

The decline of membership-based politics

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Ingrid van Biezen

Leiden University, The Netherlands

Thomas Poguntke

Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf, Germany

Abstract

In one of his last publications, Peter Mair documented how party membership had declined substantially in virtually all European democracies. As his collaborators on this piece, it seems pertinent that we take these findings as a point of departure and discuss what they mean for our understanding of party democracy. After all, the collapse of membership figures calls into question one of the central elements of our conceptualization of representative democracy, namely that it is based on voluntary political participation within political parties. All authoritative typologies of political parties consider the role of members to be one of their defining elements, although the cartel party most clearly envisages the marginalization of party members by professional party politicians. The traditional organizational allies of political parties (e.g. trade unions, organized religion) are subject to similar processes of erosion. In this article, we review the evidence of the social anchorage of political parties and discuss how political parties and party democracy can survive in an age where amateur politicians are becoming an increasingly rare species and parties are being transformed into organizational vehicles for those to whom politics is a profession rather than a vocation.

Keywords

collateral organizations, linkage, organized interest, party membership, political participation

Introduction

Comparative research has shown that in recent decades party membership in European democracies has been in marked decline. The numbers of party members are falling, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of the electorate. Parties are struggling to hold on to their membership organizations and are failing to recruit significant numbers of new members. While Duverger (1954) expected a ‘contagion from the left’ that would encourage parties across the political spectrum to adopt a similar organizational structure to that of the mass party, the emergence of the ‘catch-all party’ in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Kirchheimer, 1966) not only challenged this conception of the political party as the representative of pre-defined sectors of society, it underlined the temporary nature of the mass party phenomenon. Katz and Mair’s cartel party thesis drew attention to the next logical step: party members were becoming increasingly marginalized within party organizations, and large membership organizations served to validate the ‘legitimizing myth’ of party democracy rather than remain true vehicles of linkage between party elites

and society at large (Katz, 1990; Katz and Mair, 1995: 18). Arguably, this could not remain without consequence for the ability (and willingness) of parties to recruit members let alone to hold on to them.

As parties started to appeal to the electorate at large rather than aim to represent a specific class or social group, their strategies became more aggressive as they began to aim at simple electoral persuasion rather than partisan mobilization. The focus of party strategy changed from what Parisi and Pasquino (1979) once defined as ‘the vote of belonging’ to ‘the vote of opinion’. It was now voters and not committed adherents that counted, even if these voters were free to turn elsewhere at the following election. Furthermore, parties shifted from a ‘bottom-up’ to a centralized ‘top-down’ party structure, wherein

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Corresponding author:

Thomas Poguntke, University of Duesseldorf, Politikwissenschaft I, Universitaetsstr 1, Duesseldorf 40225, Germany.
Email: poguntke@hhu.de

party elites play an increasingly important role at the expense of ordinary party members. The traditional, almost exclusive reliance of mass parties on specific collateral (religious or trade union) organizations was replaced by a more contingent and instrumental relationship to a larger variety of interest groups characterized by weaker and less regular party ties.

These changes in party organization were the result of a process of ideological and organizational adaptation of the earlier mass parties to the changing external context. First, the post-war period was marked by significant changes in the social structure underlying the party systems (Dalton et al., 1984). Technological innovation and economic modernization significantly reduced the size of the working class, and increased upward mobility blurred traditional socio-economic boundaries, weakening the sense of collective identity based on the notion of class. Religious identities and practices were also subject to the erosion produced by secularization. Second, there were major changes in the resources that became available to parties, in particular the access to modern techniques of mass communication and the beginnings of the provision of public funding. Both factors facilitated a more top-down, catch-all approach and created the opportunity for parties to bypass the traditional mass party model. These changes in how parties financed their activities resulted in a decrease in their reliance on membership subscriptions and other popular forms of funding. Direct access to mass media outlets, and to television in particular, enabled party leaders to appeal directly to the electorate; offering the benefits of a direct linkage in place of what previously was mediated by grassroots activists. Politics quickly became more professionalized (Panebianco, 1988); parties began to outsource key services to commercial organizations and political consultants, policy experts and spin doctors took over many of the tasks once performed by volunteers or 'amateur democrats'.

As a result, politics has become more and more about the competition between professionalized party elites and less about the mobilization and integration of socially distinct groups. Most voters no longer have any long-standing partisan loyalties but have become free floating and uncommitted; they are, in principle, available to any of the competing alternatives. While the mass party was firmly anchored within civil society, linking society with the state through the intermediary mechanism of the party organization, catch-all parties became autonomous from both society and the state, and the cartel party was increasingly absorbed by the state. As the process of party adaptation has progressed, the linkage between parties and civil society has progressively weakened. Indeed, over the past few decades, Western European democracies have suffered from growing popular withdrawal and disengagement from conventional politics. This can be seen from the decreasing turnout levels, increasing levels of electoral volatility, weakening of party identifications, and increasing partisan dealignment (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Gallagher

et al., 2005: 288–296). This is perhaps most obvious in the substantial decline in the number of party members.¹ At the turn of the twenty-first century, the average ratio of party membership to the electorate across (old and new) European democracies hovers around 5 percent (van Biezen et al., 2012; Mair and van Biezen, 2001; see also below). In 1980, by contrast, an average of almost 10 percent of the electorates of the older democracies was affiliated to a political party, and at the beginning of the 1960s the average party membership ratio stood at almost 15 percent (Katz et al., 1992). In other words, parties in contemporary European democracies are clearly losing their organizational hold on society and their capacity to engage citizens in the way they once did.

