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The 'paradox of enrollment': Assessing the costs and benefits of party memberships

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Abstract. From Duverger onward, students of party organization have failed to address systematically the question of what party members actually do for 'mass' parties. This article argues that a clearer understanding of the particular reasons why parties want to have members can help us better interpret ongoing changes in relations between specific party organizations and individual party members. This article lists a wide range of arguments that parties are most likely to make concerning the costs and benefits of memberships. Which of these types of arguments a specific party highlights has implications about the types of members it is looking to attract, and about what the party will be willing to offer to attract such members. The article concludes with a discussion showing how the perspective developed here can be used to illuminate recent changes in several German and British political party organizations, changes which, by themselves, may appear to be isolated and meaningless organizational details.

Introduction

Why should contemporary political parties choose to devote any resources to recruiting or retaining members? For the past thirty years, one common response among political scientists has been that there are no good reasons why modern parties should seek mass memberships (see, for instance, the widely-cited Epstein 1967). In the simplest version of this tale, the development of membership parties is portrayed as a three step process. About a century ago impoverished parties of the left discovered membership as a resource which allowed them successfully to compete with the well-endowed bourgeois parties. The success of leftist parties inspired their rivals on the right to imitate the mass membership organizational model. Finally, the introduction of television and other 'American' campaign and communications tools made mass memberships obsolete and useless. Recently many scholars have challenged this technologically deterministic version of political party history (for instance Ware 1987; Sundberg 1988; Angell 1987; Mintzel 1987; and even Epstein 1986). Yet though it now seems obvious that the 'inevitable decline of mass membership in the television age' is too simple a model, as of yet there have been few systematic efforts to understand the

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precise reasons why contemporary political parties might – or might not – view members as a desirable resource. Despite many efforts to unravel the so-called 'paradox of participation', few efforts have been made to unravel the equally puzzling 'paradox of enrollment': why should parties want to enroll supporters anyway? This article argues that the explanations of these two seeming paradoxes are not unrelated; indeed, they constitute complementary sides of a single equation. Knowing why particular parties think they need members may help us better to understand changing relations between contemporary party organizations and individual party members.

Exploring the uses of membership

From Duverger onward, students of party organization have failed to address systematically the question of what party members actually do for 'mass' parties. Analysts have usually assumed that such parties are interested in two varieties of aid from members – financial help, and volunteer labour during election campaigns (for instance Duverger 1955; Epstein 1967). Some recent discussions have suggested that parties may also be interested in members for the community contacts members make during inter-election periods (Ware 1987; von Beyme 1985). Nevertheless, few discussions of party organization have attempted to diagnose systematically the types of tasks party members are called upon to perform. Indeed, the opposite is often the case: many discussions adopt an undifferentiated view of party members as generic organizational assets.

Such an undifferentiated perspective may yield misleading conclusions about trends in the development of party organization. Even if members constitute organizational resources, membership resources are not nearly as fungible as monetary resources. Whereas money may be used in most circumstances to purchase some type of 'instant organization' (Sabato 1981: 200–201), membership may be a worthless asset if members cannot be mobilized to support their party actively and effectively.

Many previous studies have noted that the extent to which a particular party gains advantages from its membership base depends both on the party's success in recruiting and retaining members and on legal, technological and cultural factors. However, we also need explicitly to acknowledge that none of these factors rigidly determines the potential organizational value of mass memberships. This is particularly true because in every country election campaigns are a changing art form, and many successful campaigns innovatively employ old and new techniques. It is therefore important to recognize that how much any particular party's membership is valued depends to some extent on the party itself: on what sorts of support the party expects members to provide, and on how ingenious and effective the party is in converting the resource of membership into an active asset. In other words, to interpret general changes in the size or structure of party membership organizations,

we not only need an outsider's knowledge of the ways in which membership may constitute an electoral asset; we also need an insider's knowledge about the specific ways in which particular parties seek to gain advantages from their formal memberships.

A clearer understanding of the particular reasons why parties want members can help us better interpret ongoing changes in relations between specific party organizations and party members. This is true because party strategists, as much as political scientists, know that individuals must be encouraged to become party members. As a result the particular incentives for membership which a party will offer depend in part both on what it is that members are expected to do for the party, and on what types of individual are most likely to perform these tasks. Stefano Bartolini made a similar argument:

> [From an organizational perspective,] party membership has to be viewed mainly as an organizational resource, and as the result of organizational incentives offered by the party leadership and officers. In this case, the problem is knowing how party leaders perceive and value the basic resource of membership and its 'by-product', i.e., militarism. To maintain, increase, or even decrease the levels of membership and activism is, from the leadership perspective, an organizational effort, which might or might not be rewarded in terms of money, work, and time (Bartolini 1983: 207).

