

From multi-speed to multi-stream? Recognising the motivations, processes and triggers in a multi-stream activation model of party membership

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Abstract

One of the core questions facing scholars of party politics is the journey a politically engaged individual takes to becoming a party member. A number of possible explanations have been posited based largely on Seyd and Whiteley's (1992) general incentives model. We argue that the extant literature outlines one specific aspect of becoming a member – *motivation*. In this paper we present our *multi-stream activation model* of party membership which shows a membership journey is only complete when a motivation, process and a trigger are present. We outline this model utilising a case study of the Green Party of England and Wales including previously confidential internal party documents, membership figures, elite interviews, focus group research and participant observation. The findings represent an extension and reinterpretation of the existing literature and provide a model for understanding membership fluctuations at the aggregate and party-level not just in the case of the Green Party, nor Great Britain, but party democracies across the world.

Keywords: Party membership, party politics, British politics

Party membership has long been a crucial indicator of the democratic health of a party. Given coverage by national newspapers, venerated by those who have members, and ignored by those without. Membership figures have been a key way by which the health of a party is judged. This has generated numerous studies of party membership numbers and attempts to understand and describe who party members are. Yet, less common within existing work is scholarship that focuses on what actually leads to the moment of affiliation. Whilst the influence of factors such as family predilections, social encouragement and careerist motivations have been discussed as possible drivers of this decision, the actual impetus that prompts an individual to transform the idea of membership from theory into practice has remained opaque. This absence is somewhat surprising, as with membership numbers dropping in democracies around the world (Mair and van Biezen, 2001; van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke, 2012; van Biezen and Poguntke, 2014; Bardi, Calossi and Pizzimenti, 2017), parties are eagerly seeking new ways in which they can boost their membership.

To generate new insight on the process by which individuals come to join, this article engages with the existing literature to offer a new heuristic model by which to understand the influences that prompt a citizen to become a party member. Moving beyond traditional approaches to studying party membership, we offer a new framework for understanding what causes individuals to join, and what explains collective changes in party membership that we term the multi-stream activation model of membership.

In addition to offering a theoretical framework by which to understand how and why people become members, this article provides a valuable tool for parties (and indeed other membership organisations) seeking to boost their membership numbers. In unpacking the influences that inform citizens' decision to become members we identify three key areas in which parties can concentrate their efforts to recruit. These are a) building support and motivation for membership, b) creating effective mechanisms and means by which to join, and c) identifying stimulus and events that trigger the decision to join. To demonstrate the resonance of these strategies, this paper engages in detail with the case of the Green Party of England and Wales. Presenting data from interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis we identify strategies for effective member recruitment and detail barriers that can inhibit or frustrate this process. Through this discussion this paper generates insights for parties in democratic systems around the globe.

WHAT WE CURRENTLY KNOW ABOUT PARTY MEMBERSHIP

The literature on party membership is exceedingly diverse and has tended to focus on three key questions: who (joins political parties), why (join a political party) and what (do members provide) (van Haute and Gauja, 2015). The work of ascertaining just who party members are is generally done through single-country survey research (see for example, Syed and Whiteley, 1992; Cross and Young, 2008; Webb, Bale and Poletti, 2017). The upshot of this research is that party members are not representative of their wider citizen populations. They tend to be male, highly educated and more well off than their respective populations. Indeed, such is this representation gap that Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman (1981) noted a paradox (of sorts) – social discrepancies in those organisations that are tasked with representing the public at large *increase* the more those within parties are involved and have organisational responsibilities. These results hold up both in the aforementioned single-country case studies and attempts at more ostensibly comparative works (for example Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010; van Haute and Gauja, 2015). The

latter, in a study encompassing ten countries from Europe and North America, find that – although the micro/party-level results paint a somewhat more nuanced picture – the mean age of party a member is 53, 56.5% have completed studies in higher education institutions, 33.3% are female and only 13.4% are aged below 35.

The second consideration, is the question of what party members actually provide. Answers in this case tend to fall somewhere on the spectrum between purely functional (e.g. financial) concerns and altogether more normative (e.g. the provision of democratic legitimacy) returns. Different approaches have been used to answer these questions with Scarrow (2015: 102), for example, drawing a distinction between activities that take place primarily inside party organisations (providing volunteer labour, providing financial support, standing as candidates for public office, transmitting ideas and preferences into party debates) and activities that take place mainly outside of party organisations (providing electoral support, the communication of party ideas and enhancing political legitimacy). Granik (2005: 599) elsewhere describes political party membership as a tripartite hybrid role ‘part supporter, part funder and part worker’ and outlines the myriad studies that have served to elucidate these distinctions (see table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Party membership as a hybrid role

<i>Study</i>	<i>Supporters</i>	<i>Funders</i>	<i>Workers</i>
Duverger (1954)	‘Adherent’	‘The party is essentially based upon the subscriptions paid by its members	Attend meetings, share in the spreading of the party’s slogans, help to organize its propaganda and prepare its electoral campaigns
Milbrath (1969)	-	Monetary contribution required for membership	Participate in meetings, caucuses and conventions; holding office; doing ‘the multitude of chores required around party or campaign headquarters’; canvass voters at election time
May (1973)	Adherents	Dues payers, financial contributors	Local office bearers, delegates to conventions, canvassers, campaign work, conduits of opinion
Seyd and Whiteley (1992)	-	Contribute money	‘the activities of keeping the party in existence at the local level...preparations for elections...running the election campaign...holding elective office’
Whiteley et. al. (1994)	‘Generalised support’	Pay subscription, donate funds	Participate in consultation, fundraising, campaigning, selecting candidates for elections
Scarrow (1994)	Loyal voters	Provide essential funds	Ambassadors, volunteer