It should be emphasized that, while this trend is prevalent across old and new Europe, its manifestation is not entirely uniform. First, there is considerable variation within countries. In The Netherlands, for example, there are some parties that deliberately eschew membership – as is the case of Geert Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV) – and the established mainstream parties (Social Democrats, Christian Democrats and Conservative Liberals) have seen a consistent decrease in their memberships since the early 1980s. At the other end of the political spectrum, the Socialist Party (SP) has recorded considerable membership gains in recent years, more than doubling its membership (from 25,052 to 50,444) between 1999 and 2009.² Other, mostly newly established, parties have also recorded noticeable increases. On average, however, the gains have failed to compensate for the losses, and the aggregate membership levels generally decrease on an annual basis.

While some of these fluctuations may be contingent upon domestic political events, in other cases established parties remain highly committed to the mass model of party organization, and thus to having real memberships (as opposed to donor lists). The Italian Lega Nord offers a powerful counter-example to the general trends in this regard; it deliberately seeks to build a tight-knit and highly disciplined mass organization modelled after the former Italian Communist party (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2010). German parties also remain committed to high levels of party membership; this is in part due to the fact that state subsidies are contingent upon their ability to generate membership contributions. In this sense, the story within the individual European polities is far from uniform.

To a certain, though lesser, extent, this is also true for the comparison between individual countries. Although the general trend is unmistakably one of reduced membership organizations overall, the rates of decline are much higher in some countries than in others. In addition, it is also possible to see the aggregate membership levels of individual countries oscillate on an annual basis due to the opposing trends in the memberships of individual parties. This suggests that the downward trend is not necessarily linear. Nonetheless, in the long

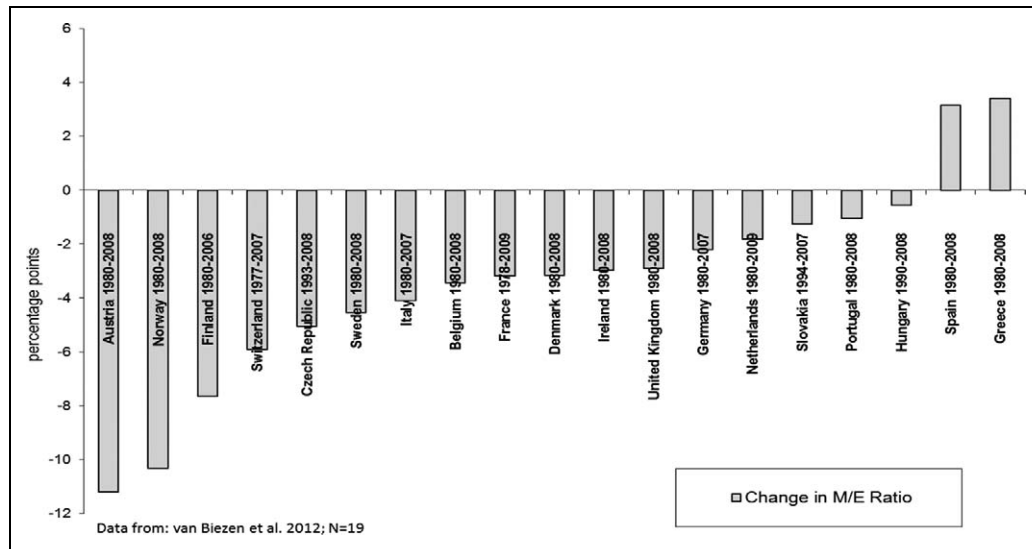


Figure 1. Change in M/E ratios since the 1980s.

run, as we will see in more detail below, there are but few exceptions to the overall downward trend. This raises serious questions concerning the viability of party democracy, which necessitates that parties provide a meaningful, substantive link between rulers and ruled (Sartori, 1976: 25). After all, the viability of this link depends, to a substantial degree, on the viability of parties as organizations with an active membership.

To be sure, parties might be able to compensate for the loss of membership by relying on the linkage function provided by other social organizations with which they have been traditionally allied. In the first instance, this would apply to the traditional cleavage-based organizations, of which trade unions and organized religions have been the most influential.³ Clearly, there are other less formalized ways of linking parties to society, most notably through new social movements and the media. However, from an organizational perspective these connections are different, since they do not facilitate a structured exchange between party elites and organizational elites, who can claim to represent a considerable and reasonably stable segment of society (Poguntke, 2000, 2005a).

This article reviews the available evidence on the most important membership-based linkages between party elites and mass publics, namely party membership itself (i.e. the strength of the party on the ground) as well as trade unions and organized religion, which have historically been the most powerful allies of the major parties on the Left and on the Right in Western democracies. Based on this, we discuss what our findings mean for the future of party democracy.

Party membership: Figures and trends

In this section, we highlight the most important trends regarding the development of party membership in European

democracies, which have been presented in detail elsewhere (van Biezen et al., 2012). Figure 1 shows the change in membership as a proportion of the electorate (M/E ratio) for 19 European countries. The data series begins at various points in time – mainly in the 1980s for Western Europe and for Central and East European countries in the early 1990s – and ends with the latest available data in the late 2000s. The most conspicuous finding is that of overall decline. Of course, there is some variation in magnitude, and there are also exceptions to the rule. However, there is an overwhelming tendency for party membership in Europe to decrease. The magnitude of this decline tends to be stronger in countries that have traditionally had a high level of party membership (such as Austria and Norway), and it is more modest elsewhere, for example in The Netherlands or Germany, which have always had comparatively low membership ratios (see for earlier data Poguntke, 2000: 222–226; Van Haute, 2011). The downward trend is similar in the post-communist democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, where most parties, despite their relatively short existence, record significant membership losses. This demonstrates that in contemporary democracies, old and new alike, the opportunity structure for political mobilization has become largely unreceptive to mass organization. The only country that unequivocally contradicts the trend is Spain, a democratic latecomer; it is the only country that has seen its party membership consistently grow since its transition to democracy.