I do not accept Bartolini's assumption that the inevitable by-product of membership is militarism. However, Bartolini's basic insight into organizational calculations is a good starting point for the following elaboration of the two sides of the equation that we expect successful parties to balance – why parties want members, and why individuals want to become members.

Calculating the costs and benefits of party memberships

To identify changes in any particular party's assessment of the strategic value of members, we need to better understand the range of arguments parties might make about the uses and liabilities of members. Given the lack of previous comprehensive discussions of the uses of membership, the first task is to present a systematic listing of plausible arguments about the possible benefits and costs of members in democratic parties. As a check on plausibility, the following list was compiled in conjunction with a study of the postwar membership recruitment endeavours of four 'mass' parties. (These parties are the British Labour and Conservative Parties and the (West) German Social Democratic Party and Christian Democratic Union.) For brevity's sake, each type of argument will be illustrated with only one or two examples of ways in which these parties have used such an argument.

This discussion rests on the simplest of traditional rational choice assumptions about the motivations of parties and individuals. Individual decisions

to join and stay in a political party are assumed to be motivated solely by private benefits available through party membership. To use Wilson's terminology, an individual's decision to become and to remain a party member should be explicable in terms of some combination of material incentives, 'specific solidary incentives' (non-material benefits for some members, such as honours or offices), 'collective solidary incentives' (non-material benefits accessible to all group members, such as social opportunities), 'purposive incentives' (benefits related to satisfaction from contributing to a cause which is perceived to be worthwhile) (Wilson 1973: 33–34).

Similarly, in the following discussion parties are viewed as unitary actors motivated primarily by office-seeking goals. Such a one-dimensional model is a simplification of the motives of party behaviour. As others have pointed out (Strom 1990; Budge & Laver 1986), this simplifying assumption ignores many equally valid explanations of party behaviour, including policy-seeking orientation, intra-party conflict, or the role of extra-parliamentary party officials. However, in this case, such an assumption is appropriate because so much of the literature on party organization assumes that office-seeking goals are the paramount force shaping party policies regarding mass party membership. Hence, this assumption simply makes explicit what is implicit in much of the literature. In fact, precisely this characterization of party goals underpins the argument that mass membership is useless in modern party organizations because members can no longer help parties win votes in election campaigns. The contention here is that accounts of the organizational development of political parties have never properly tested this argument because they have not looked intently enough at the variety of ways in which members may help their parties win votes. Until such tests are made, we should not abandon the idea that parties' relations to their members may be explicable as the strategic behaviour of office-seeking organizations.

Thus, the assumptions used here are adopted because they constitute the most difficult tests for theories that attempt to explain the 'paradoxes' of party membership. These assumptions could easily be relaxed without changing the logic of the following argument. For instance, the discussion about the possible benefits brought by members could be expanded to include ways in which members can be a resource in internal political struggles and/or to include ways in which members can be a resource in intra-election policy-making struggles with other political actors. In either case, the underlying argument of the framework presented below would remain the same. Because of intra-party or policy-making struggles, party incentives are tailored to match the type of member seen as desirable by the dominant faction within the party organization. In other words, this analysis could be seen as an amplification of Strom's discussion of parties' 'organizational imperative', as an effort to enhance the utility of his model by elaborating a view of membership uses that cannot be reduced to a labour/capital ratio (Strom 1990: 574ff).

The following discussion is divided into two sections. The first deals with

possible arguments about the costs to a party of having an enrolled membership, the second with possible arguments about the benefits of membership. The discussion begins with cost arguments because these are probably the most familiar to readers following years of articles proclaiming the inevitable decline of mass membership parties. Each of the arguments spells out a perceived mechanism through which membership aids – or hampers – a party's long term electoral goals.

Possible anti-membership arguments

Two broad arguments are usually made in answer to the question, 'In what ways do members constitute a liability for their parties?'. The first type of argument outlines ways in which members can directly lose votes for their party. The second type of argument points to membership recruitment as an opportunity cost, as a misuse of party organizational resources which might more profitably have been directed towards winning over undecided voters. The parties themselves have more openly discussed the second type of cost, while party scholars have focussed most of their attention on the first.

Cost 1. Members support vote-losing policies

According to this argument, individuals who become party members, and especially those who chose to become active members, tend to be drawn from the most ideologically motivated segment of party supporters. Unlike the professional politicians, these volunteer supporters would rather lose elections than compromise the purity of party policy. Thus, this argument concludes, wherever party members directly, or even indirectly, control the selection of party leaders and policies, a party is likely to become inflexible and unable to respond to shifts in preferences of the broad electorate (Wilson 1962; May 1973; see also previous excerpt from Bartolini 1983). In other words, members are assumed to reduce the ability of parties to act as efficient office-seeking organizations.

