

Going, Going,.....Gone?
Party Membership in the 21st Century

Ingrid van Biezen

Peter Mair

Thomas Poguntke

i.c.vanbiezen@bham.ac.uk

This paper presents a preliminary overview of levels of party membership in European democracies at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century and looks also at changes in these levels over time, comparing party membership today with figures from both 1980 and the late 1990s. We briefly speculate on the implications of the patterns observed in the membership data, and suggest that membership has now reached such a low ebb that it may no longer constitute a relevant indicator of party organizational strength. In the final section, we briefly evaluate the importance of party-association linkages, and ask whether the decline of party membership and party organizational weight might be compensated by the links to civil society that are maintained by the non-party associations to which parties are connected.

Paper prepared for presentation to the workshop on ‘Political Parties and Civil Society’, ECPR Joint Sessions, Lisbon, April 2009. This paper is a very preliminary report on work in progress, and should be treated as such. Please check with the first-named author before citing or quoting.

This paper is an early report on party membership data that we have been gathering and analyzing. This present version has been produced for the ECPR Workshop at somewhat of a rush, and should be regarded as very preliminary and provisional. We hope to finalise a version for publication before too long, and we will also publish more detailed figures on party membership on the soon-to-be-launched website of the Sub-Observatory on Political Parties that forms part of the larger EUI-based European Democracy Observatory (EUDO). This present paper is organized in three sections. In the first section we provide an overview of the levels of party membership in European democracies at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century as well as presenting an overview of the changes over time, comparing party membership today with figures from both 1980 and the late 1990s. In the second section, we briefly speculate on the implications of the patterns that we observe in the membership data, and we suggest that membership has now reached such a low ebb that it may no longer constitute a relevant indicator of party organizational strength. Alternatively, if membership is regarded as offering a meaningful gauge of party organizational strength, we might then conclude that party organizations have also reached such a low ebb that the formal organizational level is itself no longer a relevant indicator of party strength. In the third section, we look briefly and in a very provisional fashion at party-association linkages, and ask whether the decline of party membership and party organizational weight might be compensated by the links to civil society that are maintained by the non-party associations to which parties seek to be connected.

Party Membership in the Twenty-First Century

In this first section we provide an overview of the levels of party membership in European democracies at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century and then go on to present an overview of the changes over time, comparing party membership today with both the late 1990s and 1980. Our intentions here have been threefold. First, we simply want to update the data reported in Mair and van Biezen (2001), which themselves followed on from an earlier study by Katz, Mair *et al.* (1992). Following the same approach and methodology as before, the aggregate data we are presenting here are based on the membership figures as reported by the parties themselves, with all the usual caveats about their potential unreliability. In gathering these data we have once again been fortunate to have been able to rely on the help,

advice and information generously provided by a great number of party scholars across Europe.¹

Secondly, we have sought to extend the coverage of our research by including data from as many countries as possible. Our earlier study encompassed 20 European democracies, including most of the established liberal democracies in Western Europe, the younger democracies of Greece, Portugal and Spain in Southern Europe as well as four post-communist democracies: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland. This time we have been able to collect data for an additional 7 countries, adding data for Cyprus and for the post-communist democracies of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia, thus bringing the total number of countries to 27. This means that our study now covers virtually all of the European democracies, with the exception of some of the smaller states such as Iceland, Luxembourg or Malta, or more recently consolidated democracies such as Croatia and Serbia. This larger and more inclusive sample enables us not only to engage in a more comprehensive investigation of the levels of party membership across contemporary European democracies, but also allows for a more thorough exploration of the differences in the patterns of party affiliation between the longer established democracies and the more recently created ones, and the post-communist democracies in particular.

Our third intention has been to explore changes in the levels of party membership over time, and to assess the extent to which the trends we observed at the turn of the twentieth century continued to persist into the twenty-first. Then, we concluded that *'total party membership, expressed in both absolute numbers and as a percentage of the electorate, is now markedly in decline'*. Not only did we observe a continuation of the decline in membership relative to the size of the electorate already noted by Katz, Mair *et al.* in 1992, but we also saw, for the first time, a very strong and consistent decline in the absolute numbers of party members, suggesting that parties were struggling to hold

¹ In collecting the data for this paper, we gratefully acknowledge the help of Thierry Barboni, Lars Bille, Gabriela Borz, Christophoros Christophorou, Fabrizio Di Mascio, Zsolt Enyedi, Wojciech Gagattek, Elin Haugsgjerd Allern, Janis Ikstens, Alenka Krasovec, Evangelos Kyzirakos, Andreas Ladner, Lukáš Linek, Marco Lisi, Wolfgang Müller, Eoin O'Malley, Takis Pappas, Vello Pettai, Ainé Ramonaitė, Lamprini Rori, Marek Rybar, Maria Spirova, Jan Sundberg, Emilie Van Haute, Tània Verge, Liam Weeks and Anders Widfeldt.

on to their existing membership organizations and were failing to recruit new members in significant numbers. As we will discuss at greater length below, both trends have continued to manifest themselves to date, accentuating the persistence of the marked process of disengagement from party politics which gathered pace in the last decade of the twentieth century in particular.

The first set of data we present summarize the overall levels of party membership in contemporary European democracies, based on the most recent data available. These figures are presented under two headings: the total party membership expressed in raw numbers, and the party membership expressed as a percentage of the electorate (M/E), an indicator which is more suitable for cross-national comparisons. The data are reported in Table 1, which presents the countries ranked in descending order of M/E level.²

[Table 1 about here]

Taking all 27 countries together, the evidence shows that the average membership ratio is just 4.61 per cent. This is somewhat lower than the 20-country mean of 4.99 we reported for the late 1990s, and considerably lower of course than the levels recorded in the 1980s (Katz, Mair *et al.* 1992). This suggests that the downward trend has indeed continued into the new century. This becomes even more apparent if we note that the average levels of party membership of the 20 countries originally included in our earlier study actually stands at an even lower level of just 4.28 per cent. In a little less than a decade, the average membership level has thus fallen by another 0.71 per cent. The inclusion of additional countries appears to have somewhat mitigated the overall level of decline, which can largely be attributed to the relatively high levels of party membership in Cyprus (16.25 per cent). Noteworthy are also the strangely persisting high levels in Austria. Both countries are clearly outliers, and excluding both would reduce the overall country mean to 3.64 per cent. Located at the other end of the extreme are countries such as Latvia and Poland, where the levels of

