Multi-Speed Membership Parties: Evidence and Implications
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Creating membership-based local organizations was a radical idea when it was first introduced by a few parties in the nineteenth century. In many cases, it was also a highly effective approach. That is a main reason why other parties began to emulate this new organizational strategy. By the second half of the twentieth century, most parties in parliamentary democracies had established formal membership organizations to support their electoral efforts. Although parties varied widely in how they defined membership, and in the extent of their recruiting success, membership-based organizing gradually became the norm in these countries. Eventually, some countries even incorporated membership into their legal definitions of political parties.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the future of this organizing model seemed to be in doubt. In countries where party membership once flourished, parties were finding it increasingly difficult to maintain existing membership organizations. In both new and established democracies, parties were experimenting with new organizational styles and new ways to strengthen links with supporters. These changes potentially affect parties’ capacities to represent voters and to mobilize supporters. This paper presents two frameworks that may help us to think about the magnitude and likely impact of these ongoing organizational shifts. The first of these partially helps to answer the question of why parties enroll members. This framework links party member roles to concepts about how members contribute to a party’s political legitimacy. The second framework views traditional party membership as part of a repertoire of affiliation modes; today’s Multi-speed membership parties offer multiple affiliation options in order to expand their support networks. The paper concludes by examining evidence of the extent to which contemporary parties in established democracies have adopted elements of the multi-speed membership approach.

Why Party Members? Party Membership and Party Legitimacy

Why did some parties enroll members in the first place? And why did this organizational form prove more enduring in some countries than in others? Many previous studies have approached these questions from an electoral economy angle, highlighting the costs and benefits that parties and individuals derive from a membership relationship. That is a useful approach, but here I

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1 This paper is drawn from chapters 2 and 6 in the author’s forthcoming book, *Beyond Party Members*, Oxford University Press 2014.
want to focus on a compatible perspective that has received less attention, one that considers party organizational choices as linked to party ideologies. This approach examines how membership organization fits into a party’s proclaimed political worldview, and what role (if any) members are seen to play in bolstering the party’s political credibility. These ideological assumptions inform the roles that parties assign to their own members, with roles ranging from fans, to adherents, to group members, to stakeholders. Parties with formally similar membership rules may assign very different roles to their members.

Political parties are distinguished from other political organizations by the fact that they contest elections, but their organizational choices usually reflect aspirations and values that go beyond immediate electoral success. These values may be expressed in a well-defined ideological world view, or they may be only implied in the rhetoric that party leaders invoke to explain why they and their parties deserve to govern (for instance, Gauja 2013 chapter 3). These explicit or implicit accounts can be dubbed narratives of legitimacy. Such narratives identify the sources of party credentials, which may come from a combination of sound ideology, superior policy prescriptions, excellent leadership, and the strength of links to social groups or individual citizens.

There is a direct connection between the sources of a party’s self-identified credentials and its organizational choices, including the roles it assigns to party members. These different narratives of legitimacy imply different statutory relations between party leaders and party members, and different procedures for gaining party membership. Table 1 lays out some of these relations between organizational choices and narratives of legitimacy. The table gives examples of how party claims about the main sources of party credentials have implications for their understandings of the roles for party members (if any). These assignments are not necessarily permanent, nor do they necessarily assume path determinism, for instance reflecting party origins as internally or externally created (Duverger 1954; Daalder 2001). Indeed, the evolution of party members’ roles is worth studying precisely because it reveals a great deal about party efforts to adapt to societal understandings of parties’ linkage roles in representative democracies.

The rows in Table 1 are arranged according to their implications for the size of the group that has ultimate authority in the party, ranging from narrow (a single party leader) to broad (the entire party electorate). The parties with the most tightly circumscribed leadership groups are
**Personalistic Parties** (Gunther and Diamond 2001, 28; Hartleb 2013, 7-8). These parties derive their legitimacy from the quality of a single charismatic leader. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Silvio Berlusconi’s People of Italy party offered an example of a Personalistic party in a parliamentary setting, as did some nationalist and far right parties (most notably, the Dutch Party for Freedom, whose leader was the sole member of his party). If these parties have members, the role assigned to them is that of the **Fan**. Fans are a type of member who are valued for their loyalty, but who are not expected to exercise voice. Fans join to show support for the leader and his or her party, and they may be willing to pay some fee to demonstrate this support (just as listeners demonstrate support for U.S. public television stations by becoming donor “members”). A leader’s popular standing and position within his party may be bolstered if he helps to attract a large number of fan-members, but the leader is not formally accountable to them. To the extent that personalistic parties offer their members few rights, and impose few responsibilities, they can afford to have loose membership rules. Such parties may have a more exclusive level of membership, governed by tighter entry rules, out of which the party draws its candidates and functionaries.

**Ideological Parties** are ones which justify their current politics by referring to a long-term historical mission. This group includes Gunther’s and Diamond’s Leninist, Ultra-nationalist, and Fundamentalist parties (2001, 10-11). Like Personalistic parties, they may be dominated by a leader or small group, yet the appeal of these leaders rests on their authoritative interpretation of party doctrine, not solely on personal popularity. Unlike Personalistic parties, Ideological parties seek **Adherents** who believe in party doctrine and are willing to help advance its cause. **Adherents** share a political vision, and they agree on the basic implications of its diagnosis. Such parties may limit full membership to acolytes who have demonstrated their commitment to the ideology, and who are expected to work towards achieving ideologically-defined aims. Leaders’ primary accountability is to the mission, not to the membership. In order to limit potential conflict between these sources of authority, party statutes may include procedures for ejecting members, including elected representatives, who are deemed to stray too far from prevailing interpretations of party ideology. This model describes a traditional Leninist cadre party. Although genuinely ideological parties are rare nowadays in established democracies, the model may apply in milder form to some contemporary parties on the far-left.
and far-right of democratic electoral competition. In these parties, it is the overall mission that provides the main source of party legitimacy.