Leaders whose election to party offices depends on member support will probably be reluctant to openly articulate such an argument – only repeated electoral defeats may embolden leaders to challenge their members in this way. Thus in 1988, as the Labour Party was seeking to shed its 'hard left' image in hopes of winning back broad working-class support, the Labour Party General Secretary pleaded in the party's membership magazine:

> It is essential that local parties ensure that they are welcoming to new members from unions . . . . [O]ur union recruitment drive will considerably strengthen the links between the party and trade union affiliates. For

> Labour to win an election, it must reflect and respond to the challenges facing working people . . . . (Whitty 1988).

(See, however, Benefit 7, below, for just the opposite view).

Cost 2. Members waste organizational resources

Parties may view organizational resources used to recruit and retain members as a bad investment. Even if parties provide few selective incentives for members, they usually must spend some resources to maintain a membership, including the time of professional party employees and party leaders, and the money spent on items such as printing, mailing, or entertainment – resources which all might be used instead to reach out to undecided voters. Such complaints about the costs of mass membership were heard in the CDU at the end of the 1980s, when some within the CDU (including the national party treasurer) openly suggested that members cost the national party more than they contributed (Kiep 1987).

Possible pro-membership arguments

It is time now to turn to the less discussed aspect of membership, to a consideration of possible reasons why parties might view members as electoral assets. While the following list of arguments is new as a whole, many of the separate ideas are similar to those suggested elsewhere (for example Katz 1990; Zeuner 1969). This list consolidates previous discussions in anticipation of the broader argument that follows – that ongoing and fundamental changes in party organizations can be understood as responses to changes in the reasons for which parties want members.

Benefit 1. Members improve membership statistics

Members might be valued for their willingness to add their names to a party's membership roster. In some cases, parties may perceive a large membership to be an electoral asset in itself. Membership size – especially declining size – usually receives careful scrutiny in both scholarly and journalistic discussions of specific parties. Indeed, popular accounts often predict the future electoral fortunes of parties – particularly fledgling ones – in terms of increasing or declining memberships. Yet even though they have experienced significant fluctuations in their memberships in the past decades, the parties examined here seldom claimed to be interested in size for its own sake. An SPD recruiting pamphlet of the 1950s used a rare example of this type of argument when it noted that, 'the larger and stronger an organization is, the more it will be respected by voters as well as by its political opponents' (SPD 1956: 3).

There is another type of reason why parties might want to add members solely for their presence on the membership roster: Parties might value particular types of individuals as members because they diversify the membership base. One of two assumptions can support arguments about the connection between membership diversity and electoral goals. Membership diversity might be viewed as an *indicator* of support from diverse segments of the electorate, or it might be viewed as a *prerequisite* for gaining such support. In the second case, members may be valued for their everyday contacts or as candidates (see Benefits 3 and 7 below). In the first case, however, a diverse membership is viewed as a tool to enhance the credibility of party claims to have a broad electoral appeal. This latter assumption envisages that electoral benefits can be realized even from largely passive memberships. In the 1980s the two German parties highlighted this argument in recruiting drives, when German party leaders often equated membership diversity with the coveted goal of becoming, or of remaining, true 'people's parties' (*Volksparteien*). A report to the 1989 CDU party congress provides a good example of such an argument in its conclusion that, 'in order to justify our claim of being a *Volkspartei*, the age structure and the social structure of the membership must, over the long term, be changed by new ideas about membership recruiting' (CDU 1989: 9).

Benefit 2. Members are loyal voters

Parties might value members as a distinct group of voters, known or presumed to have strong party allegiance and high turnout rates. Although German and British party members constitute only a small proportion of the respective total electorates, party leaders in these countries have occasionally invoked voter loyalty as a reason to recruit. Thus, for instance, in 1988 the SPD party chairman argued in a pro-recruitment speech that election outcomes might hinge on whether a local party's membership was one per cent or four per cent of the electorate (Vogel 1988).

Benefit 3. Members multiply votes by everyday contacts

Parties might value members not just for their individual votes, but because members are perceived to be 'vote multipliers'. All four parties examined here have come to view their members as potential party 'ambassadors to the community', as people who can win new party support through their normal daily contacts. This notion appealed particularly to the German parties in the 1970s, which tried to mobilize members as informal party representatives ('*Multiplikatoren*') in personal and professional arenas. One CDU analyst provided this summary of his party's thinking about the precise ways in which these party ambassadors could aid the CDU:

Political decisions, including voting decisions, are formed in the family,

among friends, and increasingly at the workplace. In these circles members play an important role as *multipliers* and *translators* in more or less casual conversations about 'politics' (Bilstein 1970: 71).

At certain times, both German and British party organizers have emphasized the vote-multiplying powers of those members who could be called 'opinion leaders' in local communities, while at other times these organizers have stressed the electoral payoffs of party support expressed by ordinary members in daily conversations.

The everyday contacts of known party members may be especially valuable to parties struggling to gain, or regain, public recognition and trust. Such parties may be long-established, facing growing public disenchantment with traditional politics. They may be new parties trying to break into otherwise stable party systems. Or they may be trying to gain legitimacy in newly democratized regimes.

