

## Contemporary Meanings of Party Membership

**Abstract:** The decline of party memberships across European democracies and beyond has been well documented in the comparative party literature and has prompted many scholars to question the role of parties as representative and participatory vehicles in contemporary democracies. However, the association between membership decline and party organizational decline is one that is often taken for granted, and similarly the concept of party membership itself is often treated uncritically. This workshop aims to interrogate the notion of party membership in contemporary society and to shed some of the normative and empirical assumptions that are associated with the mass party model. Moving beyond the notion of formal (or financial) party membership, the workshop aims to explore the ways in which political parties and citizens engage today.

In asking the central question ‘what does party membership mean?’ we invite workshop participants not only to consider the on-going relevance and function of formal membership, but also to analyse other forms of affiliation and engagement as functional alternatives. We welcome both theoretical and empirical papers that consider how we might re-conceptualise the concept of party membership to better reflect changing patterns of political participation, that analyse the differences and similarities between membership and supportership, that assess the impact of technology in structuring the ways in which citizens engage with parties, and that explore the implications of multi-faceted modes of membership for activism, participation and representation. Papers that examine synergies between party membership, interest group membership and social movement participation are also welcome.

**Keywords:** Political parties, political participation, representation

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**Outline of Topic:** The core aim of the workshop is to interrogate the notion of party membership in contemporary society and to shed some of the normative and empirical assumptions that are associated with a mass-party model of politics, which is often held up to be the benchmark of participation and representation in democratic societies. Moving beyond the notion of formal (or financial) party membership, the workshop aims to explore the ways in which political parties and citizens engage with one another today – reconceptualising membership without undue deference to historical models and with regard to the contemporary nature of political participation and communication. We do not assume that the concept of membership is one-dimensional or static. Indeed, in recent years we have witnessed the emergence of several organisational reforms and participatory opportunities that challenge the very notion of formal party membership. As a prominent example, these reforms have included the establishment of friends and supporters’ networks that encourage the participation of non-members in policy development, leadership and candidate selection (see for example, Gauja 2013; 2012). Much of this engagement is now occurring online, through, for example, Twitter, Facebook and party websites (Gibson et al. 2012; Gibson and Ward 2009).

Responding to this real-world challenge and engaging with a new and important research agenda, the workshop will cover a number of inter-related themes that seek to re-conceptualise the concept of party membership both theoretically and empirically. In asking the central question ‘what does party membership mean?’ we invite workshop participants not only to consider the on-going relevance and function of formal membership (for example, in providing legitimacy to political parties), but to also analyse other forms of affiliation (for example, party supporters and friends) and engagement (online participation, donations and campaigning activities) as functional alternatives. In doing so the workshop directly addresses an emerging debate over the utility of maintaining party membership as a distinct category in analysing party activism in light of changing forms of political participation. For example, we welcome papers that consider the differences (both theoretically and empirically) between party members, registered supporters, non-registered activists and party identifiers and/or provide a more nuanced account of the types of party membership that now exist. We encourage participants to think about this difference from one or more of a variety of standpoints that could include the party, the voter, the member, the activist and the state.

A related theme is the impact of technological developments on the concept of party membership. In particular, we are interested in the way that emerging forms of participation and engagement (such as Facebook friends and Twitter followers) intersect with expressions of support to produce new patterns of affiliation, and the implications for participatory and representative democracy. The final theme of the workshop concerns the lessons that might be learned from other forms of political organisation in considering what we mean by membership, for example, interest groups and social movements. Is there a general model of membership that reflects activism and engagement applicable to a range of political groups? To this end, papers that examine the synergies between party membership, interest group membership and social movement participation are also welcome.

**Relation to Existing Research:** The decline of party memberships across European democracies and beyond is well documented in the literature on comparative party organisations (van Biezen et al. 2011; Whiteley 2011; Scarrow and Gezgor 2010). It has been identified as both a pervasive and problematic trend and has prompted many scholars to question the role of political parties as both representative and participatory vehicles in contemporary democracies (see Pemberton and Wickham-Jones 2012: 3-4; Whiteley 2011). However, this analytical connection (between party membership decline and organisational decline) is also built upon an understanding of party politics that conceptualises parties, both empirically and normatively, as mass-member organisations. One of the central characteristics of these political parties is a large financial (or formal) membership, which serves multiple purposes: resourcing the organisation, injecting policy ideas and maintaining links to voters, and providing legitimacy to the party in the eyes of the public and the state.

While the ‘golden age’ of mass parties has long been challenged – whether this be through the evolution of new models of organisation (catch-all, electoral professional, cartel etc.) or questions as to whether this model ever existed in the first place (Scarrow 2000) – the concept of party membership continues to be treated rather uncritically in party scholarship. While previous studies have revealed that the characteristics and experiences of party members are diverse (see, for example, van Haute 2011, Spier et al. 2011; Heidar and Saglie 2003), particularly in terms of the type and intensity of their involvement and activism, almost all of this research relies on self-reported data from political parties on membership numbers and who ‘counts’ as a party member (Bruter and Harrison 2009: 10-2). Hence declines in official membership numbers and certain participatory trends are often characterised as reflecting membership organisations in crisis, rather than prompting a re-examination of the concept of membership itself and whether the theoretical and empirical indicators we rely on are still suitable.

This critical examination is long overdue and forms the cornerstone of the proposed workshop. As part of an exciting and emerging research agenda, the core workshop theme seeks to engage with other key debates in the current scholarship on political parties, such as the role of political parties in providing representation and linking citizens to the state, as well as organisational change and the increasing 'democratisation' of parties through initiatives such as open primaries for leadership selection. We also believe that the workshop will speak to scholarship in other sub-disciplines of political science that examines the changing nature of political participation, representation and organised political interests, including political communication, interest groups and social movements.

**Participants and type of papers required:** We welcome both theoretical and empirical papers that consider how we might re-conceptualise the concept of party membership to better reflect changing patterns of political participation, that analyse the differences and similarities between membership and supportership, that assess the impact of technology in structuring the ways in which citizens engage with parties, and that explore the implications of multi-faceted modes of membership for activism, participation and representation. Both case study and cross-party and cross-country comparative research is welcomed.

Emerging as well as established researchers are encouraged to apply. Those working in the field of party politics are especially targeted, but we also welcome paper submissions from scholars working in related fields (political sociology, political communication, political theory, interest groups and social movements). The workshop is endorsed by the ECPR Standing Group on Political Parties.

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