² In this paper we only present aggregate membership figures. Information on the breakdown by individual parties can be obtained from the first author.

party membership fail to reach even 1 per cent, as well as Britain, Hungary, France and the Czech Republic, where they register under 2 per cent.³

In our earlier report we observed that the levels of membership appear to bear relatively little relation to the question whether the polity in question was a long established democracy or one that had emerged out of more recent waves of democratization. We did note, however, that the post-communist countries appeared to stand out from the other democracies. These patterns are reproduced here. Taking all the newer democracies together, the average level of party membership totals 3.40 per cent, against 5.75 per cent for the longer established democracies in Western Europe. This discrepancy should be largely attributed to the post-communist democracies, rather than the newer democracies per se. In fact, the average level of party membership in the three Southern European democracies is somewhat higher (4.92 per cent) than the overall 27-country mean.

Most of the post-communist democracies fall below the overall mean, with the notable exceptions of Slovenia and Estonia. Placed at the very bottom of the rank order are Latvia and Poland, which record membership levels under 1 per cent, while Hungary is positioned just above the United Kingdom with a membership level of 1.54 per cent. Taken together, moreover, the average level of party affiliation in the post-communist democracies equals just 2.94 per cent, against an average of 5.60 for the Western and Southern European democracies combined. This difference is significant at the statistical level (sig. 0.093), as is confirmed by an Anova significance comparison of the means of the two groups. The post-communist thus continue to provide the starkest contrast with both their counterparts in the younger democracies in Southern European and the older democracies in Western Europe.

On the basis of the data for the late 1990s, we also surmised that there might be a difference between small and large polities, with the larger countries tending to have lower membership ratios. The more recent data seem to reaffirm this patterning. For

³ The remarkably low British figure (which excludes Northern Ireland) is probably more accurate and comprehensive than that reported in Mair and van Biezen (2001). Some of the parties now report membership figures to the new Electoral Commission, and our data also now include the Scottish and Welsh nationalists and the far right BNP. The figure for the Conservative party in the UK remains an (over) estimate, however.

example, the larger polities of France, the United Kingdom and Germany are among the lowest scoring in terms of M/E levels, while smaller countries such as Austria, Cyprus, Finland, and Belgium are among the highest ranking polities. Even though the relationship seems not entirely unequivocal, with the smaller democracies of Latvia and Ireland breaking the pattern with relatively low membership ratios and Italy with a relatively high level of membership, the correlation between the size of the electorate and levels of party membership appears to be significant statistically (Pearson correlation -0.364 , sig. 0.037 , 1-tailed), although only after the exclusion of outliers Italy and Latvia.⁴ This large versus small dichotomy confirms that membership levels to some extent reflect a systemic bias. As we suggested earlier, this might also be reflected in the membership levels in other forms of association and organization.

Declining levels of party membership

The second set of data we present concern the changes in the levels of party membership over time. First of all, we have assessed the change in membership ratios over the course of the last decade. For this purpose, we have taken the data for the late 1990s reported in Mair and van Biezen (2001) and compared them with the most recent data available to date. In addition, benefiting from evidence recently made available, we have been able to include an additional 3 countries (Bulgaria, Estonia and Slovenia) to the overall comparison, such that the longitudinal comparison now encompasses 23 countries. The summary measures are presented in Table 2, which reports both changes in the M/E levels as well as in the absolute number of members, ranked in descending order according to the percentage change in the latter. It should be noted that caveats about the validity of comparisons still apply for the more recently established democracies, and the post-communist ones in particular. At the same time, however, the new democratic polities have now had an additional ten years of experience with democracy. Approximately two decades after consolidation (more than three for the Southern European countries), the newly established democracies have had considerable time for the institutionalization of the parties and the party systems, and the figures are less likely to be distorted than they may have been before. Any volatility in the party formations or their weak organizational presence on the

⁴ Including Latvia and Italy still yields a negative correlation between membership and size, although significant only at the 0.10 level (Pearson correlation -0.282 , sig. 0.077 , 1 tailed).

ground, therefore, is more likely to be a reflection of structural and systemic features, rather than a symptom of the transitional status of these polities. Furthermore, at this point, the post-communist figures are less likely to be misrepresented as a result of the organizational legacy of the former ruling communist parties and their satellites. The relative impact of these successor organizations was important primarily in the first years after the transition and is unlikely to be of the same consequence today, albeit not entirely irrelevant, as is demonstrated by the Czech case.

[Table 2 about here]

The evidence in Table 2 shows that, since the turn of the century, the large majority of European democracies have experienced a further decline in their membership levels, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the electorate. This can be seen, first of all, from the widespread and steady decline in M/E levels across the board. Inevitably, the fall is more muted because of the shorter time span under investigation. This is also why a certain degree of fluctuation is to be expected. It may also be simply that the trend is now bottoming out. It is no less unequivocal for that matter, however. Simply put, with only a handful of exceptions, membership ratios have fallen everywhere. There does not seem to be any relationship with the question whether the democracy in question is long-established or relatively new. Most of the older democracies have experienced a decline, although party membership in France and Italy has increased by 0.28 and 1.52 per cent respectively.⁵ The Netherlands has also seen the overall membership ratio rise, albeit only by a very modest 0.01 per cent, which is largely as a result of the ability of the small protest parties to counteract the continued decline of the larger established parties. Membership has also fallen in the two younger Southern European democracies of Greece and Portugal, even though it is continuing to be on the increase in Spain. Even in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe membership levels have fallen substantially, thus defying any expectations that the low levels of partisan affiliation might simply be a reflection of the newness of their democratic polities, although Estonia appears to offer a significant exception to this pattern, albeit with respect only to 2002.

⁵ Note that the Italian figure from 1996, against which this increase is measured, was remarkably low, and that the current figure is little more than half that recorded in 1987 (see Table A1).