**Elite Parties** is the term that Gunther and Diamond use to describe local notable parties and clientelistic parties (2001: 12-13). The former are electoral alliances whose appeal rests primarily on the general economic and social sway of local and regional leaders, while the latter are based on specific transactional relations between local patrons and clients. In Elite Parties, as in Personalistic Parties, members are optional. If the party has them, they are generally regarded as *fans*. *Fans* may be electorally useful, and some may be mobilized to help with campaign tasks, but they are not central to a party’s claims about why it should govern. As a result, there is no reason to give the members ultimate authority over party decisions. Because elite parties tend to be more decentralized than parties dominated by a single leader, their fan-members may enjoy some opportunities to exert informal influence in dyadic relations with local party leaders. However, their party statutes may look like those of personalistic parties in terms of specifying loose membership procedures and limited formal membership rights.

**Cleavage Representation** parties present themselves as defenders of pre-existing interests, be these economic, ethnic, or religious. (These include Gunther’s and Diamond’s class-mass, denominational, and ethnic parties; 2001, 10-11). They define politics more as a matter of group conflict than of contending individual claims. They cultivate visible ties to the group(s) they claim to represent. Having strong party membership organizations is one way to embody and cement such links, although there are other ways to achieve the same end. As a result, some cleavage parties are classic mass parties, placing strong emphasis on their membership organizations. Others have had few members of their own, and have instead relied on milieu organizations and leaders to nurture partisan identity and to mobilize popular support. For parties of this type, one of the chief reasons to create their own membership organizations is to reinforce the political implications of group identity. Members of such parties are viewed as *Community Members*. They are co-religionists, trade union comrades, or ethnic group members.

Cleavage parties with their own membership organizations are ones that the German political scientist Sigmund Neumann described as “parties of democratic integration” ([1932] 1965, 105). Maurice Duverger also had this type of organization in mind when he remarked that a mass party without members “would be like a teacher without pupils” (1954, 63). Such parties
often give members an indirect role in party decisions, letting them select delegates to party conventions. Indeed, Katz and Mair claim that such parties have valued extensive membership organizations precisely because they have viewed mass participation in party policy formulation as crucial to their legitimacy (1995b, 7). Cleavage Party statutes tend to make leaders ultimately accountable to party members, who are seen as representatives of the larger interest group. At the same time, however, Cleavage Parties generally have well-defined notions of the group interest to which members are expected to defer. To ensure such loyalty, parties may restrict membership to those with demonstrated ties to the cleavage group, such as religious affiliation or trade union membership. They also may impose a probationary period on new members, requiring them to demonstrate their commitment to the pre-defined group interest before they are granted full membership rights. Finally, Cleavage Parties may have mechanisms for expelling members who are perceived to be disloyal to the party’s major aims. These elaborate rules on membership are designed to protect the party from takeover by those who misunderstand, or who seek to undermine, community interests. In short, such parties may employ the mechanisms of representative democracy, and their narratives of legitimacy may emphasize the virtues of these procedures. However, deference to members is restricted when that is seen to conflict with the party’s proclaimed goal of representing the fundamental and pre-defined interests of a specific group.

In contrast, **Subscriber Democracy** (Bermeo and Nord 2000; Morris 1990) parties define themselves through their members. These organizations are heirs to the civic associations that proliferated in the mid-nineteenth century. Such associations enrolled a dues-paying (subscribing) membership, and gave members an equal vote in internal affairs. Organizational leaders were accountable to the membership, and often were required to report to them at the organization’s annual meeting (Morris 2000). Among the first parties to adopt this organizational style were the nineteenth century British, German and Swedish Liberals. Neumann described these as **Parties of Individual Representation**. Parties in this mold depict themselves as formed by, or on behalf of, individual citizens with shared values. Unlike cleavage parties, which put a premium on shared social group identity, they are in principle open to all who broadly share their values. At the same time, it is party members, not pre-existing commitments to ideology or to social groups, who ultimately determine party aims. As in the nineteenth century civic associations on which they were originally modeled, leaders of
Subscriber Democracy parties are formally accountable to members. Members of such parties are viewed as *Stakeholders*, with clearly-defined rights to help determine party goals and to help select party leaders. These rights are most often exercised indirectly, through layers of delegates and representative assemblies. In practice such organizations may function as oligarchies dominated by office-holding leaders, but statutorily they are mini-republics. As the Subscriber Democracy label suggests, such parties tend to have clear rules to distinguish members from non-members; these rules usually require regular payment of a party subscription (dues).

**Political Process** parties resemble Subscriber Democracy parties in that they look to enrolled supporters to validate the superiority of their proposals. The difference is that these parties emphasize supporters’ direct involvement in party decisions. As a result, they are likely to place more direct responsibility in the hands of individual members than to leave decisions to delegate assemblies. (Gunther’s and Diamond’s Left-libertarian parties fit into this category; 2001, 10-11.) This ideal of participatory democracy within parties was popularized by Green and Alternative parties in the 1980s. More recently, it has been embraced by populist parties such as the German Pirates Party and the Italian Five Star Movement, both of which based their political credentials on their extensive use of internet-based policy formulation (Hartleb 2013; Passarelli and Tuorto 2013). Green and Alternative parties have had varied approaches to membership rules, differing on whether to make them maximally open to encourage participation, or to limit membership to those who share fundamental party values. Some of the newer populist parties have made broad popular participation in party decisions a paramount principal, one that is at least as important as other (often loosely defined) party priorities.