Benefit 4. Members provide essential funds

Both party organizers and scholars have frequently noted the potential financial value of party members. Duverger expressed this idea most picturesquely when he equated the invention of mass membership organization with the invention of the national defence bond (Duverger 1955: 63). The German and British parties have tended to be quite open about the financial motives for their recruitment efforts. The main leaflet for the Conservative Party's 1988 recruiting campaign was only slightly blunter than most when it proclaimed in large letters: 'Supporting a good stable Government requires more than just your vote. It also requires an annual contribution from you' (CCO 1988).

Benefit 5. Members are volunteer workers inside the party

Party members may provide a valuable source of free labour for party efforts during and between election campaigns. This is the reason political scientists most often give to explain why parties might want mass memberships. In contrast, the four parties' recruitment justifications have generally ignored the prospect that new members might actively help with specific local party tasks. This lack of emphasis on volunteer work should not be surprising. Party organizers must be even more aware than party researchers that only a minority of members will actively work within the party organization. Recruitment justifications 1 to 4 are possible answers to the question of what, if anything, party organizers think the rest of the members – the 'inactive' ones – are good for.

Benefit 6. Members provide valuable ideas

Party membership may be viewed as an essential communications channel, as a link between the broad electorate and the party leadership. New members might be viewed as resources for keeping the party in touch with grass roots opinion. Party leaders have sometimes made this argument, even though it directly contradicts the argument that (existing) members keep parties out of touch with their electorates (Cost 1). Thus, for example, several Labour Party publications of the 1970s made such arguments when they portrayed new members as vital 'new blood' (Labour Party 1975) which would help the party 'respond to new ideas, keep in touch with electoral opinion' ('1976 Campaign', 1976: 9) and keep the party from 'stultifying' ('Membership Campaign', 1975: 11).

Benefit 7. Members are potential candidates

Scholars of party organization rarely mention the need to find candidates for party or public offices as an explanation for why parties may want strong membership bases.[1] The public choice literature has generally assumed that parties will have no difficulty in recruiting members eager for the selective benefits of public office. Yet both the German and British parties have invoked the search for candidates as a membership recruitment justification. These parties' leaders have endorsed recruitment as a way of boosting the reservoir of able and electorally-attractive potential candidates. One particularly explicit example of the use of this argument is found in an open letter discussing the Labour Party's 1946 recruitment campaign, whose purpose was described as being,

> the specialized enrolment of men and women who are particularly well fitted, either by character, ability, or experience, to take on important tasks inside our Movement. The principal positions to be filled from the new membership would include Party Office-bearers and key workers in local parties; propagandists; local government candidates; Parliamentary candidates and general party leadership (Phillips 1946).

The seven preceding arguments outline a broad range of ideas about how party members might be converted into electoral assets. It is important to emphasize that any particular party's evaluation of each argument is likely to shift over time. In other words, as political and environmental circumstances change, any party is likely to change its assessment of which are the most important mechanisms for converting membership resources into working assets. Furthermore, a particular party may perceive different segments of its membership to be useful in different ways. Note, however, that if this discussion about perceived costs and benefits is to help illuminate changes

within party organizations, it should be true that no party always views all arguments as equally relevant.

Membership uses and membership incentives

In order to demonstrate what can be learned from a more thorough understanding of the perceived utility of party membership, let us concentrate for the moment on the implications of the pro-membership arguments. The contention here is that it is useful to be clear about why particular parties want members, because the types of members a party seeks will be directly related to its perceptions of how members produce electoral benefits. We can gain further insight about the types of member a party may seek by asking two questions about the party's organizing strategies. 'What level of engagement is demanded of members the party considers to be assets?' 'To what extent does this engagement take place within formal party structures?'

Building on the preceding discussion of the types of benefits provided by members, possible answers to these questions are presented in Figure 1 (numbers in brackets refer to benefits described in the text). The two cells indicate the location of activities for which parties want members. These may be inside formal party structures or outside them – whether outside all formal organizations (voting, for instance), or in non-party organizations (participation in community initiatives, for instance). Within each cell activities are ranged along a spectrum of increasing intensity of engagement, where 'engagement' might be operationalized as a combination of time demanded by an activity and of the activity's public visibility. Thus, for example, if members are merely desired to enhance membership statistics, little engagement will be demanded of these members – how little depends on factors such as how difficult it is to join a particular party. Supporting the party outside the formal organization may be done through a variety of increasingly demanding activities. Expressing political views in everyday conversations demands little time, whereas organization of community initiatives can be every bit as demanding as volunteer work within the party organization. The exact endpoints of the various activities shown in Figure 1 may vary between parties, but the relative locations of activities in this figure are suggestive enough to support the crux of my argument, that precisely *what* it is that parties hope their members will do has implications about *how* parties organization and *whom* they try to recruit.