These recent data furthermore confirm the continued decline in the absolute number of members. Party membership expressed in raw numbers has fallen everywhere in the last decade, with the exceptions noted above, as well as Austria, which has seen a positive change in terms of absolute numbers although this increase has been outnumbered by the expansion of the electorate. The decline has been quite substantial in many cases, with membership in Slovakia nearly halved in just seven years, and the membership in the Czech Republic reduced by 40 per cent compared to the late 1990s. Interestingly, the decline in raw numbers actually seems to be most pronounced in Central and Eastern Europe, with four positions in the top five are occupied by a post-communist democracy. In some cases, such as in the Czech Republic, this can be attributed to the sustained membership loss suffered by the Communist Party and its satellite party. Given that the membership of the former ruling parties tended to erode rapidly following the collapse of the communist power monopoly, a decline in this context is perhaps predictable. In other post-communist countries, however, membership is falling in significant numbers among other parties as well, suggesting that the organizational erosion of the former ruling parties is not the only cause for the loss of party members. Many of the parties in these newly established democracies are now struggling to retain whatever remains of an already limited organizational presence on the ground.

The last set of data is shown in Table 3, which presents the changes in the membership ratios and the raw number of members in European democracies today but this time marking the change since 1980 (early 1990s for the post-communist democracies). What emerges from this table is a picture of membership loss in quite staggering proportions. A decline in M/E ratios is evident in each of the long-established democracies, ranging from a fall of more than 10 percentage points in the cases of Austria and Norway to more moderate decreases in Germany (-2.22) and the Netherlands (-1.77). Taking the 13 established democracies together, the average membership ratio has fallen by nearly 5 percentage points in the last thirty years. Also the raw numbers of members has fallen dramatically. In the United Kingdom and France, the parties have lost around 1 million members over the course of the last three decades, equivalent to approximately two-thirds of the memberships recorded around 1980. Italian parties today have 1.5 million members less than their counterparts of the First Republic, corresponding to a fall by more than one-third of

the earlier memberships. The Scandinavian countries too, and Norway and Sweden in particular, have suffered severe losses, with the raw numbers falling by over 60 per cent and nearly 50 per cent respectively. Although the losses appear more muted in some countries, it should also be noted that in none of the established democracies have the raw memberships fallen by less than 25 per cent. On average, across all established democracies, membership levels in terms of absolute numbers have been nearly halved since 1980.

[Table 3 about here]

Even the parties in the post-communist democracies, despite their relatively short existence, record significant membership losses. As noted earlier, this is not simply due to the weakening of the former communist parties and their satellites, as is the case in the Czech Republic, where the absolute membership is down by nearly 70 per cent since the early 1990s. Hungarian parties have lost over a quarter of their original memberships since the transition to democracy, while party membership in Slovakia has been reduced by nearly one-third. Taken together, these three post-communist parties have lost over 42 per cent of their original memberships and have seen their M/E ratios decline by an average of 2.30 per cent.

Only the three Southern European countries seem to be bucking the overall trend: the average M/E level has gone up by nearly 2 per cent since 1980 and the membership in raw numbers by an impressive 175 per cent, although this seemingly remarkable success should be qualified by underlining that they started from an extremely low base in the early years following the democratic transitions. Significance tests of the group means confirm that there is indeed a statistically significant difference between the three regions in terms of both the change in M/E ratios (Anova sig. 0.007) and the percentage change in absolute members (Anova sig. 0.000) since 1980. Portugal records only a small rise in the raw number of members, and this increase has been unable to keep up with the increase in the size of the electorate, causing the overall M/E level to drop. Greece and Spain record an increase of both the absolute and relative levels of membership since the 1980s. In fact, Spain is the only one among the newer democracies where party membership has grown consistently since the transition to democracy. Spanish parties have now considerably more members than

they did ten or even thirty years ago, both in relative and absolute terms. Despite this constant growth, however, the membership level in Spain is still comparatively low and actually falls below the European mean.

The Implications of Membership Decline

There is scarcely any other indicator relating to mass politics in Europe that reveals such a strong and pervasive trend as that which we now see with levels of party membership. It bears repeating that with the exceptions of Greece and Spain, democratizing in the 1970s, all of the 19 European polities listed in Table 3 record a long-term decline in the ratio of party members to the electorate. In extreme cases – Austria, Norway – the decline is greater than 10 per cent; in others it is around 5 per cent. All cases, with the exception this time of Portugal as well as Greece and Spain, also record a major long-term decline in the absolute numbers of members, a drop of 1 million or more in Britain, France and Italy, around half a million in Germany, and close to that in Austria. Britain, Norway and France have lost well over half their party members since the 1980, while Sweden, Ireland, Switzerland and Finland have lost close to half. These are genuinely striking figures, and suggest that party membership as such has – in general terms – changed in both its character and its significance.

Who would become or remain a party member in the 21st century? From what we know of the members themselves – and there is now a growing literature based on close professional surveys of members in many European polities – they seem an increasingly unrepresentative group of citizens, socially and professionally if not ideologically. The large majority, of course, are inactive – 6 out of 7 in the Danish case, for example (Pedersen et al 2004) – and are members on paper only, while those who are active then to be quite a lot older than the average voter. It also seems that members are more likely than the average voter to be connected in some way to state service – many either work in the public or semi-public sector, and draw their salary cheques (or pensions) from the public purse. The membership also includes a number of political professionals, of course – public office holders, party workers, would-be party careerists, and so on, and it also seems that a large minority of young members have clear political-professional ambitions (Bruter and Harrison, forthcoming). More generally, these memberships have become so distinct in terms of

profile and activities, and also so narrowly cast and reduced in number, that it might be reasonable to regard them not as constituting part of civil society – with which party membership has traditionally been associated – but rather as constituting the outer ring of an extended political class. In terms of the three faces of party organization distinguished by Katz and Mair (1993), membership of this type is possibly closer to the party in central office and even the party in public office than it is to the party on the ground. Increasingly, it seems, the real party on the ground, if it exists at all, stands outside the confines of the party proper, being constituted by the myriads of supporters, adherents, and friends of the party rather than by the formal – and shrinking – membership as such.