Finally, **Political Market** parties are ones whose leaders rest their mandate on party responsiveness to voters’ wishes. Kirchheimer’s catch-all parties fall into this category (1966), as do Panebianco’s electoral professional parties (1988), Koole’s modern cadre party (1994), and Gunther’s and Diamond’s “electoralist” catch-all party (2001, 10-11). Parties of this sort place electoral success at the center of their narratives of legitimacy: good results signal that a party is on the correct course. In keeping with their name, political market parties may use market research tools to determine what ideas have popular support. Such parties suffer doubly from bad electoral results, because they lack an alternate political justification. This sets them apart from ideological parties and cleavage-based parties, which may soldier on for years winning relatively few votes, but nevertheless retaining a firm identity and purpose. Just as personalistic
parties can find it difficult to continue when their founding leader leaves the scene, Political Market parties lose their *raison d’être* if political consumers reject their brand: a catch-all party faces an existential crisis when it catches little.

As long as they are winning elections, Political Market parties may treat their members as fans and volunteers, but not as stakeholders. When a party is governing, leaders may think that members’ primary job is to help rally voters at election times, not to help make decisions. However, once that party finds itself outside of government, its leader may make greater efforts to develop member support as an alternative source of legitimacy, for instance by highlighting members’ roles in party decision-making. Thus, whereas Kirchheimer (1966) predicted that catch-all parties were likely to downgrade the role of members, when such parties suffer major losses they may re-examine these decisions, and may instead expand intra-party democracy in order to buttress their claims to represent the popular will. In Political Market parties, membership empowerment can be a tactical response designed to increase the party’s electoral popularity; it is not an ontological need, as with Political Process parties. Because Political Market parties stress their accountability to voters rather than to their formal members, they may be willing to consider opening these processes to non-member supporters, if such openness seems likely to win votes. In other words, Political Market parties may treat traditional members as stakeholders, but not necessarily as the only stakeholders.

The party types shown in Table 1 illustrate common ways that ideology interacts with party goals to affect the status of, and need for, party members. The rows show how party organizational decisions can be shaped not only by electoral considerations, but also by the ways that parties frame their political appeals. They also show that party members are not created equal. Differences in the roles that parties assign to their members affect how much the parties can or will invest in reforming their existing membership organizations. Parties which view members primarily as fans should find it relatively easy to substitute other resources for the financial and volunteer benefits that members once provided. Fan-based membership parties also tend to have looser affiliation rules, making it easier for parties to expand alternative forms of affiliation. In contrast, parties that have viewed members as stakeholders may find it more difficult to cope with waning enrollments. For these parties, dwindling membership undercuts one basis of their claim to political legitimacy. As a result, such parties may make greater efforts to offset these losses, for instance by elevating the status of members in hope of attracting or
retaining more members. On the other hand, such parties may find it more challenging to introduce new forms of affiliation, especially ones that potentially compete with dues-paying membership.

**What is Party Membership? Varieties of Partisan Affiliation**

Most definitions of party membership center on the question of what distinguishes party members from other party supporters. In parties with very formal membership rules, there may be behavioral distinctions between members and other supporters, and even between different groups of members (e.g., activists vs. other members). One classic and influential attempt to capture these distinctions is found in Maurice Duverger’s description of party participation as consisting of four concentric circles. Member-militants occupy the center of his bulls-eye diagram. They are distinguished from other members by their activities, and by the strength of their partisan sympathies. Electors occupy the outermost ring. (See Figure 1) Supporters occupy an intermediate position. They have stronger partisan sympathies than mere voters, and they may occasionally help their party by making a donation or joining an ancillary organization, but they do not take up full party membership. In Duverger’s colorful language, “the relation of supporter to member resembles the relation of concubinage to marriage” (1954, 102). Ordinary members are much more involved in party life than supporters, but are less active than militants (1954, 90-91). Although Duverger applied this model specifically to mass parties, this notion of concentric levels of activism is commonly used to distinguish between different levels of partisan commitment and partisan participation in all types of membership-based parties.

Duverger’s neatly-ordered model resembled the Neils Bohr model of the atom, still current when he was writing, in which electrons are conceived as circling a central nucleus in concentric orbits that are decreasingly attached to the nucleus. According to this classic chemical model, electrons occupy orbits with different average distances from the nucleus. Electrons stay in their fixed orbits unless there is a chemical reaction in which energy is released or absorbed. In the party equivalent of this model, elected officials and party leaders are the nucleus. Active members occupy the innermost orbit, followed by other members, then party voters. All activists are presumed to be members. All supporters always vote for the party. Like their atomic equivalent, the central activists in this model are seen as more tightly bonded to the
party. These strong bonds make them act differently than other party supporters, giving greater time and energy to the cause.

This traditional concentric circle model of activists, members, supporters and voters continues to be a useful starting point for thinking about the role of individuals within parties. Yet this model has always been incomplete, in part because it ignores members who have been attached to the party in other ways, for instance as family members or as members of trade unions. Moreover, viewing different ways of relating to the party as fixed and discrete orbits obscures some of the most interesting aspects of party life: the movement between, and overlap among, these circles. Whereas diagnoses that focus on party membership numbers may see exit from the party as a symptom of partisan disaffection (for instance, Whiteley 2011), a dynamic model sees movement in and out of party membership as a normal part of organizational life (Selle and Svåsand 1991).