It is by no means commonplace to emphasize party flexibility in recruitment strategies. For several decades political scientists have been arguing that the comparative attractions of party membership faded as other institutions grew. Such changes as the growth of the leisure industry, the increased availability and higher quality of non-party sources of political education and information, and the expansion of state-provided and private social welfare and insurance services have all been said to reduce the comparative value of the

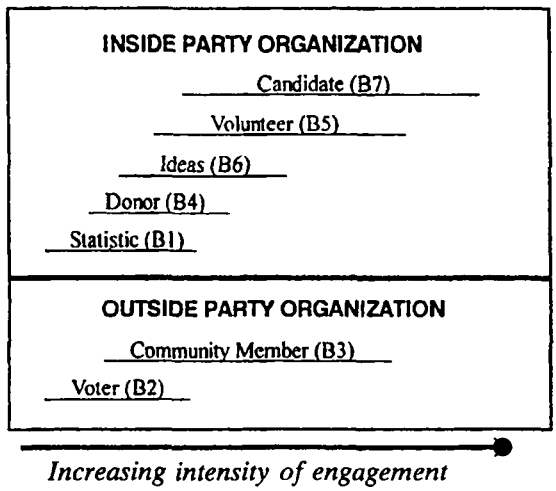

Fig. 1. Characteristics of possible activities for party members.

selective membership incentives parties can offer. More recent arguments have expanded this list. The decline of social group identities is said to have devalued the solidary incentives which parties can provide (cf. Katz 1990), while the proliferation of non-party channels for political participation is said to have undermined the value of participation incentives which parties can provide (Inglehart 1990; Kaase 1981; Selle & Svasand 1988). While these analyses do identify important changes in parties' environments, their cumulative effect can be to over-emphasize the extent to which parties are helpless victims of a changing political environment.

Much would be gained by emphasizing that democratic party organizations are both durable *and* adaptable. Just as parties can invent new responses to changes in technology and the electoral environment, so too do they have some latitude to respond if individuals appear to become less interested in joining up. Parties can lower membership costs and/or can change the mixture of incentives with which they attempt to attract and retain members. The assertion here is that the extent to which a particular party actually makes these sorts of changes will be linked to the extent to which that party values the hoped-for results of change. From this perspective, changes in the mixture of membership incentives offered by any particular party should be understood not only as a reaction to the changing interests of potential members, but also as a reaction to party perceptions of the ways in which members are useful.

At this point it will be helpful to summarize the sequence of arguments made in this section. (1) If parties want members, they want them for specific types of tasks. (2) If parties want members, they will offer incentives to encourage individuals to become party members. (3) Individuals who may become party members vary in their interest in performing particular types

of tasks. (4) If parties want members, they will offer membership incentives which are tailored to attract those individuals most likely to perform the specific tasks which they, the parties, value most.

An obvious objection to this argument is that it seems to assume that party professionals or elected leaders are familiar with political science discussions about participation incentives. Yet this assumption is not needed to sustain the argument. Political scientists' ideas about why individuals join parties have developed largely from studies of specific party organizations. Consequently, this argument merely assumes that experienced party organizers have developed similar intuitions about why individuals join and remain in their parties – whether or not these organizers would use terms made familiar by people such as Hirschman or Wilson. It is entirely plausible that party organizers make connections between the types of incentives their parties offer and the participation interests of the members these incentives are most likely to attract. Like good anglers, party organizers are probably aware that different types of lures tend to attract different types of fish.

It follows from this argument that all areas on Figure 1 can be linked to the particular types of incentives most likely to attract those who will perform the activities in question. If a party wants a large, even if passive, membership (Benefit 1), it should reduce the 'negative incentives' against joining (the barriers to membership), and increase its offerings of non-political, material, incentives.[2] The form of these incentives may depend on perceptions about what individuals want (whether these are group social activities or benefits delivered to them in their homes) as well as on party assessments of the value of continuously active local party organizations. Thus, while computerized mailing lists enable a national party to send selective membership benefits directly to members' homes, local party organizations may also be essential to national membership strategies as providers of non-political selective social incentives (Olson 1965: 63) such as holiday parties or services for older members. If a party wants members who are interested enough in politics to speak about political issues in formal or informal settings (Benefit 3), it could offer incentives in the form of participation opportunities – chances to select candidates, to meet with party leaders, or to debate and vote on party policies. The party could also offer political information as a selective benefit of membership. These are the types of rewards most likely to appeal to individuals who would publicly express their political convictions.

Just as we do not expect to find a single answer to the question 'Why does a party want to have members?', neither do we expect to find a single answer to the question 'What type of member is a party trying to attract?'. Real parties obviously offer a mixture of incentives designed to attract different types of members. Even so, certain organizational changes introduced by specific parties make more sense if viewed as reflections of changes in party perceptions about the type of member worth having. The utility of this perspective can be illustrated with a brief account of two varieties of recent organizational change in the four German and British parties examined earlier. As this account shows, all four parties have actively

responded both to perceived changes in interests of potential members, and to changes in their own perceptions of what types of members constitute electoral assets.