This is an exaggeration, of course, but it may well reflect the direction in which many parties are now heading. Moreover, it is also reflective of the American experience, and this too may offer a model for the future. Some signs are evident already: the increased emphasis on professional consultants for polling and fund-raising purposes; the increasing control of and manipulation of the media and news outlets, and the greater reliance on spin and on marketing; the increasing appeal to the public to support the party through donations rather than through membership or activism, and so on. A lot of these trends have been apparent for some time, of course, but they are now more dominant and more pervasive, and they are also now being joined by other US practices which are perhaps even more telling: the use of primaries to select leaders and sometimes even local candidates, and the transformation of party congresses – now heavily mediatized through both television and internet – from deliberative or combative policy-making arenas into PR events and leadership rallies. In other words, what we increasingly see in the European democracies is not a party leadership that engages with a party membership and thereby connects indirectly to the wider society, but instead a party leadership which uses and incorporates the acclamation of a core group of party supporters to create media events that allow it to connect *directly* to the wider society. With the onset of audience democracy (Manin 1997), party members have become part of the spectacle rather than part of the public.

The increasingly frequent adoption of primaries follows a similar logic, even though in most cases logistic difficulties mean that parties have been restricted to polls among the membership. This may also be changing, however. In Italy, for example, the new

centre-left primaries have been opened to all citizens who are willing to register their names and addresses and who are willing to pay the small fee (varying from 1 to 4 Euros) that is required to finance the primary in the first place. Other parties in Europe may well follow this example. Given the erosion of key ideological differences between parties, there is no longer any reason to exclude most voters from helping to select candidates for the party leadership, particularly given that the more widely-based the selectorate, the greater will be the chances that the leaders who are chosen will have a far-reaching appeal. In other words, if primaries are intended to broaden the base of leadership support, it makes much more sense to extend the opportunity for participation in these primaries beyond the party itself.

In this sense also, party membership becomes less and less important. Given that memberships are now more narrowly cast, they will not necessarily select the sort of leaders that will appeal to the wider public. Nor are they always likely to provide a reservoir of attractive candidates. In this sense, as has been suggested by the earlier literature on declining memberships, they may be even more of a nuisance than before. In their overview of the findings of their party membership surveys in Britain, Seyd and Whiteley (2004; 364) make a similar point, and quote Theda Skocpol (2002) on the emergence in the US of what she calls ‘the professionally led advocacy group’, in which she suggests that leaders and citizens are less and less likely to think in terms of building or engaging in formal mass organizations, but instead, think “opening a national office, raising funds through direct mail, and hiring pollsters and media consultants. Polls are used to measure disaggregated public opinion, even as advocacy groups emit press releases about hot-button issues, hire lobbyists to deal with government – and engage in incessant fund-raising to pay for all of the above. Organizational leaders have little time to discuss things with groups of members. Members are a nonlucrative distraction.”

This is not always the case, of course. Even though some new parties try to eschew the notion of membership completely – as in the case of Rita Verdonk’s recently launched Trots op Nederland (‘Proud of the Netherlands’) – many others still claim pride in reporting what looks like a mass membership. Moreover, some parties remain highly committed to building real memberships (as opposed to donor lists) and in engaging with these memberships in policy formulation, leadership selection, and so

on. The story in Europe, and even in the individual polities, is in this sense far from uniform. Nonetheless, as is evident when one tries to gather data on membership levels, most parties now seem quite unconcerned about their memberships, and are instead much more focused on reaching out to the wider public through professional campaigning and marketing techniques. That party membership has declined so enormously seems in many cases this seems a matter of indifference to the party organizations concerned.

This also suggests a more far-reaching conclusion: party membership levels have fallen to such a low level that membership itself no longer offers a meaningful indicator of party organizational capacity. Alternatively, if membership is still to be regarded as offering a meaningful gauge of party organizational strength, then we can conclude that party organizations have also reached such a low ebb that the formal organizational level is itself no longer a relevant indicator of party capacity. From a more general perspective this may indicate the need to reconsider our conceptualization of party organization and organizational strength in a more fundamental manner, and this includes the way parties connect to society via collateral organizations to which we will now turn.

Parties and Collateral Organizations

For many years the normative, theoretical and empirical literature on parties as organizations has been inspired by a concept of parties that was dominated by the mass party model. While cadre parties came to be regarded as a pre-modern, pre-democratic variant, all later variants or types of parties were usually compared to the ideal typical mass party model (Duverger 1964; Neumann 1956; Kirchheimer 1965; Katz and Mair 1995) . This comparison was not always explicit, even though the results tended to be relatively uniform in that, as far as organizational strength was considered, decline was the dominant diagnosis.

When analyzing party organizational strength in the traditional sense, party membership has always been regarded as the most central indicator. Despite the familiar ambiguities and cross-national variation of the concept of membership, it has been seen as a fairly reliable and valid indicator of the degree to which parties are

anchored in their relevant constituencies. Arguably, a party's membership organization serves – or served – as the most reliable organizational linkage party elites could create toward their electorate.

Other forms of linkage include *direct* linkage through different kinds of mass communication (including modern web based variants) and various forms of polling and *organizational* linkage through more or less exclusive connections to different forms of collective actors. All linkage variants serve to inform party elites about the preferences of their potential voters but direct linkages “do not facilitate agreement on binding deals between party elites and groups of voters” (Poguntke 2005a: 45). Organizational linkage, on the contrary, facilitates a two-way process of communication between party elites and mass publics mediated through collective actors which perform a considerable part of relevant interest selection and aggregation. “While direct linkage is based on individual party support in exchange for elite responsiveness, organizational linkage is based on an exchange between party elites and organizational elites who can mobilize or withdraw the support of their organization for a political party” (Poguntke 2005a:45).

From this perspective, a party's membership organization is but a special variant of organizational linkage between party elites and relevant segments of the electorate. After all, party elites need to keep the preferences of relevant factions of their own internal membership organization in mind and secure their support through making negotiating policy concessions with faction leaders. The more or less formalized and exclusive ties between political parties and relevant collective actors can therefore be conceptualized as an “extension” of a parties' membership organizations in that these organizational linkages can, in principle, perform the same tasks as the membership organization proper. As such, while the membership organization might be in decline, it could – at least in principle – be compensated for by links to collective actors.

In a nutshell, political parties are (or have been) capable of stabilizing their electoral support through stable ties to collective actors who form their relevant organizational environment because they can rely on the mobilizing support such organization in exchange for specific policy concessions (Poguntke 2005a). However, the capacity of

such collective actors to enter in such stable exchange relationships varies widely depending on the degree of their formal organization and is also changing with time.