In fact, parties themselves may seek to erase the boundaries between these support categories. In recent years many parties’ have responded to voter disaffection, and to the advent of new technologies, with new initiatives that deliberately blur the lines between members and other supporters, making it easier for supporters to link to the party, even if only in very loose ways. These efforts create what I call “Multi-speed Membership Parties”. These are organizations that offer supporters multiple ways to engage with the party. The costs and benefits of such interaction vary, but almost all of them involve minimal affiliation. This transaction supplies parties with supporters’ contact information, and often gives them other potentially useful data about supporters.

It is not a new idea for parties to create alternative affiliations for those who do not want to join the party proper. Indeed, Duverger described the creation of such options as “the latest stage in party technique” in the early 1950s (1954, 106). Yet today’s new affiliation modes differ from the ancillary organizations that Duverger described. The latter were often only loosely linked to the national party, and many pursued seemingly non-partisan ends (sports clubs, tenant associations, small gardener associations). In contrast, today’s affiliates are generally linked directly to the central party and their activities center on partisan politics or issue advocacy. National parties can use relatively inexpensive new technologies to stay in touch with these new affiliates, including e-mail, electronic newsletters, blogs, text messages, and Facebook postings. Affiliates sign up to receive these electronic messages. Parties then try to mobilize them to act as
“digital ambassadors”, urging them to pass along partisan messages to their friends and to declare their political affiliations on Facebook pages (Margetts 2006; Marschall 2001). In addition, a few parties have created categories of affiliation that are designed as half-way steps to traditional party membership, including trial memberships with reduced dues and reduced membership privileges. Different types of affiliation may generate different types of contact from the party, and may lead to different types of engagement.

The imperfect overlap between partisan activists and party members is a second factor that muddies the clean lines of the concentric circle model of activism, membership, and supporter-ship. Multiple affiliation modes create potentially overlapping circles of support and contact. The idea that all activists were party members was probably never accurate, particularly for cleavage-based parties that traditionally drew campaign volunteers from other organizations aligned with the group interest (such as trade unions, churches, or farmers’ organizations).

Today, it seems clear that many parties are encouraging supporters to get involved, regardless of their membership status. For instance, non-member supporters may be asked to donate to the party, and they may be urged to distribute party materials to their digital friends; they may even be invited to help select party candidates or leaders.

Finally, a third factor that complicates the concentric circle picture is that the size of the circles does not correspond to the required level of commitment. Thus, for most parties the newer affiliation categories still attract relatively small numbers, although these numbers are growing along with the spread of new technologies. Low intensity participation opportunities do not necessarily attract higher numbers of participants.

There is not a single template for these efforts, but most steps in the direction of multi-speed organization share three common characteristics: they are centralized, they are digital, and they are highly accessible.

Centralized The new support categories create direct contact between a national party and its potential supporters. Centralization of newer affiliation modes is characteristic even in parties in which local or regional parties still retain primary responsibility for traditional membership recruiting and enrollment.
Most of the new affiliation categories are based on electronic media. They can be as formal as statutorily-recognized cyber-branches, or more informal options such as registration to receive party-generated content in the form of e-newsletters, blogs, Facebook or Twitter messages, or text messages. The latter connections are not recognized in party statutes. They incur no obligation and confer no rights. However, they do provide those who affiliate with some of the benefits traditionally associated with membership. In return affiliates provide their parties with contact information that otherwise might be given by members alone; such information can be particularly useful to parties seeking to run data-driven campaigns.

Parties’ new affiliation schemes are readily accessible and are low-cost or free to join. Becoming a party Facebook friend, Twitter follower or blog reader generally requires nothing more than basic registration. These affiliations are open to party members and non-members alike. Interested supporters can spontaneously and independently sign up for these various types of affiliations, most of which are compatible with traditional dues-paying membership.

These three traits of the new affiliation modes—centralized, digital, accessible—reduce the costs for party supporters to link with a party, and for parties to connect with them on an ongoing basis.

As a group, political parties in parliamentary democracies are now offering at least six main ways of joining, listed below from most to least costly to the individual affiliate. These represent a repertoire of affiliation modes from which parties choose; few parties promote all of them to an equal extent.

1. **Traditional individual membership** This type of affiliation is traditional in the sense that the mass party model has been an organizational inspiration for many parties in parliamentary democracies. When there are multiple ways to affiliate, traditional membership is the mode that confers the most political rights within the party, and also carries the heaviest obligations. Such members are generally required to pay dues, and may also need to sign an explicit declaration of support for party principles. Traditional members may have to serve a probationary period
before they are granted full political benefits. Most parties specify that traditional membership is an exclusive status: members are prohibited from joining more than one party at a time.

2. **Light Membership** This category, sometimes designated “party friend” or “party sympathizer”, is a kind of second class membership. It charges lower dues than traditional membership, but also carries fewer benefits, especially political benefits. Light Members are generally ineligible to stand as candidates, but sometimes are allowed to vote in intra-party decisions. Parties may view Light Membership as a potential gateway to full membership. They may give individuals the option of remaining in this category indefinitely, or they may set it up as **Trial Membership**. This is a time-limited status for those who are curious about the party but not yet ready to fully commit.

3. **Cyber-members** These “virtual members” are formally registered party supporters who are recruited through a party’s web page or other on-line portal. In some parties, they also must fulfill criteria other than simple self-registration, such as proclaiming support for the party goals, requirements that set them apart from those who are merely on-line followers. This category may include traditional members, who have all the rights and obligations of other traditional members, but who sign up through on-line cyber branches rather than having the more customary link with a geographically-based local party. Cyber-members of all types are encouraged to use on-line tools to campaign on the party’s behalf, and to help spread the party message to others. They also may receive special benefits, such as password-protected access to web-sites that provide resources for building web-sites and Facebook pages to promote party goals.