Political parties in search of new types of members

In recent years, the two largest parties in Britain and in Germany have all reaffirmed their interest in membership as a financial asset (Benefit 4). But recent changes in the four parties' organizations are not merely rooted in recognition of members as a stable source of revenue. They also reflect major changes in party organizers' perceptions of the extent to which so-called 'inactive' members – those who are not active within branch parties – can aid the party cause. In recent years, each of the parties has reassessed the electoral utility of members' activities outside local parties, activities which would fit in the lower half of Figure 1. As a result, the parties have expanded their efforts to attract and retain individuals who have little interest in traditional party activities.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the German parties were especially receptive to the idea that 'inactive' members can make crucial contributions to electoral success. One catalyst for their reassessment was a well-publicized study of the 1972 German federal election which claimed to show that elections can be won or lost depending on whether ordinary party supporters are willing to publicize their political convictions (see 'Die Schweigespirale', reprinted in Noelle-Neumann 1979). Additionally, in the early 1980s party organizers in both countries gained more evidence of the utility of attracting and retaining support through ongoing activities that could not be tarred as mere campaign gimmicks. In these years leaders of the large parties in both Britain and Germany were confronted with favourable citizen response to rival political groups, party or non-party groups that portrayed themselves as alternatives to the established parties. In Britain, both the Conservative and Labour Parties felt increasingly challenged by the 'community politics' campaigns of both Liberal and Social Democratic candidates. While organizers in both big British parties initially derided such 'pavement politics' efforts, by the mid-1980s these same organizers were urging members to imitate their rivals' techniques. Indeed, by 1984 one Conservative Party publication was proudly proclaiming, 'We are back to communicating regularly with our electors – and communicating about our local actions on their behalf. Community politics is Conservative Politics' ('Impact', 1984: 7). In Germany, the CDU and SPD felt similarly challenged by the success of politically unaffiliated 'citizens' initiatives' (single issue local activists' groups), and by the success of the Greens.

Thus, both academic studies and the success of rival groups helped to change party perceptions about the value of informal, extra-party support activities, and about the value of 'non-partisan' constituent service activities. Parties began to see large, 'inactive' memberships not only as the source of

regular funds, but also as reservoirs of sympathizers distributed throughout communities. The parties recognized that they would benefit most from members in a community if these members were willing to share their political views with friends and colleagues. As a result, in the 1970s and 1980s all four parties introduced organizational changes which reflected these two main conclusions about membership: attract as many dues-payers as possible (Benefit 4), and maximize the number of members who publicize their political commitments outside the party sphere (Benefit 3). In keeping with the first of these goals, all four parties lowered barriers to entry and, more subtly, increased the barriers to exit. They also introduced new material incentives, incentives designed to appeal even to those without a strong interest in politics.

Over the past twenty-five years all four parties changed membership application and dues-collection procedures to make it easier for individuals to become party members. Most importantly, all four began to encourage, even require, members to pay annual dues by direct debit from bank accounts. Direct debit payment not only regularizes the income parties receive from membership dues; it also makes membership termination more difficult, since bank debit agreements are usually automatically renewed each year. Such procedures could be seen as ways of maximizing type 4 benefits (membership revenue) and simultaneously as ways of reducing type 2 costs – part of the motivation for introducing these changes was clearly the desire to eliminate time-consuming (and financially inefficient) systems of door-to-door monthly collection, or of yearly renewal letters.

The British Labour Party went even further in its efforts to reduce membership disincentives: in the late 1980s this party lowered its dues levels and introduced special introductory rates for union members. (These changes were explicitly justified as ways of increasing revenue. Party leaders assured conference delegates that the consequent membership expansion would outweigh the effect of lower individual dues levels.)

In addition to making it easier for 'inactive' members to join and renew their memberships, all four parties introduced new benefits that members receive directly in their homes, without needing to go to a single party meeting. Most strikingly, in Britain in the late 1980s the Labour Party began offering members the party's own *VISA* credit card, while the Conservative Party introduced schemes which enabled local associations to reward higher-paying members with discount shopping cards and special terms for insurance (Tether 1991: 25). All of the preceding changes can be viewed as efforts to expand party membership bases by lowering barriers to entry and increasing incentives aimed at supporters with little desire to participate actively in a political party.