Essentially, we can distinguish between three types of relevant organizational environments. First, a party's own membership organization; second, new social movement organizations; and third, different types of collateral organizations, which range from traditional mass organizations (e.g. trade unions) to different types of party-controlled organizations. Collateral organizations are hierarchically organized and led by stable elites and hence provide more reliable anchor points for stable exchange relationships with political parties than new social movement organizations. Furthermore, linkage through new social movements is highly contingent on mobilization cycles and characterized by frequently rather temporary alliances between movement and party elites.

This suggests that when discussing the decline of party organizational strength, we should focus, in the first instance, on linkage based on collateral organizations. Here we can distinguish two types: First, mass organizations which are either fully independent of political parties or maintain corporate links with them (e.g. through collective membership); and second, affiliated or ancillary organizations which are characterized by a partial or even complete membership overlap with a specific party (Poguntke 2005b). While the organizational development of such sub-organizations is largely captured by the trends in party membership, we need to treat mass organizations as separate unit of analysis.

These organizations maintain permanent exchange relationships with a party (or a political camp) but they rarely formalize these ties. Corporate links through collective membership and ex officio seats in party executives have always been the exception rather than the rule, and they have been abolished or modified almost everywhere (for early accounts, see, for example, Svasand 1992, Webb 1992). Hence, the most straightforward indicator for the strength of linkage through collateral organizations is also trends in organizational membership. After all, the electoral and more general political effectiveness of agreements between party and organizational elites depends to a considerable degree on the number of organizational members that can be mobilized in favour (or against!) a specific party.

When looking at the classic case of trade union membership, the picture largely resembles that of political parties. Membership has tended to decline in modern democracies substantially over the past decades. However, the Nordic countries and Belgium deviate from this rather general trend. It has been suggested that the fact that the trade unions administer the unemployment insurance in these countries works like a selective incentive in their favour (Ebbinghaus 2003). By and large, and this applies even to the Nordic countries, the formerly stable alliances between parties and the trade unions have lost much of their political 'reach'. In some cases, they may have even turned from an asset into a liability even though more detailed analyses show that their coordinated action and joint gains are still possible (Svasand 1994, Allern 2007).

Similarly, the reach of organized religion has declined substantially. Here, membership figures tell us fairly little because a formalized 'exit' from church membership does not exist in many countries. Also, survey-based evidence on religious orientations (religiosity) is a relatively poor indicator of the remaining political effectiveness of the church hierarchy because even the faithful are increasingly unwilling to accept or even obey political guidance by church leaders (e.g. Jagodzinski, Wolfgang/Karel Dobbelaere 1995a ,b).

This example indicates that the significance of membership figures (formal or based on a functional equivalence like church attendance) as an indicator of the social power of organizational elites may have declined. In an age of increasing pluralization of the social fabric of Western societies, organizational membership may prove less and less telling in pointing to identification with a certain segment of society. Instead, it may simply be based on selective incentives or a selective agreement with the organizational goals in a narrower sense. A trade union member, to use an obvious example, may still be prepared to pay trade union dues because strong unions make pay rises more likely but this does not mean that he or she shares the more general political philosophy of the trade union leadership or feels part of the wider party-union ideological nexus.

This leads us to an interesting observation. Just as parties have evolved into organizations which exist and act ever more independently of their social anchorage,

the same may be true for many other mass organizations. Their continued political clout may no longer depend so much on the size of the troops they can mobilize. Instead, their power may flow from the integration into the rules and rituals of a country's political process like the inclusion into decision-making arenas and access to top decision-makers.

Furthermore, there may be something like a path dependency of interest representation in party politics that is largely based on past experience and the related symbolic significance attached to certain organizations by mass publics. Whether or not a party really needs good relations with the church hierarchy or the trade unions is very difficult to know if membership is losing its significance as an indicator of social reach. Instead such organizations may have become symbolic actors as much as real mobilizers. As long as trade unions stand for social justice, their opposition may be harmful for a Social Democratic party even though the large majority of its voters may no longer be trade union members. Similarly, criticizing the Pope may be risky for a Christian Democratic leader even in an age where churches are reliably empty. And, to use a particularly conspicuous and recent example from Germany: Alienating refugee organizations seems still a risky business for the German Christian Democrats even though the vast majority of World War II refugees may already have passed away by now.

It follows from this that we may be seeing parallel trends. Organizational membership is declining as a result of social pluralization which, in turn, also means that the significance of membership as an expression of collective identity is waning. While some mass organizations may be able to maintain a satisfactory level of membership as a result of selective incentives (e.g. trade unions) others may hang in there because of tradition (churches) or simply because they have transformed themselves into professionalized lobby groups for whatever cause (e.g. the German refugee organizations) – not unlike NGOs belonging to the new social movement sector who rely on fundraising rather than membership contributions (Jordan and Maloney 1997).

While mass organizations remain electorally important for political parties, their blackmail potential vis-a-vis parties is becoming increasingly independent of their ability to recruit large number of members. Instead, their power resources begin to

resemble those of political parties: the ability to raise funds (including from the public purse), highly professionalized staff, professional lobbying and campaigning. As such, politics is becoming a battle between groups of professionals who claim to represent certain (ever more heterogeneous) constituencies but who are no longer socially or organizationally tied to them.

References

Allern, Elin H. (2007): *Parties, Interest Groups and Democracy: Political Parties and their Relationship with Interest Groups in Norway*. Department of Political Science, University of Oslo. Doctoral (PhD) thesis. Oslo: Unipub.

Bardi, L., Ignazi, P., Massari, O. (eds.) (2007). *I partiti italiani. Iscritti, dirigenti, eletti*. Milano: Università Bocconi Editore.

Borz, Gabriela (2009). 'Romania', in Darren J. Sagar (ed.), *Political Parties of the World*. London: John Harper, forthcoming.

Bruter, Michael and Sarah Harrison (2009). 'Tomorrow's Leaders? Understanding the Involvement of Young Party Members in Six European Democracies.' *Comparative Political Studies*, forthcoming.

Christophorou, Christophoros (2006). 'Party Change and Development in Cyprus (1995-2005)', *South European Society and Politics* 11/3-4: 513-542.

Duverger, Maurice (1964), *Political Parties*. London: Methuen.