Mair (1994)	Legitimisers	‘Membership fees and donations still constitute an important source of revenue’	workers, provide ideas, potential candidates Occupy official positions, help mobilize voters, select party leaders
Scarrow (1996)	‘a source of democratic legitimacy’	‘an important component of party fundraising strategies’	Contribute free labour both during and between election campaigns, a channel of communication keeping the party in touch with grass roots opinion, a new source of ideas
Martin and Cowley (1999)	Testing ground for party policy	Fund party organisation	Campaigners, recruit and socialise leaders and representatives, party staff, ‘ambassadors’
Seyd and Whiteley (2002)	-	‘Donating money is a key function of party members	‘Ambassadors in the community’, campaigning and representation

Source adapted from Granik (2005: 600)

Finally, scholars have focused on why people become party members and it is this question the rest of this article is dedicated to addressing. Scholarship in this area can be summarised along either supply-side or demand-side interpretations. Supply-side explanations consider the role of party supporters and their calculations about whether it makes sense to join a political party, whereas demand-side explanations involve calculations by party elites regarding the net utility of engaging party members (see Scarrow, 2015: 15). Much of the work in this area categorises members and potential members as rational actors (broadly defined) that respond to a series of incentives and benefits. Clark and Wilson (1961) separate these benefits into three categories: solidary (social), material, and political (purposive). Seyd and Whiteley (1992) develop a general incentives model that adds psychological drivers such as altruism and solidarity. Granik (2005) outlines four models of explanation: civic voluntarism, social psychological, rational choice and general incentives. While Scarrow (2015: 157) categorises three distinct benefits parties provide for members: social and psychological (e.g. the provision of group identity, the provision of leisure activities, status), material (e.g. policy benefits, consumer discounts, education, training, patronage and general careerism) and political (e.g. to advance a cause or oust current government, to influence party decisions). Webb, Poletti and Bale (2017) find that Syed and Whiteley’s (1992) general incentives model ‘largely stands up well’ for contemporary analyses and restate their six possible motivations for joining a political party:

1. Expressive incentives (e.g. an attachment to the party’s principles or a belief in the party’s leadership)
2. Collective incentives (e.g. to support the party’s general policies or a specific policy that mattered greatly to me or to oppose the policies of a rival party, or the power of a social or economic group (such as big business or unions))
3. Altruism (e.g. to support the democratic process or to promote the interests of the nation)
4. Social norms (e.g. the influence of family, friends or colleagues)

5. Selective process (e.g. being able to engage in activities in which you would be mixing with other like-minded individuals)
6. Selective outcome (e.g. to enhance their career)

In the aforementioned (largely quantitative) studies and innovative narrative based approaches (see for example Garland, 2016; 2017) this framework of incentives has been shown to have an important causal pull. For example, Garland (2016: 43) showed that whilst collective ideological incentives are consistently placed at the top of member surveys, in interview-based research ‘selective incentives (either process or outcome ones) appeared to have a more influential role in prompting joining’.

These insights have proved to be significant, helping scholars to monitor and debate the health of parties. However, whilst important in themselves, these broad trends provide only limited insight in attempts to answer the question of what precisely prompts people to take action and join a party. In other words, these accounts fail to outline the process by which someone transforms an interest or predilection towards membership into the actual act of becoming a party member. This is because, in tending to ask people why they join or developing theoretical accounts of membership motivations and incentives, this literature focuses on the rationales and incentives that *explain* membership, rather than the triggers and drivers that prompt a non-member to become a party-member. In the remainder of this article we build upon this extant literature to create a dynamic model able to trace the confluence of factors that inform the action of actually joining a political party in the age of ‘multi-speed membership’ (Scarrow, 2015).

THE THREE STREAMS OF PARTY MEMBERSHIP

The process of becoming a party member is by no means straightforward. As the literature above has demonstrated, a range of influences and beliefs appear to inform the membership journey. Seeking to understand this we draw inferences from existing literature to identify three different factors that each inform the process of an individual becoming a member and which, when combined, lead to the moment an individual decides to join a political party. Presenting what we term a multi-stream activation model of membership, we argue that motivations, process and triggers can explain why people join, and accordingly provide fertile sites in which parties can concentrate recruitment efforts.