In keeping with the second type of membership recruitment goal (to gain type 3 benefits), all four parties also introduced a variety of new incentives designed particularly to appeal to those interested enough in politics to discuss political issues with friends and colleagues. Among these new incentives are collective solidary and selective (informational) benefits especially

directed at members who have no interest in attending local party meetings. Thus, as part of efforts to reach out to 'inactive' members, three of the parties began mailing free colourful party magazines to all members. The fourth, the Conservative party, livened up the format of its subscription newspaper. Party organizers view these magazines as regular ways to reinforce the sense of group identity among members – even if the magazine never gets read. For the politically interested member, the magazines offer articles and interviews to acquaint members with party leaders and policies, and to provide them with ammunition for informal political discussions. In addition, these magazines regularly suggest ways in which individual members can independently help the party cause, including suggestions about activities which individuals can undertake on their own, outside the party branch.[3] The membership magazines offer other benefits for members less interested in politics: they sponsor contests, organize and advertise vacations or offer opportunities for members to purchase novelty items bearing the party logo. Such offerings can be seen as ways of boosting the benefits offered by membership in a largely invisible national community – benefits a member can enjoy without enduring the possible (real or perceived) discomfort of attending local party meetings.

If parties are looking for 'ambassadors to the community' to carry the party message into non-party milieux, they are implicitly seeking individuals interested enough in politics to discuss and defend their political beliefs publicly. One clear strategy for attracting such politically interested members is to offer them a greater role in determining party policies. To phrase it differently, increasing purposive incentives is a good way to appeal to those with a particular interest in politics. And indeed, although it has been customary since Michels to view party leaders as adamantly opposed to expanding participation opportunities, two of the parties discussed here have done, or have considered doing, just that. In both cases proponents of change have invoked the same two arguments: (1) the mass of members have better political ideas than do the minority of party elites and activists; and (2) parties will continue losing members unless they can offer members meaningful participation privileges. Significantly, the steps implemented or discussed were once again aimed at members with low interest in traditional party participation channels.

The Labour Party in the 1980s took small but significant steps to expand participation by members, increasing the weight of constituency association voting in party conferences and the value of the individual member's vote in candidate selection. Both types of change tended to be seen as ways to make party membership more desirable to 'mere' supporters. The Labour Party also took steps to facilitate participation by individual members, introducing postal ballots into local candidate selection. These ballots enable members to participate in one of the most important local party decisions without ever attending local party meetings. These procedural changes were an overt attack on the power of extreme left activists within the Labour Party, a way of strengthening the power of the political ideas of the 'average' Labour

supporter.[4] Similarly, in the 1990s some SPD leaders called for a member-only primary to select the party's chancellor-candidate. This proposal was endorsed both as a way to ensure the selection of a candidate enjoying the broad backing of SPD members and voters, and as a way to increase the value of party membership ('Völlig Sinnlos', 1992). As a result, in 1993 the SPD successfully experimented with using an advisory ballot of all members to select the party chair, and it has promised to make greater future use of such membership ballots in party decision-making about policies and personnel. In other words, not only were the proposed or actual organizational changes in both parties intended to appeal to those more interested in politics than in party life: they were also intended to reduce one of the costs of membership – the unrepresentativeness of views that can be imposed by traditional party activists (type 1 cost).

The preceding discussion argues that in the 1970s and 1980s there were two complementary changes in the relations between these four parties and their members and potential members. On the one hand, top organizers in these parties adopted new perspectives about why their parties needed members. On the other hand, these same organizers came to recognize that many of the most valuable potential members could not be attracted by traditional membership incentives. As a result, all four parties took steps to rebalance the equation between party needs and member motivations. All four introduced new incentives explicitly intended to appeal to individuals who had little interest in traditional party activities.

This process of change is particularly easy to follow in German party records. In the 1980s leaders of both the CDU and SPD came to recognize the need to compete directly with citizens' initiatives for the membership and loyalty of those most interested in politics. Party organizers concluded that politically engaged citizens were directing their energies outside traditional parties because they wanted to join organizations in which they could make tangible contributions to their communities. Party organizers also recognized that these types of activity made electoral sense; known party supporters could generate good will for the party by engaging in such non-partisan initiatives as building playgrounds, cleaning up litter or helping senior citizens. In response to these reassessments of ways to attract both voters and members, the CDU and SPD membership magazines began actively encouraging individual party members to participate in existing non-partisan citizens' initiatives. National party organizers urged local political parties to establish their own 'non-partisan' initiatives to tackle community problems, initiatives that were supposed both to provide satisfying outlets for party members and to increase admiration for the party. This need to increase member satisfaction was highlighted in the arguments made by an SPD national party manager to support such non-traditional party projects:

> Only bridging the gap between words and deeds increases the attractiveness and drawing power of a party. Therefore it is still necessary to search

for ways beyond programs and resolutions that offer opportunities for concrete engagement, for combining ideas and deeds (Fuchs 1989).