Ebbinghaus, Bernhard (2003), 'Die Mitgliederentwicklung deutscher Gewerkschaften im internationalen Vergleich' in: Wolfgang Schroeder and Bernhard Weßels (eds.), *Die Gewerkschaften in Politik und Gesellschaft der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Ein Handbuch*, Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, S. 174-203.

Gunzinger, Mathieu (2008). *Analyse comparative des ressources financières des partis politiques suisses*. Cahier de l'IDHEAP 240/2008.

Jagodzinski, Wolfgang and Karel Dobbelaere (1995a), 'Religious and Ethical Pluralism' in Jan van Deth and Elinor Scarbrough (eds), *The Impact of Values (Beliefs in Government Volume Four)*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 218-49.

Jagodzinski, Wolfgang and Karel Dobbelaere (1995b), 'Secularization and Church Religiosity' in Jan van Deth and Elinor Scarbrough (eds.), *The Impact of Values (Beliefs in Government Volume Four)*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 76-119.

Jordan, Grant A. and William A Maloney (1997) *The Protest Business. Mobilizing Campaign Groups*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Katz, Richard S., Peter Mair *et al.* (1992). 'The membership of political parties in European democracies, 1960-1990', *European Journal of Political Research* 22: 329-345.

Katz, Richard S. and Peter Mair (1993). 'The Evolution of Party Organizations in Europe: The Three Faces of Party Organization' *American Review of Politics*, 14, 593-617.

Katz, Richard S and Peter Mair (1995), 'Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party' *Party Politics*, 1:1, 5-28.

- Kirchheimer, Otto (1966), 'The Transformation of the Western European Party System' in Joseph LaPalombara and Myron Weiner (eds), *Political Parties and Political Development*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 177-200.
- Mair, Peter and Ingrid van Biezen (2001). 'Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980-2000', *Party Politics* 7:1: 5-21.
- Manin, Bernard (1997). *Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge University Press.
- Neumann, Sigmund (1956), 'Towards a Comparative Study of Political Parties' in Sigmund Neumann (ed.), *Modern Political Parties. Approaches to Comparative Politics*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 395-421.
- Niedermayer, Oskar (2008). 'Parteimitglieder in Deutschland: Version 2008', Arbeitshefte Otto Stammer Zentrum Nr. 13.
- Pappas, Takis S. and Elias Dinas (2006). 'From Opposition to Power: Greek Conservatism Reinvented', *South European Society and Politics* 11:3-4: 477-495.
- Pedersen, Karina et al. (2004). 'Sleeping or Active Partners? Danish Party Members at the Turn of the Millennium.' *Party Politics*, 10: 4, 367-83.
- Poguntke, Thomas (2005a), 'Party Organisational Linkage: Parties without Firm Social Roots?', in Kurt Richard Luther and Ferdinand Müller-Rommel (eds.), *Political Parties in the New Europe: Political and Analytical Challenges*, Oxford University Press, 43-62.
- Poguntke, Thomas (2005b), 'Political Parties and Other Organizations', in Richard S. Katz & Bill Crotty (eds.) *Handbook of Party Politics*, London: Sage, 396-405.
- Ramonaitė, Ainė (2006). 'The Development of the Lithuanian Party System', in Susanne Jungerstam-Mulders (ed.), *Post-Communist EU Member States: Parties and Party Systems*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp.69-90.
- Rozenvalds, Juris (ed.) (2005). *How democratic is Latvia: Audit of Democracy*. Rīga.
- Seyd, Patrick and Paul Whiteley (2004). 'British Party Members: An Overview' *Party Politics*, 10: 4, 355-66
- Skocpol, Theda (2002) 'United States: From Membership to Advocacy', in Robert D. Putnam (ed.) *Democracies in Flux*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spirova, Maria (2005). 'Political Parties in Bulgaria: Organizational Trends in Comparative Perspective', *Party Politics* 11/5: 601-622.
- Svasand, Lars (1992), 'Norway' in: Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair (eds.), *Party Organizations. A Data Handbook on Party Organizations in Western Democracies, 1960-90*, London: Sage, 732-80.

Svasand, Lars (1994), 'Change and Adaptation in Norwegian Party Organizations' in Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair (eds.), *How Parties Organize. Change and Adaptation in Party Organizations in Western Democracies*, London: Sage, 304-31.

Szczerbiak, Aleks (2006). 'Power without Love? Patterns of Party Politics in Post-1989 Poland', in Susanne Jungerstam-Mulders (ed.), *Post-Communist EU Member States: Parties and Party Systems*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 91-123.

Verge, Tània (2009). 'Els partits polítics catalans', *ICPS, Anuari Polític de Catalunya*. Barcelona: Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials, forthcoming.

Webb, Paul D. (1992), *Trade Unions and the British Electorate*, Aldershot: Dartmouth.

Weldon, Steven (2006). 'Downsize My Polity? The Impact of Size on Party Membership and Member Activism'. *Party Politics*, 12: 4, 467-81.

Table 1: National Levels of Party Membership

| Country | Year | Total Party Membership | Total Party Membership as Percentage of Electorate (M/E) |
|--------------------|-------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Austria | 2008 | 1,054,600 | 17.27 |
| Cyprus (Greek) | 2009 | 81,433 | 16.25 |
| Finland | 2006 | 347,000 | 8.08 |
| Greece | 2008 | 560,000 | 6.59 |
| Slovenia | 2008 | 108,001 | 6.26 |
| Italy | 2007 | 2,622,044 | 5.57 |
| Belgium | 2008 | 426,053 | 5.52 |
| Norway | 2007 | 176,310 | 5.15 |
| Estonia | 2008 | 43,732 | 4.87 |
| Switzerland | 2008 | 233,800 | 4.76 |
| Bulgaria | 2008 | 311,621 | 4.57 |
| Spain | 2008 | 1,530,803 | 4.36 |
| Denmark | 2008 | 166,300 | 4.13 |
| Sweden | 2008 | 266,991 | 3.87 |
| Portugal | 2008 | 341,721 | 3.82 |
| Romania | 2007 | 675,474 | 3.66 |
| Lithuania | 2007 | 71,709 | 2.66 |
| Netherlands | 2008 | 309,429 | 2.52 |
| Germany | 2007 | 1,423,284 | 2.30 |
| Ireland | 2008 | 63,000 | 2.03 |
| Slovakia | 2007 | 86,296 | 2.02 |
| Czech Republic | 2008 | 165,425 | 1.99 |
| France | 2009 | 883,559 | 1.85 |
| Hungary | 2008 | 123,932 | 1.54 |
| United Kingdom | 2008 | 574,882 | 1.30 |
| Poland | 2009 | 299,465 | 0.98 |
| Latvia | 2004 | 10,985 | 0.74 |
| Mean (N=27) | | | 4.61 |