The preceding categories share certain similarities, in that they create communities reserved for loyal supporters. They also usually involve an exchange of rights and obligations. These features distinguish them from the affiliation modes described below, ones which impose no duties, and which generally do not require exclusive membership. Those who affiliate to a party in the latter ways may sometimes gain opportunities to exercise voice within the party, but because the affiliation is so loose, they have little to gain by threatening to exit. These looser affiliation categories contain some who would have been labeled “supporters” in Duverger’s
distinctions. While this label still applies, the definitions below identify relationships with parties that go beyond psychological attachment, in that they involve some kind of formal registration with the party. Because of this registration, party organizations can communicate with these affiliates much more effectively and frequently than with more casual supporters.

4. Sustainers Sustainers are supporters with financial links to their parties. Their gifts may be small, one-time, donations, they may be ongoing contributions via automatic bank withdrawals, or they may be large gifts. Even when the amounts are small, digitally-solicited contributions can reinforce partisan ties that exist apart from traditional membership categories and traditional member activities. In making on-line donations or contributing via text message, contributors provide contact information which parties can use for future communication and mobilization. Parties are likely to return to one-time donors in hopes that they will give further financial support.

5. Social Media Followers & Friends Followers join party-led digital communications networks; they do not pay fees to affiliate in this way. Followers receive messages from the party headquarters or party leader via Twitter or other blogs, or the party Facebook page. These media are designed as two-way communications technologies. Parties may emphasize this participatory angle by encouraging followers to speak back, for instance by commenting on Facebook postings or by taking web-polls on topical questions. Followers do not have any obligations towards a party, nor is this status exclusive: no rules prohibit individuals from “liking” more than one party, or from receiving Twitter feeds from competing politicians.

6. News Audience This is the audience for one-way communications from a party. Audience members may sign up to receive updates from one or more of the party’s official outlets, such as newsletters and news feeds. Those who access the party web page directly are also part of the wider audience, but they are not a registered part of this audience, and therefore the party cannot initiate communication with them. Parties’ news communications are generally distributed for free. Like social media followers, registered audience members incur no obligations towards the parties from which they receive the information. Even if followers and news audience members never communicate back to the party, they are not necessarily politically passive. Indeed, one
reason for parties to enlist such affiliates is the hope that targeted party communications will mobilize broader public opinion. Such mobilization may be accomplished when news recipients forward story links to friends; it also could occur through conversations between friends and colleagues. Thus, even though these loose affiliates do not have obligations to the parties, having such affiliates may enhance parties’ ability to shape public perceptions, and may provide them with valuable data about their supporters.

We could conceive of these different modes of affiliation merely as new rings in Duverger’s concentric circle model. In such a model, activists would still be seen as a subset of traditional members, and partisan engagement would progressively diminish when moving towards the outer rings. However, this modified concentric circle model would still not be a good representation of how people actually affiliate, because those in the inner circles do not necessarily belong to all of the outer categories. Most importantly, supporters can volunteer for a party without actually joining it. Moreover, the size of the groups does not necessarily expand when moving from the inner to the outer circles.

In a way, this lack of fit should come as no surprise, because the atomic model once used to describe levels of party activism has itself been obsolete for decades. It has been replaced by a model which conceives of atoms as nuclei surrounded by clouds of particles whose locations are described probabilistically rather than being confined to fixed orbits. Similarly, the model of party activism proposed here sees supporters’ activities and commitments as much more fluid than the activism-orbits in Duverger’s model. This quantum model of activism assumes that individuals will alter their degree of participation in party activities at different points in their lives, or even within spans of months rather than years. When there are important elections or internal primary contests, the affiliated supporter may temporarily take her activism to a different level, for instance by joining the party in order to vote in party-internal elections, or by volunteering to work in local campaign efforts. Indeed, parties may encourage supporters to move temporarily from one circle into another, for instance by inviting “instant members” to participate in party decisions (an incentive to formally join), but then offering them few reasons to keep paying membership dues once the vote has passed. Today’s Party Friend may never become a full-fledged party member, but she may serve as a digital ambassador, for instance by forwarding Twitter messages to her friends, sharing a link to a partisan YouTube video, or letting
her *Facebook* friends know that she “likes” her party and its leader. She might even be inspired to make a one-time donation by text message, making her a Sustainer, even if she never pays regular membership dues. Whether or not she is a registered party member, she is closely linked to the party project, receiving messages from the central party, and possibly participating in two-way communications in the form of party-organized discussion groups and surveys. Her level of partisan engagement between national elections may not predict what she will do in the months leading up to an important political contest. This dynamic model implies that we need films, not snapshots, if we want to study individual experiences of partisan activity and affiliation across different points in electoral cycles, and across different life stages.

Another important difference from Duverger’s model of partisan engagement concerns the size of the various groups. In his classic model, there is a direct and inverse relation between the level of partisan activity and the size of the group: those in the outer ring are least active, those in the inner ring are most active. In this new model, high activity is not confined to those in the central rings: most importantly, some non-member supporters may be very active on behalf of their party. Conversely, some traditional members who self-recruit and pay dues online may be only very loosely linked to the party, especially to local party branches. Parties can benefit by mobilizing various types of affiliates at election times, particularly if they can move loose affiliates into higher levels of activism.

Figure 2 illustrates this new organizational structure as a Venn diagram, not a bulls-eye. The differing sizes of the various circles are only suggestive. In practice, the relative sizes of the different groups would need to be established empirically, and we would expect this to vary across parties, and across time in a single party. What will not change is the fact that these are overlapping circles: some individuals are in several circles at once; some in only one or two. The entire diagram encompasses a larger universe than Duverger’s circles, which were bounded by party voters, because the news audience of the newer model potentially includes non-citizens and others who never will vote for the party. In addition, the lines between these new circles are fluid: as individuals are likely to shift between them, sometimes within very short periods. Many supporters may join for a few years and then leave. Unless they are very disillusioned by their experiences they may remain more loosely bound to the party through political and personal ties; they potentially could be re-activated under the right political circumstances. This dynamic
quality implies that in order to understand experiences of partisan engagement, we need studies that are more like films than like snapshots.