These illustrations have been invoked to clarify the argument that, over the long run, successful parties will try to balance the equation between the reasons they want members and the reasons individuals want to become members. This argument has nothing to say about the ultimate success of such efforts. Indeed, the Labour Party's recruitment efforts in the years after the 1987 election might be viewed as a good example of a failed attempt to balance the equation between party needs and supporters' wants. Despite such changes as streamlining membership procedures and lowering annual membership dues, and despite relatively high levels of support for the Labour Party in public opinion polls, the party's high profile recruitment campaign did not produce the hoped-for increases in individual Labour Party membership.[5] Nevertheless, in the wake of the party's 1992 defeat, it is likely that Labour Party strategists will continue to develop new approaches to balancing the party/potential-member equation, either by convincing themselves that members are not useful, or by introducing new types of incentives to attract members.

This discussion has only considered parties' evaluations of the potential utility of supporters who have become formal party members. But many of the arguments about the utility of members could be equally well made about *all* supporters. For instance, much volunteer work within the party could be done as well by supporters as by formal members, and parties may not care whether regular donors are formal members. Thus, it seems likely that party organizers may not view the distinction between 'members' and 'active supporters' as a rigid one. They may well perceive an overlap between two groups which Duverger and other political scientists often portray in distinct concentric circles of diminishing activity (Scarrow 1990). However, this acknowledgement does not undercut the preceding argument – it merely adds an extra set of variables to the calculation. In weighing up the utility of members, party organizers probably also consider such factors as the ability to substitute active supporters for enrolled members, as well as the relative costs of recruiting and maintaining members as opposed to supporters.

Implications

The preceding discussion presents the outline of an interpretive framework. The discussion of British and German examples is intended to illustrate the usefulness of this framework. Assumptions about party and citizen rationality have been combined to deepen our understanding of changes which, by themselves, tend to look like isolated and meaningless organizational details. While the four parties highlighted here are traditional 'membership' parties,

the utility of this framework is not limited to the analysis of change within parties which share characteristics of Duverger's mass parties. For instance, this framework might help sort out ambivalent, and often antagonistic, attitudes of the so-called left-libertarian parties towards formal party membership (Kitschelt 1989).

The framework presented here encourages researchers to view certain changes in party organizations as the product both of changes in party perceptions of members' utility, and of changes in party perceptions of the factors likely to motivate potential members. The perspective adopted here questions the widely accepted idea that social and technological changes are the primary motors propelling the transformation of contemporary party organizations. Instead, the chosen framework emphasizes how changes in parties' competitive environments are mediated through the perceptions of party strategists. Parties have options about how they chose to react to such developments as the introduction of new communications technologies, or waning public interest in the social attractions of branch party life. This framework offers a way to go beyond dichotomous arguments about the decline or non-decline of membership parties. Those who adopt this framework will not focus on sheer membership size when making predictions about future party organizational developments. Instead, they will try to discover the reasons why parties want members, and will ask what parties are willing to offer as incentives for membership.

Because this perspective emphasizes the inventiveness of possible party responses to change, it cannot be expected to yield highly detailed predictions. Further hampering the framework's predictive utility is the difficulty of identifying 'relevant' changes in party organizers' perceptions. To admit this is not to retreat from earlier claims that parties have alterable perceptions about the utility of party members and about the motivations of potential members. Nor is it to retract the claim that changed party perceptions are likely to lead to organizational changes. It is, however, to-admit the difficulty of recognizing such changes in perception without the confirming evidence of subsequent organizational changes. Changes in party perceptions are difficult to recognize both because much party decision-making is diffuse, and because parties are not introspective. Party strategists seldom conduct systematic assessments of party organizational needs and, even when they do so, seldom publicize their conclusions. Furthermore, we are likely to dismiss as irrelevant any party pronouncements which are not backed up by at least attempts at organizational change.

In short, while the framework presented here represents what is intended to be a falsifiable theory about the nature of relations between party organizations and party members, in practice it will be difficult to gather the necessary evidence to test it. Probably the best possible test is whether it highlights party activities which, outside the framework, seem random or insignificant. The preceding German and British examples are offered to support the contention that the proposed framework does just that.

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Notes

1. One recent exception is Kitschelt's discussion of Green parties in Belgium and West Germany (Kitschelt 1989).
2. This statement reverses the relationship observed by Selle and Svasand in Scandinavian parties: 'the easier it is to be members (sic), the less likely that *membership* will lead to *activity* ' (Selle & Svasand 1989: 223).
3. The German party magazines have been particularly full of advice about 'Your Personal Campaign' – something the British magazines necessarily avoid because of election laws. But even the British magazines have given advice on independent ways in which members can help the party cause between elections, for instance, by supporting party membership drives.
4. Another aspect of this attempt to increase the power of individual party members was the struggle by the Labour Party leadership to reduce the power of trade unions in candidate selection, a struggle which was finally won in 1993.
5. However, reported individual Labour Party membership did increase by about 45,000 between 1989 and 1991, reaching a 1991 level of 311,000 (Atkins, Dawnay & Tucker 1991: 14).

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