Table 2: Party Membership Change since late 1990s

| Country | Period | Change in M/E Ratio | Change in Number of Members | % Change in Number of Members |
|----------------|---------------|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Slovakia | 2000-2007 | - 2.09 | - 78,981 | - 47.79 |
| Czech Republic | 1999-2008 | - 1.45 | - 113,560 | - 40.70 |
| United Kingdom | 1998-2008 | - 0.62 | - 265,118 | - 31.56 |
| Slovenia | 1998-2008 | - 3.60 | - 48,700 | - 31.08 |
| Hungary | 1999-2008 | - 0.61 | - 49,668 | - 28.61 |
| Norway | 1997-2007 | - 2.16 | - 65,712 | - 27.15 |
| Sweden | 1998-2008 | - 1.67 | - 98,597 | - 26.97 |
| Ireland | 1998-2008 | - 1.11 | - 23,000 | - 26.74 |
| Switzerland | 1997-2007 | - 1.62 | - 59,200 | - 20.20 |
| Germany | 1999-2007 | - 0.63 | - 356,889 | - 20.05 |
| Denmark | 1998-2008 | - 1.01 | - 39,082 | - 19.03 |
| Bulgaria | 2002-2008 | - 0.61 | - 46,379 | - 12.96 |
| Finland | 1998-2006 | - 1.57 | - 53,615 | - 13.38 |
| Belgium | 1999-2008 | - 1.03 | - 54,751 | - 11.39 |
| Portugal | 2000-2008 | - 0.61 | - 42,684 | - 11.10 |
| Poland | 2000-2009 | - 0.17 | - 27,035 | - 8.28 |
| Greece | 1998-2008 | - 0.18 | - 40,000 | - 6.67 |
| Netherlands | 2000-2008 | + 0.01 | + 14,960 | + 5.08 |
| Austria | 1999-2008 | - 0.39 | + 23,548 | + 2.28 |
| France | 1999-2009 | + 0.28 | + 198,340 | + 32.24 |
| Italy | 1998-2007 | + 1.52 | + 649,261 | + 32.89 |
| Spain | 2000-2008 | + 0.94 | + 399,553 | + 35.32 |
| Estonia | 2002-2008 | + 1.53 | +14,999 | + 52.20 |

Table 3: Party Membership Change, 1980-2009

| Country | Period | Change in M/E Ratio | Change in Number of Members | % Change in Number of Members |
|----------------|---------------|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Czech Republic | 1993-2008 | - 5.05 | - 379,575 | - 69.65 |
| United Kingdom | 1980-2008 | - 2.82 | - 1,118,274 | - 66.05 |
| Norway | 1980-2007 | - 10.20 | - 284,603 | - 61.75 |
| France | 1978-2009 | - 3.20 | - 923,788 | - 53.17 |
| Sweden | 1980-2008 | - 4.54 | - 241,130 | - 47.46 |
| Ireland | 1980-2008 | - 2.97 | - 50,856 | - 44.67 |
| Switzerland | 1977-2007 | - 5.90 | - 178,000 | - 43.22 |
| Finland | 1980-2006 | - 7.66 | - 260,261 | - 42.86 |
| Denmark | 1980-2008 | - 3.17 | - 109,467 | - 39.70 |
| Italy | 1980-2007 | - 4.09 | - 1,450,623 | - 35.61 |
| Slovakia | 1994-2007 | - 1.27 | - 41,204 | - 32.32 |
| Belgium | 1980-2008 | - 3.45 | - 191,133 | - 30.97 |
| Austria | 1980-2008 | - 11.21 | - 422,661 | - 28.61 |
| Netherlands | 1980-2008 | - 1.77 | - 121,499 | - 28.19 |
| Germany | 1980-2007 | - 2.22 | - 531,856 | - 27.20 |
| Hungary | 1990-2008 | - 0.57 | - 41,368 | - 25.03 |
| Portugal | 1980-2008 | - 1.05 | + 4,306 | + 1.28 |
| Greece | 1980-2008 | + 3.40 | + 335,000 | + 148.89 |
| Spain | 1980-2008 | + 3.16 | + 1,208,258 | + 374.60 |

Table A1: Summary Data, by country

| Country, Year | Electorate | Total Party Membership | Membership as % of Electorate (M/E) |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Austria | | | |
| 1980 | 5,186,735 (79) | 1,477,261 | 28.48 |
| 1990 | 5,628,099 | 1,334,554 | 23.71 |
| 1999 | 5,838,373 | 1,031,052 | 17.66 |
| 2008 | 6,107,892 (06) | 1,054,600 | 17.27 |
| Belgium | | | |
| 1980 | 6,878,141 (81) | 617,186 | 8.97 |
| 1989 | 7,039,250 (87) | 644,110 | 9.15 |
| 1999 | 7,343,464 | 480,804 | 6.55 |
| 2008 | 7,720,796 (07) | 426,053 | 5.52 |
| Bulgaria | | | |
| 2002-03 | 6,916,151 (01) | 358,000 | 5.18* |
| 2008 | 6,814,169 (05) | 311,621 | 4.57* |
| Cyprus (Greek) | | | |
| 2009 | 501,024 (06) | 81,433 | 16.25 |
| Czech Republic | | | |
| 1993 | 7,738,981 (92) | 545,000 | 7.04 |
| 1999 | 8,116,836 | 278,985 | 3.44 |
| 2008 | 8,333,305 (06) | 165,425 | 1.99 |
| Denmark | | | |
| 1980 | 3,776,333 (81) | 275,767 | 7.30 |
| 1989 | 3,941,499 (90) | 231,846 | 5.88 |
| 1998 | 3,993,099 | 205,382 | 5.14 |
| 2008 | 4,022,920 (07) | 166,300 | 4.13 |
| Estonia | | | |
| 2002 | 859,714 (03) | 28,733 | 3.34 |
| 2008 | 897,243 (07) | 43,732 | 4.87 |
| Finland | | | |
| 1980 | 3,858,533 (79) | 607,261 | 15.74 |
| 1989 | 4,018,248 (87) | 543,419 | 13.52 |
| 1998 | 4,152,430 (99) | 400,615 | 9.65 |
| 2006 | 4,292,436 (07) | 347,000 | 8.08 |
| France | | | |
| 1978 | 34,394,378 | 1,737,347 | 5.05 |
| 1988 | 36,977,321 | 1,100,398 | 2.98 |
| 1999 | 39,215,743 (97) | 615,219 | 1.57 |
| 2009 | 43,888,483 (07) | 883,559 | 1.85 |
| Germany | | | |
| 1980 (west) | 43,231,741 | 1,955,140 | 4.52 |
| 1989 (west) | 48,099,251 | 1,873,053 | 3.89 |
| 1999 | 60,762,751 | 1,780,173 | 2.93 |
| 2007 | 61,870,711 (05) | 1,423,284 | 2.30 |