The fluid affiliation categories depicted in Figure 2 characterize today’s *multi-speed membership parties*. These are parties which differ from traditional membership parties by deliberately linking to their supporters in a variety of ways, and by promoting varying types of activity for affiliates. Multi-speed membership parties offer supporters multiple ways to engage with their preferred party, and to be active on its behalf.

**Multi-speed Membership Parties in Practice**

To what extent are contemporary parties implementing such multi-speed organizing approaches, and how are supporters responding to their overtures? One way to assess party efforts is by looking at national party web pages. Web pages are parties’ public faces. A party web page is a type of graphic manifesto, one that is likely to be seen by many more people than is a party’s traditional manifesto. By now, web pages have become a standard tool for party communication. Their availability and ready accessibility make them a highly useful new resource for the comparative study of party organizational practices. They are particularly well-suited for learning about party strategies for recruiting and activating members and potential members, because those who visit party web sites constitute a prime target for such appeals. For this reason, party web pages tend to give a clear idea of the participation and affiliation options that each party offers to its supporters.

The web page evidence discussed below comes from a 2011 survey of web pages that covered 109 parties in 19 established democracies. The survey included national parties which held seats in the lower of the national legislature, but excluded most regional parties (with exceptions in Belgium, and for some regional parties with large parliamentary delegations, including the German CSU, the UK Scottish Nationalist Party and the Italian Northern League). The survey examined the information that parties provided about traditional membership and about other affiliation and support options. Here I look at what the web pages tell us about how parties were using new affiliation options to create new links with supporters.

Multi-speed membership parties are distinguished by their multi-faceted efforts to engage with supporters who have varied interests, and who are unevenly willing to make long-term commitments. Party web pages offer sufficient information to compare the diversity and
flexibility of party efforts to promote five types of affiliation categories: traditional members, light members, sustainers, news audience, and followers. Each of these areas is scored on a 0-2 scale based on the range of tools they use to attract these types of affiliates, as measured by the options a non-member would see if she visited the national party’s web pages. For instance, traditional membership is scored based on whether the party offers member-only web pages as a member benefit, whether it offers a new member discount, or whether it offers a youth member discount. This category gets a score of zero if none of these options were located on the web pages; it is scored one if one of these options is available; it is scored two if two or more of them are available. Light membership is similarly assessed in terms of the number of alternative affiliation options. Sustainers are scored based on the ease of immediate donation. News audience is rated based on the number of news platforms. Finally, followers are scored based on the variety of social media platforms which are advertised on the web page. (The full coding scheme is found in the appendix.) Table 2 presents country averages for each category, and for a 0-10 combined score for all categories. These are arranged from lowest to highest aggregate score. This table shows clear national differences in how parties are exploring new affiliation options. It suggests that the national competitive context plays a large role in shaping these types of organizational decisions. The UK parties score at the top end in the aggregate score, and are well above the mean in each of the areas. In contrast, whereas Greece and Portugal are both at the low end in terms of the aggregate score, each of them is above the mean on at least one of the five sub-dimensions (though not on the same ones).

Another thing this table shows is how few parties have created “light membership” options. Parties that offer such alternatives offer either trial memberships (time limited), or registered sympathizer categories (indefinite); as of 2011 no parties offered both options. Although these second-class memberships schemes have gained some attention for parties which promote them, in 2011 only 14 of the 109 parties (13%) actually offered such an option. In some cases, this was constructed as a time-limited deal, intended as a prelude to traditional membership. For instance, two German and two Dutch parties offered trial or guest memberships. These were one-year, reduced-fee, options that carried reduced benefits. In the other cases, parties offered long-term light membership options with names such as friends, sympathizers and co-operators. In most cases, these affiliates had reduced rights as well as
reduced obligations, although some parties permitted them to participate in important party decisions.

There are several possible explanations for the large cross-national differences in party efforts to spur digital affiliation. For instance, they may reflect the important of institutional contexts, such as electoral system incentives. Differences in the level or structure of public funding for parties might also matter, particularly because well-funded parties may be able to afford to hire staff to manage digital technologies. Given the diversity of electoral systems and party funding levels among the high-scoring countries, neither of these explanations look very promising. Alternatively, the differences might be more a reflection of the power of political contagion than of institutional incentives, with parties not wanting to be left behind once a competitor adopts a new technology. To test the power of this explanation we would need to know more about when parties embraced the new techniques: a diagnosis of contagion is easiest to support when one party adopts a technique, its electoral fortunes improve, and then rivals imitate its organizational innovations.

The cross-national variation shown in Table 2 is far greater than the party-family differences shown in Table 3. This table averages the same scores by party family, again arranged from lowest to highest overall score. Green/alternative parties score highest in three of the five areas, as we might expect given their reputation as parties which promote participation, and which have catered to younger audiences. However, their average scores are not that different from those for Social Democratic parties. Despite the eye-catching organizational innovations of newer and smaller parties such as the German Pirates, as a group the (generally smaller) “other” parties have been least likely to experiment with new forms of outreach to supporters.