The general picture scarcely changes if we take another look at this change over time; this time only the decade starting in the late 1990s is examined (Figure 2). This allows us to include a total of 23 countries for which data have become available. Again, the overall picture is one of decline, but with some more variation. Clearly, the rise of new parties (as in Italy) or the re-configuration of old

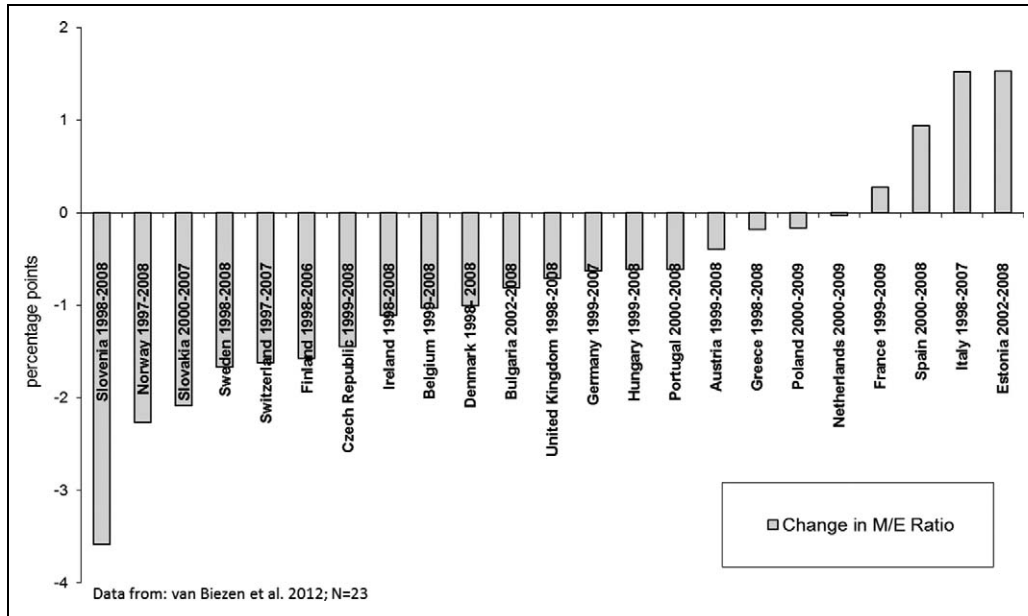


Figure 2. Change in M/E ratios since the late 1990s.

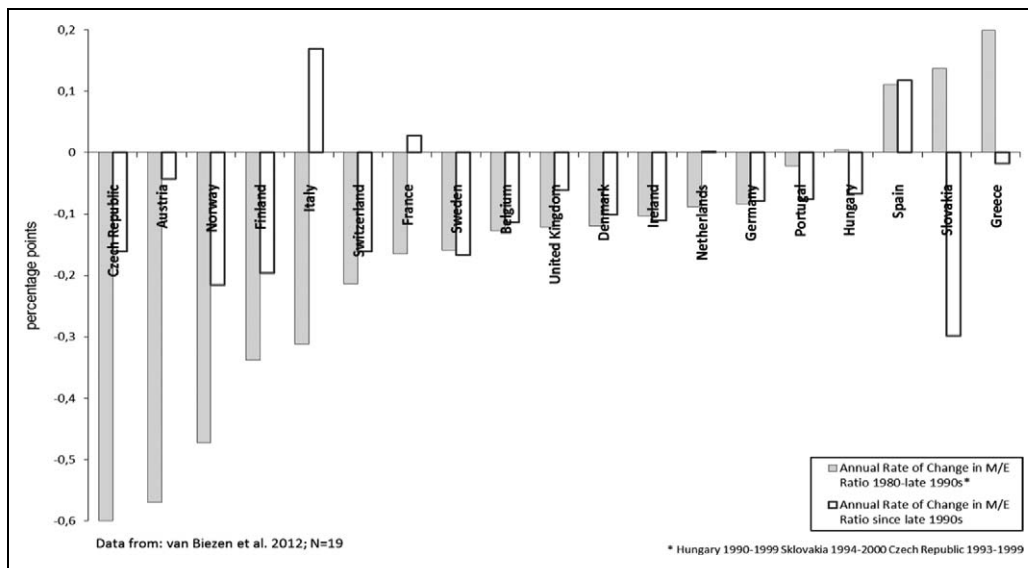


Figure 3. Annual change of M/E ratios compared.

parties is likely to reverse the trend, at least for a short period of time. However, there is little indication that a general reversal of the downward trend will occur.

This becomes even more obvious when we look at Figure 3, which compares the annual rates of change during the 1980s and late-1990s and the most recent data beginning in the late 1990s. In the majority of cases, the annual decline has been less pronounced since the 1990s, suggesting perhaps that the downward trend has begun to level out.