| | | | |
|--------------------|-----------------|-----------|-------|
| Greece | | | |
| 1980 | 7,059,778 (81) | 225,000 | 3.19 |
| 1990 | 8,050,658 | 510,000 | 6.33 |
| 1998 | 8,862,014 (96) | 600,000 | 6.77 |
| 2008 | 8,500,000 (07) | 560,000 | 6.59 |
| Hungary | | | |
| 1990 | 7,824,118 | 165,300 | 2.11 |
| 1999 | 8,062,708 (98) | 173,600 | 2.15 |
| 2008 | 8,043,961 (06) | 123,932 | 1.54 |
| Ireland | | | |
| 1980 | 2,275,450 (81) | 113,856 | 5.00 |
| 1990 | 2,471,308 (89) | 120,228 | 4.86 |
| 1998 | 2,741,262 (97) | 86,000 | 3.14 |
| 2008 | 3,110,914 (07) | 63,000 | 2.03 |
| Italy | | | |
| 1980 | 42,181,664 (79) | 4,073,927 | 9.66 |
| 1989 | 45,583,499 (87) | 4,150,071 | 9.10 |
| 1998 | 48,744,846 (96) | 1,974,040 | 4.05 |
| 2007 | 47,098,181 (06) | 2,623,304 | 5.57 |
| Latvia | | | |
| 2003-04 | 1,490,636 (06) | 10,985 | 0.74 |
| Lithuania | | | |
| 2004 | 2,666,196 | 54,569 | 2.05 |
| 2007 | 2,696,090 (08) | 71,709 | 2.66 |
| Netherlands | | | |
| 1980 | 10,040,121 (81) | 430,928 | 4.29 |
| 1989 | 11,112,189 | 354,915 | 3.19 |
| 2000 | 11,755,132 (98) | 294,469 | 2.51 |
| 2008 | 12,264,503 (06) | 309,429 | 2.52 |
| Norway | | | |
| 1980 | 3,003,093 (81) | 460,913 | 15.35 |
| 1990 | 3,190,311 (89) | 418,953 | 13.13 |
| 1997 | 3,311,190 | 242,022 | 7.31 |
| 2007 | 3,421,741 (05) | 176,310 | 5.15 |
| Poland | | | |
| 2000 | 28,409,054 (97) | 326,500 | 1.15 |
| 2009 | 30,615,471 (07) | 299,465 | 0.98 |
| Portugal | | | |
| 1980 | 6,925,243 | 337,415 | 4.87 |
| 1991 | 8,222,654 | 417,666 | 5.08 |
| 2000 | 8,673,822 (99) | 384,405 | 4.43 |
| 2008 | 8,944,508 (05) | 341,721 | 3.82 |
| Romania | | | |
| 2007 | 18,464,274 (08) | 675,474 | 3.66 |

| | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------|-----------|-------|
| Slovakia | | | |
| 1994 | 3,876,555 | 127,500 | 3.29 |
| 2000 | 4,023,191 (98) | 165,277 | 4.11 |
| 2007 | 4,272,517 (06) | 86,296 | 2.02 |
| Slovenia | | | |
| 1998 | 1,588,528 (00) | 156,701 | 9.86 |
| 2008 | 1,720,481 (07) | 108,001 | 6.26 |
| Spain | | | |
| 1980 | 26,836,500 (79) | 322,545 | 1.20 |
| 1990 | 29,603,700 (89) | 611,998 | 2.07 |
| 2000 | 33,045,318 | 1,131,250 | 3.42 |
| 2008 | 35,073,179 | 1,530,803 | 4.36 |
| Sweden | | | |
| 1980 | 6,040,461 (79) | 508,121 | 8.41 |
| 1989 | 6,330,023 (88) | 506,337 | 8.00 |
| 1998 | 6,601,766 | 365,588 | 5.54 |
| 2008 | 6,892,009 (06) | 266,991 | 3.87 |
| Switzerland | | | |
| 1977 | 3,863,169 (79) | 411,800 | 10.66 |
| 1991 | 4,510,784 | 360,000 | 7.98 |
| 1997 | 4,593,772 (95) | 293,000 | 6.38 |
| 2007 | 4,915,563 | 233,800 | 4.76 |
| United Kingdom | | | |
| 1980 | 41,095,490 (79) | 1,693,156 | 4.12 |
| 1989 | 43,180,573 (87) | 1,136,723 | 2.63 |
| 1998 | 43,818,324 (97) | 840,000 | 1.92 |
| 2008 | 44,245,939 (05) | 574,882 | 1.30 |

* Parties with parliamentary representation only.

Sources: Mair and van Biezen (2001). Figures in italics are updates. In addition to information received directly from the parties themselves and/or through the help of colleagues, we have also relied on the following published sources: Bardi *et al.* (2007), Borz (2009), Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen (www.rug.nl/dnpp), Christophorou (2006), Gunzinger (2008), Niedermayer (2008), Pappas and Dinas (2006), Raimonaitė (2006), Rozenvalds (2005), Spirova (2005), Szczerbiak (2006) and Verge (2009).