Multi-speed parties were earlier described as characterized by three features: centralized, digital, and accessible. Thus another way to assess the extent of party developments is to calculate an index of on-line accessibility. Tables 4 and 5 do this, using an index that describes how much the web pages facilitate three types of supporter activities: joining, donating, and volunteering. Membership access describes how far a prospective member can get in the enrollment process by visiting the party web site, ranging from just getting information about how to join, to being able to complete and submit an on-line membership form. Donations describe how much help a prospective donor gets from visiting the party web page, ranging from
getting no directions on how or where to give, to being able to donate immediately via text message or on-line. Volunteering describes the extent to which the party web pages encourage personal political involvement, ranging from no discussion of this topic, to mentioning specific on-line or off-line projects for individuals, to inviting prospective volunteers to identify themselves to the party. (Full details of the coding are in the appendix.)

Combining the score for these three items produces a 0-9 scale of digital accessibility. Compared with the multi-speed attributes shown in Tables 2 and 3, the on-line accessibility dimensions shown in Tables 4 and 5 may be less constrained by resources, because they represent more static choices, and do not require the same level of resources to maintain and manage as blogs, newsletters, or limited-time trial memberships. On the other hand, we might expect larger cross-national differences, particularly because institutional contexts are likely to affect parties’ approaches to fundraising and their use of election volunteers.

Table 4 shows party averages by country, again ranging from low to high. Once again, there are large national differences, and once again, the UK parties are at the top and those in Portugal and Greece are at the bottom. Because on-line giving is a component of this index and well as the multi-speed index, differences in party finance laws and party subsidy schemes may explain some of the similarities in the cross-national rankings. There are, however, differences in the order of the countries in between. Once again, the differences across party families are much less extreme than the cross-national differences. And once again, there are big within-family variations. For instance, the UK Labour Party was at the high end among socialist parties. Its webpage visitors could complete an on-line membership application, fill out a form to indicate interest in volunteering, and make an on-line credit card donation. In contrast, the web page of the Portuguese Socialist party provided a membership form that could be downloaded and mailed in, but did not provide for joining on-line (perhaps because prospective members needed to provide the names and membership numbers of two current members who endorsed their application). The web page did not ask for on-line donations, and it had no mechanisms to enlist supporters as volunteers. Strikingly, the three top-scoring countries earn this place because of their parties’ greater interest in using on-line tools to recruit volunteers; it is probably no coincidence that all three countries use single-member district systems to elect the lower houses of their national legislatures, systems that elevate the importance of constituency-level
campaigning. Accessibility index scores vary more widely across party families than did the multi-speed index. In particular, parties of the center right (mainly conservatives and Christian Democrats) and “other parties” (which includes new populist parties) have, on average, taken fewer steps in the direction of digital accessibility.

To what extent could the party family differences shown in Tables 3 and 5 reflect the impact of different inherited traditions concerning the roles of members in establishing party legitimacy? The earlier discussion of narratives of legitimacy argued that parties cast members in different roles, such as “fans” or “stakeholders”, and that members’ rights and responsibilities vary according to party conceptions of their roles. This discussion also posited that such traditions might constrain experiments with new types of affiliation options: parties which view members primarily as fans should be least concerned to police the boundaries of membership, while those which view members as part of a cleavage community, or of an ideological movement, might be more likely to preserve control over admission to the party. These tables offer limited support for these hypotheses. As they predict, Green/alternative parties (political process parties) and Liberal parties (generally, subscriber democracy parties), are the high scorers for on-line accessibility, and Green/alternative parties also score highest in terms of offering a variety of affiliation options. On the other hand, and contrary to predictions, Social Democratic parties (cleavage representation parties) also score relatively high for on-line accessibility and affiliation options. This may be evidence that some of these cleavage parties are experiencing an important shift in organizational orientation, towards a “stakeholder” view of party membership that is more concerned with attracting affiliates than with ensuring the homogeneity of those who join. Finally, the low scores of the “other” parties are also in line with predictions, at least to the extent that they reflect the practices of ideologically nationalist or cleavage-oriented ethnic parties: such parties should be interested in limiting membership access to maintain a homogenous identity. However, the lower scores could also just reflect the fact that most of these parties are smaller, and thus have fewer resources to devote to organizational efforts. In order to understand more about relations between party membership traditions and the limits (and implications) of organizational changes, we would need more longitudinal data on parties’ varied efforts to cultivate affiliated (identified, contactable) supporters.

The Multi-speed index and the index of on-line accessibility are two tools to capture and compare the on-going evolution of parties’ outreach efforts. These or similar measures could
usefully supplement more traditional evidence to study party organizational development, such as membership numbers and party rules. Any specific scales probably would need to be altered to reflect new technologies and new practices, and members of this workshop would doubtless have differing ideas of what should be included in such scales. Nevertheless, the more basic point is that because parties’ web pages are accessible and are oriented towards their self-defined target groups, they offer a promising resource for systematic comparative analysis of parties’ political and organizational priorities.

**Expanding Options for Partisan Affiliation**

In the face of declining memberships and growing public distrust of established political options, many parties have been experimenting with ways to reduce membership costs and to make it easier for their supporters to connect with them. The resulting initiatives have helped to create new organizational outlets which enable supporters to link to their parties in multiple ways. Not coincidently, many of these initiatives are aimed at younger citizens, members of the cohorts who are proving most resistant to traditional party membership appeals.