Having explored the trends, let us turn our attention to the actual levels of party membership. After all, if we wish

to assess the meaning of these trends, we must also consider the overall level of membership. A country in which party membership has declined from 15 to 10 percent of the electorate can still count on a large number of party activists, while a country that has suffered an equal decline in percentage points but began with an M/E ratio of 6 would be left with very few party members. Figure 4 clearly shows that the vast majority of party democracies now have an M/E ratio that rests below 6 (or is only marginally higher). Combining all country data, our data show that the average membership ratio in Europe is just 4.7 percent. Our findings are consistent

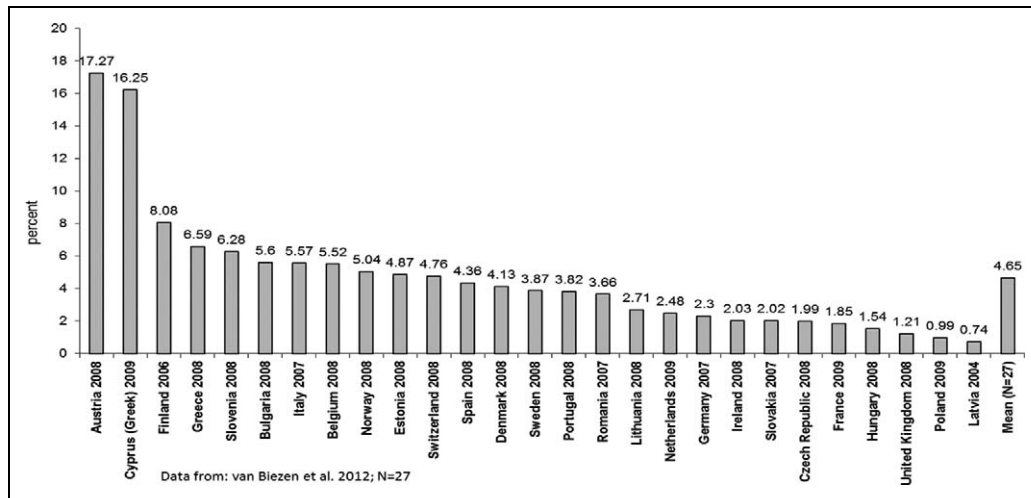


Figure 4. Total party M/E ratios.

with those of survey-based analyses, which point to similar patterns of disengagement from party politics (e.g. Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010; Whiteley, 2011).

A wide range of membership surveys (e.g. Bruter and Harrison, 2009; Spier et al., 2011) all reveal that a considerable proportion (usually a clear majority) of these fee-paying members does not seek an active role within the party. This means that parties are increasingly confronted with the serious challenge of finding a sufficient number of credible candidates to ensure intra-party democracy. In other words, it is highly likely that those who are internally active in the political parties of European democracies also hold intra-party or elected offices. Or, to overstate this point somewhat, hardly any active grassroots members are left in the parties to provide a linkage between party elites and mass publics at large. However, the membership organization of political parties is but one organizational linkage that is, in principle, available to party elites when they wish to connect with their wider constituency. Historically, the major parties on the Left and on the Right have relied on alliances with organized religion and organized labour in order to stabilize their electorates. However, these linkages have undergone similar processes of erosion, as will be demonstrated in the following section.

Collateral organizations

While cadre parties have come to be regarded as a pre-modern, pre-democratic variant, all later variants or types of parties have usually been compared – often unfavourably – to the ideal typical mass party model (Duverger, 1954; Katz and Mair, 1995; Kirchheimer, 1966; Neumann, 1956). When analysing party organizational strength in this traditional sense, party membership has always been regarded as the primary indicator. Despite familiar ambiguities and cross-national variation of the concept of

membership, it has always 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 was the most reliable organizational linkage party elites could create with their electorate.

Clearly, it was not the only linkage. Other forms include a *direct* linkage through different types of media of mass communication (including modern web-based variants) or various forms of polling, as well as an *organizational* linkage through more or less exclusive connections to different forms of collective actors. Each of these variants serves to inform party elites of the preferences of their potential voters. However, direct linkages are largely one-way (either top-down or bottom-up), while organizational linkages facilitate a two-way process of communication between party elites and mass publics that is mediated through collective actors that perform a considerable proportion of the relevant activities of interest articulation and aggregation. While direct linkage functions through an act of individual party support offered in exchange for elite responsiveness, organizational linkage is articulated through an exchange between party elites and organizational elites who can mobilize or withdraw the support of their organization (Poguntke, 2005a: 45).

From this perspective, a party's membership organization is merely a special variant of the organizational linkage between party elites and relevant segments of the electorate. After all, party elites need to bear in mind the preferences of relevant factions of their own membership organization and secure their support through the negotiation of policy concessions with faction leaders. More or less formalized and exclusive ties between political parties and relevant collective actors can therefore be conceptualized as an 'extension' of the parties' membership organizations insofar as these organizational linkages can, in principle, perform the same tasks as the membership organization proper. From this

perspective, parties could, at least in principle, compensate for the erosion of their membership organizations by strengthening their links to collective actors. This point is reinforced by empirical analyses, which have shown that political parties have been capable of stabilizing their electoral support by increasing the stability of their ties to collective actors who form their relevant organizational environment. Obviously, parties can rely on the mobilizing support of such organizations in exchange for making specific policy concessions (Poguntke, 2005a).