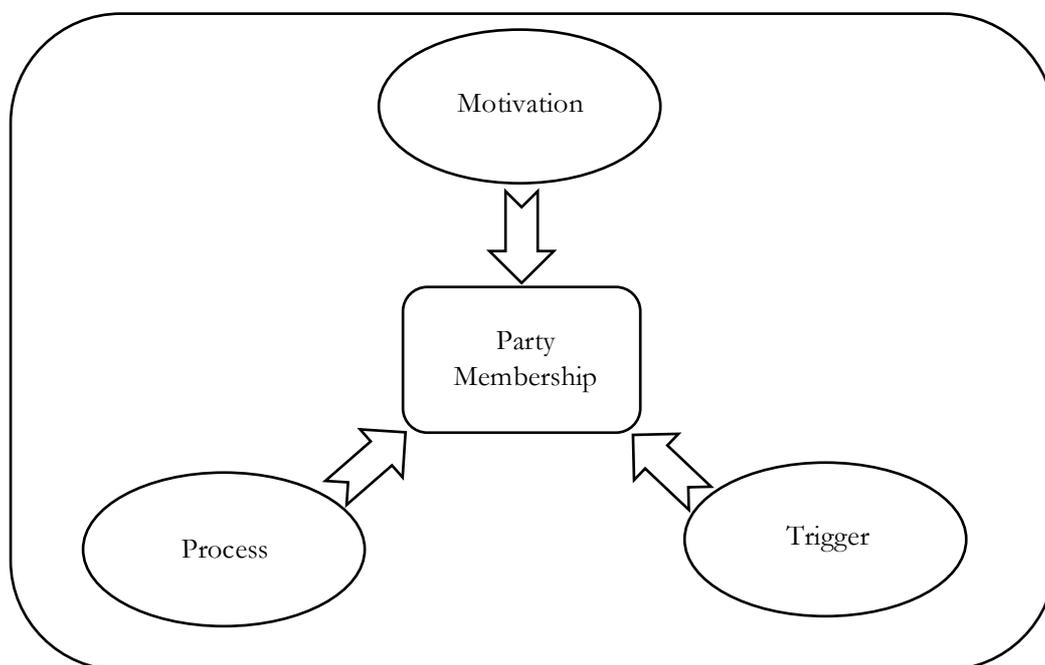
In introducing this model, we first argue that *motivation* plays a significant role. As recognised in the literature précised above, individuals can possess a range of different traits that render them more likely to become party members. The kind of social and psychological, material and political approaches outlined, or the six incentives identified by Seyd and Whiteley (1992) therefore reveal the kind of influences that lead an individual to be more disposed towards a party. As we go on to later discuss, motivations for membership can be actively promoted by political parties themselves through efforts to demonstrate the appeal of membership, and yet motivations are often latent and may be unrecognised by individuals prior to a moment of activation. What matters here is that individuals are in some way disposed towards a party they may decide to join.

Motivations are not, however, enough. To understand the act of becoming a member we, second, argue that *process* is vital. This factor is perhaps the simplest aspect of the membership process as it describes the actual mechanics and organisational infrastructure that enable individuals in geographically diverse locations to join (often centralised) parties. Whilst effective online membership systems widely exist in the UK, historically and often internationally, many parties

lack effective mechanisms by which individuals can actually join. These processes are fundamental requirements for membership recruitment and therefore constitute an often unrecognised part of the equation.

The final component of our model directs attention to *triggers*. Triggers or sparks are the factors that cause an individual to act on their motivation and activate membership mechanisms. Triggers do not come in a single form and can be categorised as personal, local, national or international. Membership could therefore be triggered by a conversation with a friend who has just joined a party, by discussion at a local action day or party event (such as a county fair or university induction week), by a national event such as a general election, or an international occurrence such as a global climate conference. Importantly these triggers do not automatically lead to membership, and are often more likely not to produce this outcome.

Figure 1: The Multi-stream Model of Membership



Instead, of arguing that these streams remain relatively independent of each other until an exogenous shock or critical juncture occurs, we suggest that the act of becoming a member happens at the confluence of these factors. We can also express this model in Boolean set-theoretic terms, which serves to provide null hypotheses from which further studies can test the model and demonstrates the falsifiability of the approach. We suggest (constellation 1) that motivation (M), process (P) and the trigger (T) are all required to lead to party membership (PM). The absence of any of these variables (constellations 2, 3 and 4) leads to an absence of party membership (pm).¹

- (1) **TMP → PM**
- (2) **tMP → pm**
- (3) **TmP → pm**
- (4) **TMp → pm**

¹ Where the '→' symbol represents causal sufficiency

This model reinterprets much of the extant literature to argue that the explanations currently developed to explain party membership actually offer limited insight into the membership journey that people undertake. It recognises that whilst motivations are a vital factor, they are alone insufficient as they require activation and mediation in order to transform a desire for membership into the actual act of membership itself. In other words, we argue that motivations (that currently dominate existing accounts of ‘why’ people join parties) are latent, and are only realised when understood in the context of multi-stream activation. This argument represents an important extension of the literature and demonstrates the significance of triggers in activating these influences.

To fully appreciate the value and traction of this idea, we now turn to present new empirical data to support our claims. Taking each stream of our model in turn, we demonstrate why each stream is an important component of the membership process, and how, in combination, these streams can explain the activation of party membership. Whilst asserting that this model can be applied to explain membership activation around the world, in the analysis that follows we use detailed engagement with one specific case in the UK, presenting new data gathered from the Green Party of England and Wales to explain the membership process. This approach allows us to move from an attempt to describe and map individual membership journeys, to consider what may be driving fluctuations in national level party membership figures. The Green Party case is particularly interesting because, over recent years, the Party have witnessed significant membership fluctuation. Focusing on the period 2010-2018 we examine a period of membership increase (described as the ‘green surge’) and decline, and use this to demonstrate the value of our theory. Presenting previously unseen and detailed membership figures, documentary analysis of confidential internal party reports and action plans, off the record meetings and workshops, as well as data collected from 10 elite interviews with party staff (paid and voluntary), focus group research with local party members and supporters and participant observation from a local party action day, we provide new insight into the way that motivation, process and triggers combine to drive membership at an individual and collective level. The interviews were transcribed and coded to identify key themes. We also triangulated our results ‘using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning’ (Stake, 2008: 133) with wider documentary evidence from the news media and further evidence garnered from a related research project which conducted 15 elite interviews with party staff from the Conservatives, Labour and the Greens and three workshops with party activists and members of the general public.

