 2011; Lee and Romano, 2013).
- 3 In 1997, there was a single candidate, elected with 95 per cent of the votes. In 1999, the election was competitive for the first time. After the election Sarkozy to the Elysée, the position was left vacant – thereby demonstrating the flexibility of the party rules and the limited attachment to the democratic selection of a leader (Haegel, 2012). In 2012, the elections were reinstated. The competition was bitterly fought and the results too close to call, leading to months of disputes and a new ballot a year later.
- 4 Closed primaries can also be used by members to express dissent. The first secretary of the PS was defeated in primaries for the election of the presidential candidate in 1995 and in 2011.
- 5 In the wake of the MPs' expenses scandal, the primary (24 per cent turnout) delivered a candidate who had no previous political career or experience and campaigned with non-partisan line. The exercise proved costly and it is unclear whether the experiment will be extended to other constituencies.
- 6 Indeed, this was often precisely the objective, as in the French socialists after 1993 (Treille, 2000).
- 7 The two main parties attracted up to 90 per cent of the votes until the 1980s.
- 8 This may need to be qualified following the latest findings of the Hansard Society's political engagement audits (9 and 10), which identified significant drops in interest in politics and willingness to engage in voluntary as well as political participation, [http://hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/parliament\\_and\\_government/pages/audit-of-political-engagement.aspx](http://hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/parliament_and_government/pages/audit-of-political-engagement.aspx)
- 9 Although financial contributions are included in the list of forms of participation, one must remember that visa card members mostly sub-contract their political involvement to bodies created and led by political entrepreneurs (G. A. Jordan and Maloney, 2007).
- 10 The idea was that governmental responsiveness would be linked and measurable through indicators of the personalisation of the delivery of public services (Leadbeater, 2004).
- 11 They have, by the same token, become heavily dependent on patronage (Maloney, 2010 and Jordan, 2010).
- 12 It is ironic that a procedure that was seen as maintaining leadership control thanks to union support led to the surprise election of Ed Miliband as leader in 2010.
- 13 Most communication seeks to provide them with information about national policies and campaigns, or sometimes involves special offers from insurance companies or from businesses providing a wide selection of goods and services (Faucher-King, 2005).
- 14 Such as the belief (however delusional) in policy efficacy through conference deliberation in Labour or identification with the imagined community of the party as a family of brothers and sisters (Faucher-King, 2005).
- 15 Successive studies have demonstrated the importance of local (and traditional) campaigning in delivering votes, and hence the renewed interest in voluntary workers (Denver *et al*, 2004; J. Fisher and Denver, 2009).
- 16 This exercise allowed ministers to respond to public questions without really providing an opportunity for participants to engage (Coleman, 2004).
- 17 London Citizens is the British-based organisation most directly inspired by *Broad-based Community Organising* (Balazard, 2012). Its targeted (and successful) campaigns contributed to attract a good deal of attention to its issues and itself during the 2010 general election campaign.
- 18 David Miliband referred to community organising to explain his vision for the party in his unsuccessful leadership bid in 2010. Once elected leader, his brother Ed followed the suggestion and recruited Arnie Graf to develop community organising as a strategy for the next general election (see for instance, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/nov/21/arnie-graf-labour-party-miliband>). *Movement for change* is working on training community leaders and engaging local communities on issues close to their preoccupations. It hopes to create a new dynamic (<http://www.movementforchange.org.uk/>). It is also closely associated to the short-lived Big Society programme (Batho, 2013).

- 19 The social constituency that is likely to support each organisation is well identified and thoroughly exploited through a regular flow of direct mail, personalised calls and the price of fierce brand competition (Jordan and Maloney, 2007, p. 118). Similar techniques are deployed in electoral campaigns to target effectively switching voters (Nielsen, 2012).
- 20 Other analyses confirm class de-alignment but dispute the individualisation of the vote (Heath and Andersen, 2002). (Braconnier, 2010).

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