However, the capacity of collective actors to enter into such stable exchange relationships varies widely depending on the degree of their formal organization. This is why we focus here on traditional collateral organizations, which are hierarchically organized, are led by stable elites, and have therefore traditionally been able to provide reliable anchors for stable exchange relationships with political parties. New social movements, on the contrary, are less structured internally and the political mandate of elite positions tends to be precarious, which makes stable exchange relationships between political parties and new social movements elites unlikely. Furthermore, forming linkages through new social movements is highly contingent on mobilization cycles and is characterized by what are often temporary alliances between movement and party elites (Neidhardt, 1985; Neidhardt and Rucht, 1993; Poguntke, 2005a: 48 f.).

Two sets of collateral organizations are relevant here. The first – the affiliated or ancillary variants of sub-organizations – is characterized by a partial or even complete membership overlap with a specific party (Poguntke, 2005b). Typically, membership in a party's youth or women's organization either requires membership in the respective party or makes this very likely. Hence, the organizational development of such sub-organizations is largely captured by the trends in party membership. The second – the mass organizations – is either fully independent of political parties or maintains corporate links with them (e.g. through collective membership). These organizations maintain permanent exchange relationships with a party (or a political camp) but rarely formalize these ties. Therefore, these collateral mass organizations must be treated as separate units of analysis. Corporate links through collective membership and *ex officio* seats in party executives have always been the exception rather than the rule, and were often abolished or modified in the 1980s and 1990s (see, for example Allern, 2010; Allern and Bale, 2012; Svåsand, 1992; Webb, 1992). Hence, the most straightforward indicator for the strength of linkage through collateral organizations is provided by the trends in their organizational memberships. 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. That said, a detailed analysis of the membership developments of these

collective actors goes beyond the scope of this article, and thus we have chosen to review some of the general trends and patterns instead. In fact, as will quickly become apparent, the trends are similar to those that are found for the membership organization of political parties.

Trade unions

Table 1 gives OECD data on the development of trade union membership in 22 countries. Combining survey data with official records, the table reports the ratio of wage and salary earners who are trade union members to the total number of wage and salary earners, and hence the figures are comparable to the M/E ratios for party membership. It shows quite clearly that trade union membership has undergone a similar decline to that of party membership in the vast majority of countries. In all but five countries, trade union density at the end of the first decade of the new millennium was lower than it had been in 1970 (or a decade later in the case of Spain and Portugal). Only in Spain, which also showed a divergent trend in terms of party membership development, as well as four smaller European countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Belgium) has a deviation from this otherwise universal pattern been verified (see Table 1). The fact that it is the trade unions that administer the unemployment insurance in these latter four countries may create a selective incentive in their favour (Ebbinghaus, 2003: 195). While the data reported in Table 1 cover a relatively long period of time, a closer look at more recent developments shows that the effect of such selective incentives seems to have worn off. In 2005/06 trade union density was lower than it had been 10 years earlier in all EU-27 countries except Malta (Eurofound, 2008).

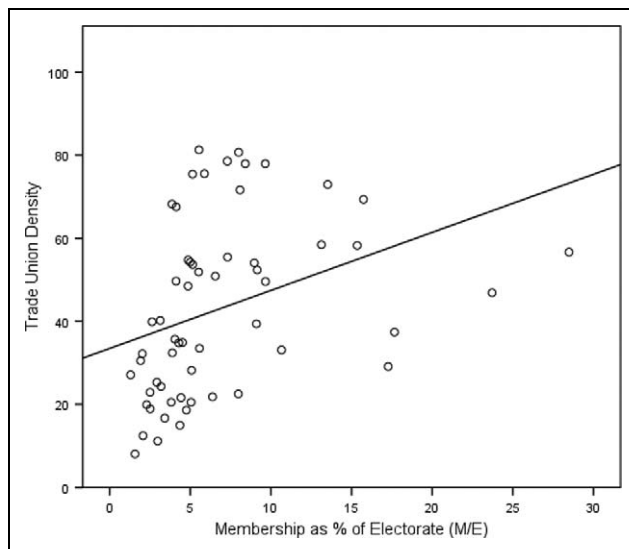
Most certainly, and as is the case of party membership, there are substantial differences in the unionization levels of each country. Union density has declined particularly rapidly in the post-communist transition countries; this is a result of the shift from (more or less) compulsory to voluntary union membership. In addition to the more general erosion of the organizational hold trade unions have across the board, there are also clear indications that they have lost much of their capacity to integrate politically (Streeck, 1987). In some cases, the privileged relationships between political parties and trade unions may even have turned into a mutual liability; though some detailed analyses also show that coordinated action and joint gains are still possible (Allern, 2010).

Although we have only a limited number of measurement points (four) for party membership ratios in a sufficiently large number of countries, a regression analysis shows that there is a fairly substantial positive correlation between the development of trade union density and party membership (0.36, significance 0.01) (Figure 5). This clearly demonstrates that membership trends in parties and unions are interconnected and that the phenomenon of

Table 1. Trade union density in OECD countries.