UNDERSTANDING ACTIVATION: THE MOTIVATIONS, PROCESSES AND TRIGGERS BEHIND INDIVIDUAL’S MEMBERSHIP DECISIONS

The multi-stream activation model of membership has particular value as a means of understanding individual level decisions to become a party member. Whilst the existing literature has enabled the classification and weighing of various membership motivations, these approaches tend to overlook the multi-faceted and complex stories that individuals tell about the process of becoming members. To demonstrate this point, we present three illustrative examples of the stories Green Party members told about their membership journey:

Story 1:

‘I’d been interested in politics since mid-teens, living in rural areas. I thought that for anything to happen with respect to conservation and the protection of environment, it had to be political...I thought of joining the Liberal Democrats who were then the Liberal Party

and oddly enough, I failed to be able to do that. I didn't make a huge effort, I must admit, but there were several people at my place of work who I knew were Liberal Party members and I thought it would be quite easy to drop a word and say, "How do you join?" Anyway, I didn't find any way of joining, this was of course pre-internet, although I must admit, I didn't pursue it doggedly...I saw an advert for what was then the Ecology Party in the Ecologist magazine which I read regularly at the time and I thought, well, maybe that's the route and that's what I joined. Immediately I was contacted by other members in the Stockport area, including one person I knew from the place where I worked who said, he had tried to form a group in Stockport, would I come along. That's how I got drawn in"

Story 2:

"Although I voted Green for years, for me, the deciding factor was on the zero hour contracts and I know that sounds like a really obscure thing, and it may be for a lot of people...but I was watching a debate and it was really mealy-mouthed person, it was during 2013, and the spokesperson for the Labour Party on Newsnight just wouldn't condemn zero hour contracts...Then I looked at everything else and I said, "I agree with all of that." It'd be really churlish not to join them really and I agree with all of these things, and that's the thing I think that there are lots of people out there that are used to compromising, and if you're on the radical left, and I will still say we're the radical left even though other people in the party try to say, no we're not really."

Story 3

"My involvement in the party was actually through trade union activism, so I worked for seven years in further education, in Southend. I was a trade union activist...From there, there were people who were in my local union branch of the college, who were members of the party, who were members of the Green Party. So, I was involved in a lot of trade union campaigning. So from 2010 onwards, I was involved in a Southend trades council, kind of campaign. Southend against cuts, I was doing a lot of anti-cuts campaigning and a lot more political stuff...Someone said, "You'd be really good standing as a candidate for the Green Party in the local elections." And so, I did. And joined and got involved in some of the trade union campaigning within the party"

Each of these stories provides rich insight into the variety of factors that conditioned individuals' membership journeys. In each narrative an underlying motivation is clear. Referencing an interest in politics, concern for the environment, affinity with green values or activist background each interviewee demonstrated the presence of the expressive and collective incentives identified by

Seyd and Whitely (1992). The third story also reveals the influence of selective incentives, whilst the second hints at the potential for social norms and individual connections to influence the decision to become a member (although, in this case, work place ties did not reap dividends). And yet, as each story makes clear, alone these motivational factors were not enough, process and triggers also played a role (as recognised in the Boolean logic above). The first story demonstrates the importance of easily accessible mechanisms through which to join a party, and the barriers that can exist when individuals are not able to “*find any way of joining*”. Whilst the internet, as acknowledged by the participant, has made finding and accessing opportunities to join far easier, this story demonstrates that practical considerations can frustrate the process of signing up. As discussed further below, process issues can arise that help to explain individual and collective level membership trends. Finally, the stories above reveal the presence of triggers. As story two demonstrates, an expressive incentive for membership can lie latent for years before it is activated, and specific triggers are important here. In this case, a national news event and policy decision sparked a decision to join, whilst in the third story it was a personal connection that triggered the individual to join. Triggers can vary in scale and scope, but in each case a specific event or intervention occurred that led an individual to utilise available processes to enact their motivation.

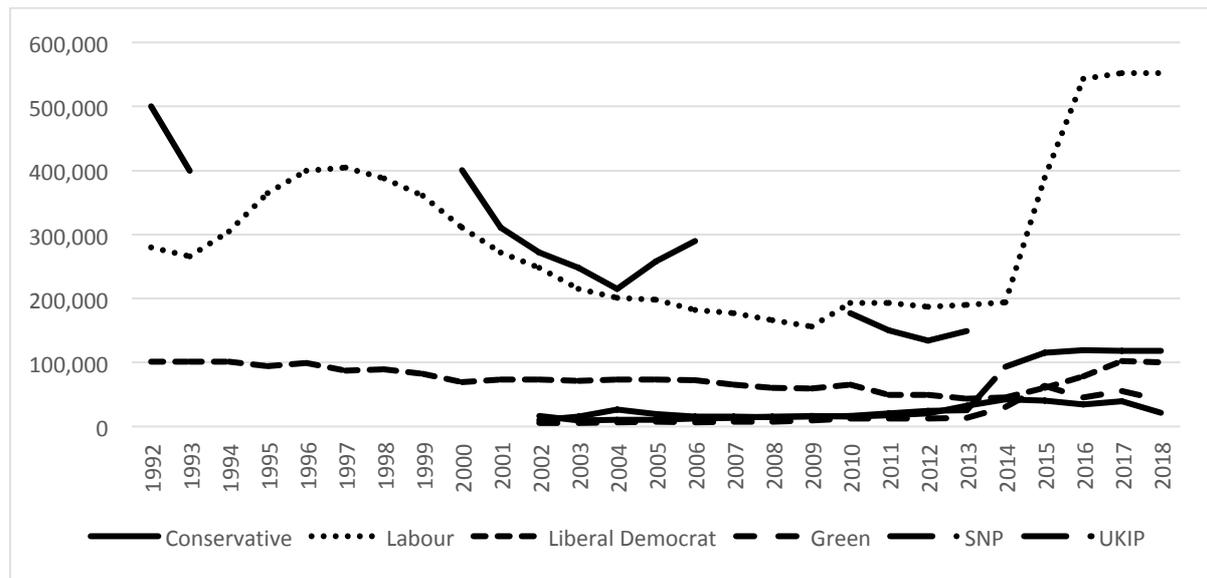
These examples demonstrate the resonance of our multi-stream activation model, but we argue that this model is not simply descriptive, but can help to conceptualise and understand membership change at a collective level. To demonstrate this point, we turn now to consider trends in party membership in Great Britain to specifically interrogate how an understanding of motivation, process and triggers can help to account for collective membership change.