For the most part, parties have presented these new affiliation options as complements, or gateways, to traditional membership. Parties which already have established membership traditions are not seeking to replace their networks of geographically-organized, dues-paying, members with exclusively on-line organization. Nevertheless, the growing array of digital affiliation options potentially changes how parties relate to supporters, and which supporters they are trying to mobilize. This shift may be particularly noticeable in parties that once emphasized cleavage mobilization. Through electronic outreach strategies, parties are going beyond traditional efforts to mobilize members of specific groups. They are reaching out to wider swathes of potential supporters, offering them new affiliation options. In order to understand these trends, party scholars will need to broaden their lens to view traditional party membership as one part of a participation repertoire, a component whose importance can vary across parties and in one party over time. Parties’ efforts to cultivate new and overlapping connections are likely to raise questions about how they should accommodate traditional party members and new affiliates into party narratives concerning leadership accountability and party ownership. They also have the potential to re-define the ways that parties link citizens with policy-makers, and that parties mobilize supporters to participate in politics.
Figure 1

Party Affiliation: Duverger’s Bulls-eye Model

- Electors
- Supporters
- Members
- Militants
Figure 2
Party Affiliation: the Multi-speed Model
## Table 1
Party Members and Party Narratives of Legitimacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Type</th>
<th>Source of Political Legitimacy</th>
<th>Role of Party Members</th>
<th>Nature of Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personalistic</td>
<td>Legitimacy comes from the Leader’s political vision and popularity.</td>
<td>Fans</td>
<td>Loose membership rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>Party aims are defined by ideology.</td>
<td>Adherents</td>
<td>Exclusive membership. Members must pass ideological tests; dissenters are ejected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>Party leadership group embodies a social order.</td>
<td>Fans</td>
<td>Loose membership rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleavage Representation</td>
<td>Parties represent the interests of a defined group.</td>
<td>Community Members</td>
<td>Membership (if any) primarily for cleavage group members. Members are vetted prior to joining, and can be expelled for misinterpreting party aims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscriber Democracy</td>
<td>Parties are clubs representing the interests of their members.</td>
<td>Stakeholders</td>
<td>Well-defined membership rules. All full members are equal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Process</td>
<td>Legitimacy is guaranteed by internal processes.</td>
<td>Stakeholders</td>
<td>Membership rules vary in strictness, balancing tradeoffs between boosting participation and protecting party identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Market</td>
<td>Parties represent political consumers (i.e., voters).</td>
<td>Fans</td>
<td>Loose membership rules designed to increase participation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2
Multi-speed Attributes: Country Averages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Traditional Members</th>
<th>Light Members</th>
<th>Sustainers</th>
<th>Followers</th>
<th>News Audience</th>
<th>Multi-speed Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
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<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
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<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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<td>0.4</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
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<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
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<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
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<td>0.8</td>
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<td>1.2</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
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<td>Germany</td>
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<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
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<td>2.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Denmark</td>
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<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<td>2.0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall averages</td>
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<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
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<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coding: 0-2 scales except Multi-speed scale of 0-10. For details, see Appendix A6.

Table 3
Multi-speed Attributes: Party Family Averages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Family</th>
<th>Traditional Member</th>
<th>Light Members</th>
<th>Sustainers</th>
<th>Followers</th>
<th>News Audience</th>
<th>Multi-speed Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
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<td>Center Right</td>
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<td>1.7</td>
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<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
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<td>1.9</td>
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<td>6.0</td>
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<td>1.7</td>
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<td>Total averages</td>
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<td>1.2</td>
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<td>5.3</td>
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</table>

Coding: see Appendix A6 and Endnote 11.
## Table 4

### On-line Accessibility Index: Country Averages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Membership Accessibility</th>
<th>Donation Accessibility</th>
<th>Volunteering Accessibility</th>
<th>Combined Accessibility Score</th>
<th>N</th>
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<td>Australia</td>
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<td>2.7</td>
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<td>Canada</td>
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<td>United Kingdom</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Index=0-9. For explanation, see Appendix A6.

## Table 5

### On-line Accessibility Index: Party Family Averages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Family</th>
<th>Membership Accessibility</th>
<th>Donation Accessibility</th>
<th>Volunteering Accessibility</th>
<th>Combined Accessibility Score</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
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<td>Greens</td>
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<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: See Appendix A6 and Endnote 11.
Appendix

Multi-speed Index
Each item scored:

0 none of the following
1 one of the following
2 two or more of the following

Traditional Members
- Member only pages
- New member discount
- Youth discount

Light Members
- Registered sympathizers
- Trial members

Sustainers
- Ask for donation
- Accept on-line donation, Paypal or credit card
- Accept text message donation

Followers: advertise these options for following party or party leader
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Delicious
- Blog

News Audience
- Subscription news letter
- RSS feed
- Phone alert

On-Line Accessibility Index
Sum of scores for three items:

Membership
0. Applying for membership isn’t obviously discussed.
1. Can’t start application process on-line on national party web page. Includes parties which redirect to provincial party web pages.
2. Can print PDF of form or send e-mail to ask for more information.
3. Can complete on-line membership form

Donations
0. No directions on how to give
1. Gives address for mailing check or bank account number. No immediate giving option.
2. Can make on-line donation or give by text message.
3. Gives both on-line and text message donation options.

Volunteering
0. None.
1. Mentions online or offline action opportunities.
2. Mentions both online and offline action opportunities.
3. Offers on-line volunteer sign up form or web site gives directions on where/whom to e-mail to sign up as a party volunteer.
References


Collected between February and May 2011. The countries were Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

Parties may be making efforts that are not clearly advertised, and there is undoubtedly measurement error in the survey that has missed certain party efforts. However, if these efforts are difficult to locate on the web pages, they are unlikely to catch the eye of casual visitors who might be willing to consider acquiring some type of affiliation. Cyber members are not included here, because it would be necessary to consult party statutes, not just web pages, to find out whether parties offer cyber branch alternatives for traditional members.

Parties were assigned to party family families based on their membership in transnational party federations (if any). The Center Right category combines members of both the Centrist Democrat International and the International Democratic Union. Members of other groups and no groups were assigned to the “other” category.