Country	Time span	No. of observations	Regression			
			b-values	TU density t1 (%)	TU density t2 (%)	t2-t1 (percentage points)
Australia	1970–2010	41	-0.991**	44.15	17.99	-26.16
Austria	1970–2010	41	-1.096**	62.75	28.12	-34.63
Belgium	1970–2009	40	1.691**	42.07	52.03	+9.96
Canada	1970–2010	41	-2.574**	31.03	27.53	-3.50
Denmark	1970–2009	40	0.412	60.30	68.84	+8.54
Finland	1970–2010	41	1.189**	51.29	69.96	+18.67
France	1970–2008	39	-1.930**	21.69	7.63	-14.06
Germany	1970–2010	41	-1.823**	32.03	18.61	-13.42
Ireland	1970–2009	40	-1.415**	50.58	33.69	-16.89
Italy	1970–2010	41	-1.716**	36.97	35.14	-1.83
Japan	1970–2010	41	-2.103**	35.10	18.41	-16.69
Korea	1970–2009	40	-3.121**	12.63	9.97	-2.66
Luxembourg	1970–2008	39	-1.904**	46.83	37.34	-9.49
Netherlands	1970–2009	40	-1.753**	36.50	19.41	-17.09
New Zealand	1970–2010	41	-0.594**	56.52	20.78	-35.74
Norway	1970–2009	40	-0.220	56.79	54.37	-2.42
Portugal	1978–2010	33	-0.676**	60.76	19.34	-41.42
Spain	1981–2009	29	2.233**	8.34	15.87	+7.53
Sweden	1970–2010	41	0.179	67.73	68.37	+0.64
Switzerland	1970–2009	40	-2.398**	28.92	17.79	-11.13
United Kingdom	1970–2010	41	-1.365**	43.05	26.52	-16.53
United States	1970–2010	41	-2.221**	27.43	11.38	-16.05
Total		871	-0.144**	42.22	30.18	-12.04

Level of significance* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.005$.

**Figure 5.** M/E ratios and trade union density.

disengagement from organizational politics stretches beyond immediate party boundaries.

Religion

The reach of organized religion has also declined substantially across Europe (Crouch, 2008: 35; Girvin, 2000: 23). Church attendance is now very low in many European

countries, particularly in the Protestant North and some post-Communist countries. The larger Catholic nations and Ireland still tend to have higher levels of formal religious practice (Pollack, 2002). However, there is no measure of the large denominations that is equivalent to trade union density or party membership; formalized church membership does not exist in many countries.⁴ Therefore, we rely on survey evidence that measures subjective religious orientations even if this captures the subjective rather than the organizational dimension and hence is not fully comparable to our membership data. Yet, if we wish to create a broader picture of the extent of the decline of organizational politics, this is the best available measure of the reach of organized religion. When asked whether they consider themselves to belong to a religion, a declining share of the population in European countries reports a subjective belonging to one of the traditional 'state denominations' (Catholic, Protestant), while there is a modest increase with regard to Orthodox believers (Figure 6).

A more detailed look at the results for individual countries (Table 2) shows that this is indeed a universal pattern; the sense of belonging to one of the two large Christian denominations has declined everywhere. While there are differences in magnitude, only three results really stand out. There has been no noticeable decline in Portugal and Austria; in the latter, party membership also remains very high. East Germany is by far the most secular 'unit' in our analysis, wherein less than a quarter of the population considers itself to belong to one of the big religious denominations.

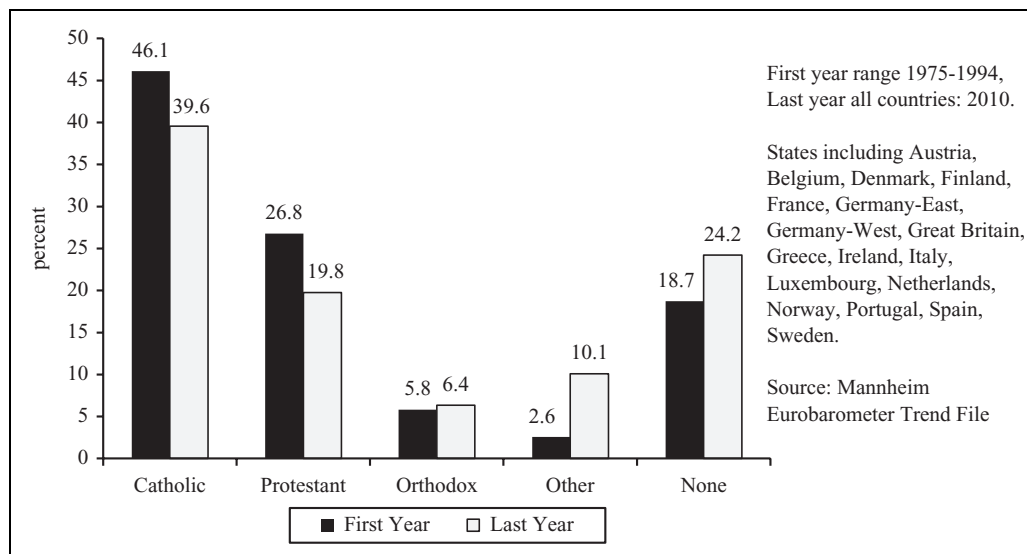


Figure 6. Religious orientation over time.

Interestingly, the results for the 'none' category are not simply a mirror image of the decline in the numbers belonging to state religions. In several countries, the share of people who do not belong to any Christian religious denomination has also declined; this may largely be attributed to the growth in the percentage of Muslims in many European countries.

Overall, our results demonstrate that, where data are available, the sense of belonging to one of the two large Christian denominations has declined considerably. Yet, these figures do not tell the full story. In fact, survey-based evidence on religious orientation (religiosity) may be 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 and Dobbelaere, 1995a, b). A striking example of this declining organizational clout may be found in Poland, where religious practice is still exceptionally high and yet the church hierarchy has frequently lost political battles (Ka-Lok Chan, 2000).