UNDERSTANDING COLLECTIVE ACTIVATION

Figure 1.1 shows the membership figures of the Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, the Green Party, the SNP and UKIP.² What is evident is that, over the period examined, there has been significant fluctuation in party membership levels – trends that are often masked by an overall focus on membership decline. In the Labour Party we see membership hit an initial peak in 1997 at 405,000 members, before falling precipitously throughout the period of the New Labour government. Membership rises from 156,205 to 193,261 between 2009 and 2010 (in response to the 2010 general election defeat) before rising significantly in 2015. This is likely in response to the unforeseen victory of Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour leadership election of 2015 and the subsequent leadership challenge in 2016. Recent data on the Liberal Democrats similarly demonstrates that the party membership has expanded, boosted by approximately 14,000 members joining in ‘the two weeks since the general election was called’ (Lib Dem Voice, 2017). Likewise, the Green Party (England and Wales) data reveals a spike in membership during the ‘Green-surge’ prior to the 2015 general election (see for example Dennison, 2015). And yet, the trend is not always up. For the Greens, membership dropped to under 46,000 during 2016, only to experience a slight uptick in subsequent returns before falling again in 2018. Similarly, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) saw its membership decline after 2014, only to recover in 2017 before falling to 21,200 in the latest reported figures.

² There is no obligation on the part of political parties to release their membership figures and as such the Conservative Party do not tend to do so. Indeed, 2018 was the first year since 2013 that they did, reporting that their membership stood at 124,000 (Audickas, Dempsey, Keen, 2018).

Figure 1.1 Total party membership (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green (England and Wales), SNP, UKIP) 1992-2018

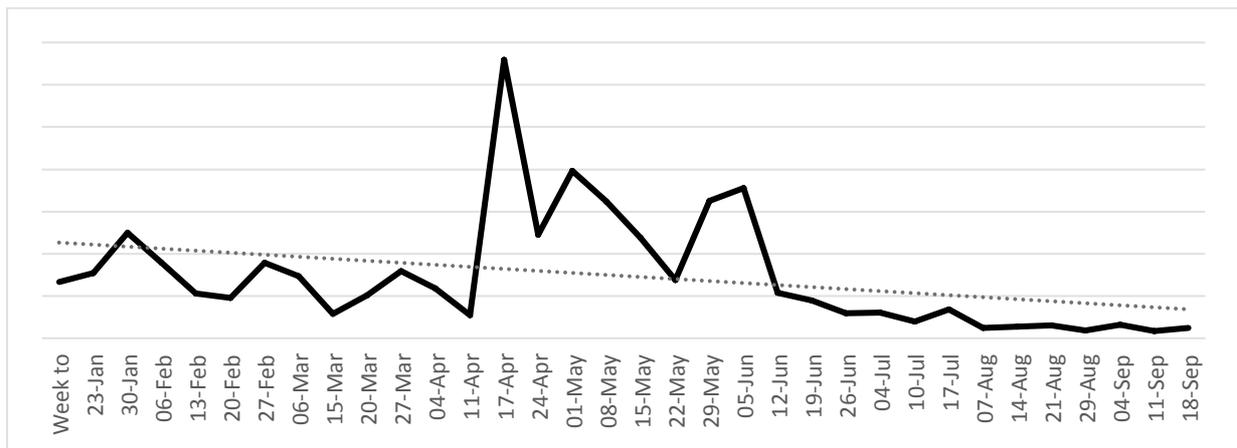


Source Audickas, Dempsey, Keen (2018)

This data therefore demonstrates that, over time, people decide to join parties in different numbers and there can be interesting peaks and troughs in reported figures. However, studies have also shown that there are important methodological deficiencies in the measurement of party membership (Delwit, 2011; Kölln, 2016), such that the overall story of decline is somewhat simplistic and based on problematic data. For example, Kölln (2016: 446) shows that the vast majority of research in this area can be categorised by the use of aggregate country-level data and/or relatively few time points.

Returning to the multi-stream activation model, we argue that an understanding of motivation, process and trigger can help to understand these variations, identifying the significance of certain types of trigger in driving membership increases, but also discussing how motivation and process inform membership levels. Far from remaining constant, members join or leave all the time, resulting in high variation in figures. This makes it important to understand why people join and also to begin to think about the consequences of our model for questions of why people leave. To offer this argument we, once again, focus on Green Party data and specifically look at 2017. For these purposes we present previously unseen data that offers increased insight into Green Party membership trends. Using this data we not only explain what causes large numbers of people to join at specific points in time (resulting in noticeable membership increases), but also what actions parties themselves can take to promote such an occurrence.

Figure 1.2 Green Party membership figures by week in 2017



What emerges most clearly from this data is that aggregate level figures mask considerable week-on-week fluctuations in membership. Seeking to explain these variations we highlight the importance of events – one form of the triggers identified above. For example, in 2017 a significant peak in membership is evident the week the General Election was announced, with a dramatic decline after the general election in June. Other increases can be explained by interventions by the Party Leader in Parliament or prominent coverage in the election campaign.

In seeking to understand why people joined the Green Party we therefore argue that events are an important trigger, but from this data it appears that the events that were significant were national occurrences that the party had little control over. Reflecting on the calling of the 2017 snap general election, one elite interviewee therefore noted:

It was absolutely nothing that we did... calling the election, there was absolutely nothing... literally you could just see the announcement was made on television, people started joining. And I think that would probably be true of all political parties.

Elections therefore present an important membership trigger, and indeed Figure 1 signals that almost all of the parties experienced a membership increase. And yet, our research found that a range of different types of national event were seen to drive membership:

At the moment that's the only thing that impacts on our membership levels. I can look through like new joiner data and I can show you exactly when Trump got elected. I can show you exactly when Article 50 was triggered. I can show you exactly when the EU referendum took place, when the General Election in 2017 was. When the local elections in 2017 were. They all have their own little membership spikes...the only thing that does drive our recruitment is framed around external events.

This signals the importance of different kinds of national events as membership triggers, but interviews also showed that local events – such as a party leader coming to visit a constituency, or a local scandal or crisis (e.g. a move by the local council to cut down trees in Sheffield) – also

drove membership.³ In seeking to understand why parties can suddenly witness a surge of new members, events are therefore useful explanatory factors, but we argue that the idea of a trigger is not synonymous with an event. The decision to become a member can be prompted by a range of triggers. Active recruitment strategies can therefore drive membership growth locally and nationally, triggered either by specific processes (such as a leadership election) or a more prosaic recruitment drive. Inter-personal prompts can also play a role, with individual conversations prompting a spread of membership (especially at times when a specific party gains grassroots traction or becomes the subject of much conversation). These kinds of trigger are commonplace, and yet it is harder to observe their effects within aggregate figures because they are often influential at the individual level. Events are therefore important for aggregate level analyses, and yet they should not be treated as the only type of trigger.

Reaching this conclusion, what emerged from discussion of triggers within our case was an acknowledgment that parties did not need to play a passive role in reacting to or manufacturing triggers. Rather, our study demonstrated that the Green Party placed an active role in seeking to capitalise on events. Indeed, our study found that the Green Party have made multiple attempts to create membership surges, effectively piggybacking on planned events to see if they could manufacture a rise in membership.

We picked an external event. We picked, what did we pick? I think we picked Earth Hour, the week in the run up to Earth Hour, because it's our turf. It's a political idea that we already have reasonable ownership of, so people will readily associate us with it, and it gets coverage in the press. So it's something that people will potentially think, "Oh yeah, yeah. No, I can tie those two things up. And now I've got a thing saying I should join the Green Party."

This suggests that an appreciation of triggers can help to unpick not only the individual and collective decisions that emerge around membership, but can also become a focus for potential recruitment, with parties able to manufacture or capitalise on existing triggers (and especially national events). And yet, a trigger alone is insufficient, what is also required is motivation and effective processes.

MOTIVATIONS

Looking at the data on membership change, it appears that motivations to join a party can, in some regards, wax and wane. Whilst factors such as ideological predisposition and familial ties remain largely constant, people's views of the desirability of membership appear, from our data, to vary. Indeed, we found that context and political motivation were often highly intertwined. For the Greens, therefore, interviews found that the perceived motivation to join the Party was often tied to their electoral fortunes and their position relative to other parties. Speaking with national figures we therefore found the view that:

People who do sympathise with us, members of Greenpeace and members of Friends of the Earth...are members of the Labour Party, or the Lib-Dems. When challenged they say, "Yeah, but you lot can't win, it's all about winning." In politics, if you're not winning, you're seen not to be getting anywhere.

³ What was considered to be unnecessary tree felling enacted by the Labour council was a major local issue in Sheffield and was also believed to have contributed to the loss of four councillors at the May 2018 local elections (BBC News, 2018)

The idea of the party’s potential success and relative standing compared to other left wing parties was therefore felt. One interviewee cited the detrimental impact of the election of Jeremy Corbyn on people’s motivation to join the Greens, stating:

I don’t want to use the word ‘enemy’ but the kind of membership-related enemy is Labour. But politically it is an ally. And then the actual enemy sits on the other end. So it’s weird.

Similarly, when the Green Party were not seen to be doing well nationally, it was felt that people were unlikely to join, whereas when national success was achieved, membership was a more attractive proposition (leading to membership rises). The impact of how people viewed a party was apparent at a local level as it became clear that where membership was seen to be useful, or influential, membership rose. Indeed, within the local party in Brighton (home to the Green Party’s only MP, Caroline Lucas), many members suggested Lucas herself as a motivation in joining the party and that, had there not been such an active local presence they would not have joined (or in one case rejoined) the Green Party. A local party survey of 288 members and supporters (62% members and 38% supporters) found that respondents ranked Caroline Lucas as the fifth most important reason for joining the Green Party (see table 1.2).

Table 1.2 How important was each of the following for your decision to join the Green Party? Average rating (0 = not at all important; 10 = extremely important)

<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Ranking</i>	<i>Categorisation</i>
Climate change	8.73	Collective incentives
Desperate for change	8.72	Expressive incentives
Sound policies	8.64	Collective incentives
Movement for change	8.23	Expressive incentives
Caroline Lucas	7.74	Expressive incentives
Successful activism	6.41	Selective process
Meet like-minded	5.62	Selective process
Political family	5.28	Selective process
Fun	4.01	Selective process
Other	9.32	N/A

This suggests that the political context (nationally and locally) can affect motivations to join, and that changes in a party’s position can therefore help explain individual and aggregate level membership behaviour.