Significance of mass membership in modern politics

The example of Poland suggests that the significance of membership figures (formal or based on functional equivalences such as church attendance or sense of belonging) as an indicator of the social power of organizational elites is itself in decline. In other words, not only are these (loosely defined) organizational memberships lower than before, they are also less formidable in terms of sources of collective action. In an age of increasing pluralization of the social fabric of Western societies, organizational membership may therefore prove less telling as an indicator of 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. However, this does not mean that the member shares the more general political philosophy of the trade union leadership or feels part of the wider party–union ideological nexus. It seems that just as parties have evolved into organizations that exist and act ever more independently of their social anchorage, so too have many other mass organizations. Their continued political clout may no longer depend so much on the number of troops they can mobilize. Instead, their power may flow from their integration into the rules and rituals of a country's political process and from their inclusion into decision-making arenas.

It follows that a considerable element of interest representation in party politics is largely based on past experience and on the related symbolic significance that the public attaches to certain organizations. In other words, this element may be path-dependent. Given that membership of mass organizations is losing its significance as an indicator of social reach, it then becomes difficult to judge whether a party really needs good relations with the church hierarchy or trade union leaderships, for instance. Such organizations may have become symbolic actors and may no longer be real forces for mobilization. As long as trade unions continue to stand for social justice in the collective mind's eye, their opposition may be harmful for a Social Democratic party, even though the majority of social democratic voters are no longer trade union members. Similarly, to criticize the Pope could be risky for a Christian Democratic leader even in an age when the churches are relatively empty. To use a particularly conspicuous and relatively recent example from Germany, alienating refugee organizations still spells trouble

Table 2. Religious orientation over time.

Country		First year (%)	Last year (%)	Difference (%)
Austria	State religion	88.7	88.7	-0.1
	None	9.5	6.6	-2.8
Belgium	State religion	78.2	59.9	-18.3
	None	20.4	25.7	5.3
Denmark	State religion	80.9	65.5	-15.4
	None	17.6	20.5	2.9
Finland	State religion	86.4	77.7	-8.8
	None	12.3	10.0	-2.3
France	State religion	78.4	47.4	-31.1
	None	19.2	43.4	24.1
Germany, East	State religion	28.7	24.4	-4.3
	None	70.7	67.7	-3.1
Germany, West	State religion	90.9	78.5	-12.4
	None	8.4	14.6	6.2
Great Britain	State religion	60.0	43.4	-16.6
	None	26.4	30.3	3.9
Greece	State religion	97.6	94.3	-3.3
	None	0	5.0	5.0
Ireland	State religion	95.6	87.3	-8.2
	None	2.6	6.0	3.4
Italy	State religion	93.0	91.1	-1.8
	None	6.5	6.0	-0.5
Luxembourg	State religion	94.6	73.7	-20.8
	None	3.6	18.7	15.1
Netherlands	State religion	66.8	37.9	-28.9
	None	29.1	43.2	9.0
Norway	State religion	51.6	42.1	-9.5
	None	44.5	40.3	-4.2
Portugal	State religion	87.4	87.3	-0.2
	None	11.4	11.6	0.2
Spain	State religion	87.5	71.1	-16.4
	None	11.3	23.6	12.3
Sweden	State religion	71.8	46.2	-25.6
	None	24.6	38.7	14.0
Total	State religion	78.7	65.7	-13.0
	None	18.7	24.2	5.5

Difference first/last year, state religion includes Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox.

Source: Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File 1970–2002 and Eurobarometer 72.1 (2010). First year range 1975–1994, last year all 2010.

for the CDU regardless of the fact that the vast majority of WWII refugees have already passed away.

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 persist because of tradition (churches) or simply because they have transformed themselves into professionalized lobbies for whatever cause (e.g. the German refugee organizations); this is not unlike NGOs that belong to the new social movement sector, and which rely on fundraising (and public subsidies) rather than membership contributions (Jordan and Maloney, 1997).

While mass organizations continue to be electorally important for political parties, their blackmail potential vis-à-vis the parties has become increasingly independent of their ability to recruit large numbers of members. Instead, the power resources of mass organizations have begun to resemble those of the political parties themselves and have come to rely on their ability to raise funds (including from the public purse), to employ a highly professionalized staff, and to engage the resources of professional lobbyists and campaigners. Politics in this scenario becomes 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. Clearly, this means that political parties cannot compensate for the erosion of their membership by maintaining or even strengthening their ties to collateral

organizations. This is because these organizations rely on linkage to their social bases, which is no longer primarily based on interest intermediation through a structured exchange relationship via mass organizations.

The same applies to political parties. Our analysis has shown that parties and party elites can rely increasingly less on the linkage function provided by their own mass membership. At the same time, the decrease in the numbers of party members is a likely indication of a change in composition of party memberships. In a time when fewer individuals feel attached to a certain subculture or milieu (and the concomitant *Weltanschauung*), people are less likely to be motivated to join political parties because of clear political convictions. At the same time, the number of political jobs that is controlled by parties has remained constant or has even grown not only as a result of the popular demand for 'more democracy' but also the trend towards the decentralization of political decision-making. Hence, career opportunities within the parties are on the rise; this is likely to attract individuals who have an instrumental view of political parties and view them first and foremost as a career vehicle. In other words, and to use Panebianco's simple dichotomy, the proportion of believers is likely to shrink while the proportion of careerists is likely to grow. There are already membership studies indicating that this is indeed happening (Bruter and Harrison, 2009; Laux, 2011).

Conclusions

What does all this mean for the future of party politics? In many ways, politics is becoming increasingly detached from social constituencies as being a party politician has overwhelmingly become a profession rather than a vocation that is (also) inspired by a commitment to a cause, be it for reasons of social background or ideological conviction. At the same time, those who arguably act 'on behalf of their constituencies' are far less bound to these constituencies than they were before because, as we have argued above, organizational anchorage through mass organization has waned. Furthermore, and equally important, these constituencies are themselves no longer what they used to be.