Interestingly, for those we spoke to within the Greens, there was a feeling that the party had little capacity itself to affect these motivations. Whilst the party devoted attention to offering an open and attractive view of membership, particularly emphasising the power given to Green members, interviewees commented:

It’s tough because we don’t really know what the party can do...the message that’s not getting out there is that we are the same and a lot of the parties nick the Green Party’s ideas. Unless that gets out there in the media, it’s an uphill battle.

On this account, the party was aware of a need to tackle motivation issues, but was stymied by wider political debate in which the case for joining the Green Party was not often heard. Whilst

attempts to circumvent traditional media were made, the dynamics of the political system were therefore seen to be significant in explaining (and driving) people's motivations to join.

EFFECTIVE PROCESS MECHANISMS

Finally, as mentioned above, process can also play an important – and yet often overlooked – aspect of people's decision to become members. In recent history parties exhibit relatively developed membership joining processes. It often therefore only requires an individual to visit a party's website and click on a link for people to join. And yet, our interviews revealed that these processes are not always infallible and can lead to problems that appear in aggregate level data. Discussing the internal Green Party CRM system, interviewees therefore described how a number of issues with the service had prevented people from joining between 2014-2017.

We had 300 members in one week, and their CRM system crashed...there wasn't enough, the system couldn't cope with people coming in. And there were just no, the membership function itself was not well resourced...and nobody knew how to cope with all these people coming in.

Another Green Party employee with a working knowledge of the CRM system was, perhaps, a little less diplomatic in his assessment of this particular process mechanism.

I'd destroy it. It's just horrible...It's great for what it wants to achieve but as the party is wanting to grow, because any old system, if you look at your phone, the old iPhone can't do what your new iPhone does. It has to have a new system in place, one that can cope with demands

Other process issues can also emerge if the system either does not work, or is designed in a way that does not embed and maintain the concept of membership. To take another example, at the time of the Green surge, the party did not have a direct debit system and hence many members joined on an annual basis, rather than through a system where their membership would automatically be renewed. Whilst this did not affect the actual process of joining, it has had considerable legacy effects, as many people who joined in 2014 or 2015 have had to actively choose to remain a member rather than automatically renewed – resulting in a significant decline in membership levels. This suggests that issues with national level systems (especially when they occur in the context of a national event) can impact on aggregate level membership figures.

Thinking once again about the relationship between this strand and parties' agency and capacity to exert control here, it is interesting to note that the Green Party not only concentrate on maintaining effective membership processes, but also experiment with how to maximise the impact of these. Indeed, one interviewee described a recent experiment that members of staff ran out of the central Green Party headquarters, reflecting fairly basic 'nudge theory' (see for example Thaler and Sunstein, 2008):

46% of people who say they joined...did it by the website. And this is exactly how I did it, no contact with the local party. So...until last Thursday, we've had a two-week experimentation with our home page being entirely about joining. So, people go on the home page, that's where there's a join and it's all about join message. You know, easy links, a suggested figure, which is not a membership rate

figure...that worked quite well, not only did we have more new members, but we also had them paying substantially higher average membership. Now, we've switched it to an elections home page. The new membership has gone right off...so, the question is: is it a membership tool? There's a lot of evidence, actually, that it is a very successful, it's good at doing that, there's a lot of traffic to the site... it doesn't cost much to join a political party does it, really, against other purchases? So, I think there's a huge amount of impulse thing. And I think it's capturing that impulse stuff...It's not just events, but it's actually in the first 30 seconds if you've got them.

Parties are therefore not impotent when it comes to building, maintaining and experimenting with process infrastructure to build capacity that is likely to recruit more people in a way that means they are likely to remain members.

Cumulatively, therefore triggers, motivations and process can also help to interpret and explain aggregate level figures, helping us to understand not only why individuals join, but also what might explain changes in national level membership figures. Our analysis has also demonstrated that parties can do much themselves to maximise membership increases, but that systemic factors can constrain parties' capacity to promote these strands. Having offered this overview, we now turn to discuss the implications of this research, considering what this model explains and what it reveals for parties interested in promoting membership increases.

DISCUSSION

In offering a multi-stream model of membership, we have focused on the question of activation, but as evident in the data above, people are leaving parties in large numbers, to an extent that annual membership returns fail to capture. Extending our model, we suggest that this framework can help to explain why members leave political parties, asserting that just as the presence of a motivation, process and trigger explain why people join a party, so too the absence of these factors can explain why members leave. To consider this possibility we again examine Green Party data and evidence of a decline in membership following the 'Green surge'.

The data we gathered, first, shows evidence of a decline in motivation. Looking at internal party reports, we found evidence that members have left due in response to the new left-wing direction of the Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. An internal (confidential) Green Party report sampled 15% of the members that left in 2016. The findings showed that 70% indicated they were leaving to join another political party, 60% to join Labour. A further 9.5% cited policy disagreements, 5.5% said they were leaving for financial reasons, and 4.5% because they were disenchanted with politics in general. Similarly, the Green Party analysed the reasons given by 288 members when cancelling membership in the five weeks after the 2017 general election – 82% said that they were leaving to join another political party (75% to Labour). Policy disagreements were cited at 3.4%, financial reasons 2.1% and a disenchantment with politics in general, 1.7%.