This raises several pertinent questions regarding the viability of party democracy. First, because parties are increasingly disconnected from society, they have greatly reduced representative capacity. Although they continue to perform some of their important linkage functions (e.g. Dalton et al., 2011), it is also true that, as Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012: 31) note, as electorates come to consist mostly of independents, choices become less sharply defined – this stems from the political orientation of independent voters, which are located closer to the ideological centre than partisans – and salient issues become more diverse. Party programmes become more fragmented as a consequence, insofar 'as the social glue connecting parties and voters and defining a common set of interests vanishes'. This also implies that the

nature of representation is fundamentally changing. As Andeweg (2003) argues, representation typically presupposes the existence of stable and meaningful social or political collectivities, a condition that is progressively undermined by the general trend towards individualization that can be observed throughout Western Europe. The ensuing uncertainty regarding citizen preferences coupled with the transformation of political parties into parastatal agents has ensured that modes of representation are shifting from *ex ante* bottom-up mandates to *ex post* top-down controls.

Michael Saward (2008) makes a similar point, arguing that political parties may in fact (claim to) represent in a variety of forms, and that what we are witnessing is a shift from one form, the so-called popular mode, to another, which he calls the 'statal' mode. The popular mode is characterized by parties that claim to speak as delegates of certain politicized interests on the basis of a relatively fixed ideology. This understanding of representation involves a bottom-up process of interest articulation and aggregation, and perhaps most deeply resonates with dominant – but increasingly outdated – conceptions of party democracy. The statal mode is characterized by parties that claim to speak as the trustees of depoliticized and relatively flexible issue-based positions. This mode of representation is more top-down and accentuates the public rather than the private functions of parties. According to Saward, such a transformation in the mode of representation is not necessarily less democratic; it is simply differently democratic (Saward, 2008: 283).

However, as this shift entails a transformation from a partisan mode of representation to a mode of representation that centres more explicitly on some notion of the general or public interest, representation becomes practically non-partisan (or, at any rate, distinctly less partisan). Peter Mair, therefore, considered this U-turn in the mode and direction of representation, whereby 'the parties have moved from representing the interests of citizens to the state, to representing the interests of the state to its citizens' (Mair, 2009: 6), to be decidedly more problematic, if only for the legitimacy of the parties as vehicles of political representation. Indeed, many democratic polities are already experiencing a variety of forms of opposition – from within and without the electoral and parliamentary arenas, and from left to right – to the established parties and political elites, which challenge their lack of representativeness or responsiveness.

Perhaps, in the age of modern democracy we simply no longer need the traditional organizational anchorage of party politicians. As Saward observes, whether or not democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties may no longer be the right question to ask. Instead, we may need to ask: 'what kinds of representative democracy are thinkable. And what forms of party [. . .], if any, are appropriate to them?' (Saward, 2008: 284). Increasingly, when citizens wish to make their voices heard, they are more likely to turn to interest groups, advocacy coalitions or the media than to political parties. In the past, interest groups

tended to operate more under party aegis, as a complement to the more established partisan channels. In contemporary politics, however, interest groups operate quite independently of the parties, and in many ways offer an alternative, if not directly challenge, to the process of interest intermediation provided by parties. In this sense, parties have become more isolated and more removed from societal demands. At the same time, we are witnessing the development of various grassroots alternatives to traditional partisan mobilization, which are sometimes fuelled by social media networks. There is a growing interest in forms of direct, participatory and deliberative democracy that aim to give ordinary citizens more influence over the political process that falls outside the traditional and hierarchical partisan channels. Although they are as yet unlikely to offer a viable substitute to traditional party politics, they may come to complement the conventional vertical and hierarchical modes of politics within an increasingly horizontalized society.

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Notes

1. Our analysis is based on data on direct, individual members; for details, see Mair and van Biezen (2001: 6 f.).
2. Since then, however, its membership has started to decline, recording 45,815 on 1 January 2013.
3. Note that there are other relevant organizations, such as farmer's organizations, but we cannot discuss them here. Moreover, they are not as universally important as the former two discussed above.
4. Membership of lay organizations, for which data are available in some countries, would not be able to capture affiliation to the churches insofar as this would require a much higher level of commitment than is generally associated with church affiliation.

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Author biographies

Ingrid van Biezen is Professor in Comparative Politics at Leiden University. She has previously taught at the University of Birmingham and the Johns Hopkins University. She is a co-editor of *Acta Politica*, and a former co-editor of the Routledge / ECPR series Studies in European Political Science. She is the author of *Political Parties in New Democracies* (Palgrave, 2003) and *Financing Political Parties and Election Campaigns* (Council of Europe, 2003) and has published extensively on comparative party politics, political finance, and democratic theory in, among others, the *British Journal of Political Science*, the *European Journal of Political Research*, the *European Review*, *Mediterranean Politics*, *Party Politics*, *Perspectives on Politics* and *West European Politics*.

Thomas Poguntke is Professor of Comparative Politics at the Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf and Director of the Düsseldorf Party Research Institute (PRuF). He has previously held chairs at the universities of Keele, Birmingham and Bochum. He was series editor of the Routledge/ECPR Studies in European Political Science and is author and editor of numerous publications including *Parteiorganisation im Wandel* (Westdeutscher Verlag, 2000) and *The Presidentialization of Politics. A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies* (Oxford University Press, 2005; with Paul Webb).