In addition, we found evidence of a failure of process. One interviewee reflected:

Of the 4,000 roughly speaking members who joined in the weeks after the referendum, after 18 months they joined on annual things, they would expire. So, 1,400 of those had expired...what we failed to do, is that we didn't take that as a group and follow them on their journey. We didn't say here are 4,000 to 4,500 members, now we're going to actually segment them as a group, they joined in this

spike. We're going to communicate to them all the time about Brexit and what Caroline's doing. We didn't do any of that, they just merged in the general mass. So, 1,400 of those have fallen out.

This suggests that the process used to secure membership can lead to membership declines, as an absence of effective renewal processes or direct debit procedures can lead people to leave. Process and motivations therefore appear significant in explaining declines. Turning to triggers, the position here is less clear-cut. It can undoubtedly be the case that triggers prompt an individual to decide to resign from a party. These triggers can fall into the category of personal (e.g. a loss of income), local (e.g. a local party dispute, such as the trees in Sheffield), national (e.g. a decision to enter, or not, a coalition government) or international (e.g. a decision to enter, or withdraw from, an unpopular/popular treaty). And yet, as the discussion of process reveals, in certain instances an active trigger is not required to leave a party, as the process by which joining occurred may not embed on-going membership. Once again, it therefore appears that these three factors have explanatory power, and yet the precise relationship between these variables can differ to the moment of activation, as differences in the process by which people joined a party can require different combinations of motivation, process and trigger in order to leave. For this reason we argue that this model has additional explanatory value, and yet in recognising these possibilities we argue that further theorisation is required to map the precise variations that account for the process of leaving a party.

In addition to theorising the process of joining a party, this article also cast light on the interventions that parties themselves could make to boost membership levels. As the above discussion has shown, parties are already demonstrating attempts to boost membership numbers, and devote attention to improving membership processes, capitalising on triggers and outlining the reasons for membership. And yet, throughout our research, we found that whilst parties are preoccupied with their membership figures, the attention devoted to addressing this issue is often piecemeal and fragmented. In our data collection, we uncovered evidence that parties often think about membership only at certain points of the year. For example, around elections, parties turn off almost entirely to the need to attract members and give little attention to providing motivation, offering processes or capitalising on triggers to join. Within our case studies, interviewees confessed to giving little thought to membership when an election was on – a mentality that, given the large numbers of people who parties engage at elections, demonstrates a significant missed opportunity to drive membership growth. This finding is unsurprising, as the electoral objectives of parties are widely recognised to dominate their activities and objectives. And yet, given that elections are the moments at which most people pay attention to parties, this demonstrates a missed opportunity. What emerges, therefore, is a need for parties to think more consistently about party membership, recognising the need to promote all three streams throughout the electoral cycle if membership numbers are to be increased. In terms of substantive strategies for boosting membership this leads us to recommend that parties focus on:

- Promoting the multiple membership activation streams throughout the electoral cycle by, for example, integrating member recruitment into party campaigning and canvassing activities
- Promoting and articulating the case for party membership by, for example, sharing membership stories and demonstrating the 'value added' of membership
- Reviewing the effectiveness and implications of its process mechanisms by, for example, using 'secret shopper' projects where party staffers (or compliant non-members) are tasked with investigated just how easy it is to join the party (for more see: Phibbs, 2018).

- Capitalizing on external events and orchestrating triggers for membership by, for example, running issue focused membership recruitment campaigns

By exploring these strategies, we argue that parties may be able to boost membership numbers and intervene to counteract the drives that cause members to leave.

CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined and introduced a new model for understanding how and why people come to be members of a political party. We argue that our ‘multi-stream activation’ explanation provides a compelling heuristic for understanding a much-discussed element of the study of party politics. The model itself outlines that there are three distinct conditions of party membership – motivations, process and triggers – that must be met before the membership journey itself is complete. Motivation represents much of what has been outlined in the previous literature on party membership encompassing everything from Seyd and Whiteley’s general incentives model (1992) to the recent ground-breaking work undertaken by, for example the Party Member’s Project (PMP) and the Members and Activists of Political Parties (MAPP).⁴ These are essentially the social, psychological, material and political influences that lead to an individual being more predisposed to join a particular political party. Process is what can also be defined as the effective mechanisms of party membership. These encompass the actual mechanics and organisational infrastructure that enable an individual to join a political party. Finally, we direct attention towards the importance of triggers. These are the (often exogenous) catalysts that cause an individual to act on an (often latent) motivation and activate membership mechanisms. Triggers can come in four forms the personal, local, national or international. Having then introduced this model, it was discussed in relation to a case study of the Green Party of England and Wales.

The above represents an extension and reinterpretation of the extant literature. In recent years scholars have been moving away from merely discussing decline, but what has not yet been offered is a model for understanding membership fluctuations at both the individual and collective level. This work provides such a contribution. Despite being developed in relation to a specific case, we suggest that this model is not unique to the Green Party of England and Wales, nor unique to the British context but explains how and why people come to be party members across Western Europe and, indeed, beyond. We have therefore, provided a new heuristic from which to understand, explain and predict membership change, but we have also sought to reflect on the practical steps that parties (and indeed other membership organisations) can take in attempts to boost their membership figures. In discussing possible interventions designed to promote motivation, process and triggers, and recognising the importance of integrating such actions across the electoral cycle, we have demonstrated the practical application of these ideas for practitioners in the field. We therefore hope that this paper represents a beginning of a (continuing) conversation, amongst academics and practitioners alike.

⁴ All information with regards to the PMP is available at <https://esrcpartyproject.org/> (accessed 25 May 2018). All information with regards to MAPP is available at <https://www.projectmapp.eu/> (accessed 25 May 2018).

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