

PART I

**General trends  
in party membership in Europe**



# Still in decline? Party membership in Europe

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## A predicted decline

In twenty years, research into political parties has gained strength in the field of European political science. The establishment in 1995 of the journal *Party Politics* confirms and supports this renewal of interest. Research into party organisation developed in a context of the growing *presidentialisation* and personalisation of political parties<sup>1</sup> and European political life. Moreover, the developments of new channels of communication<sup>2</sup> and changes in the ways political parties are funded have also had profound effects on organisational systems. Such developments have most certainly led Katz and Mair<sup>3</sup> to announce the emergence of the Cartel Party. In the area of research and analysis of party membership<sup>4</sup>, three broad directions have been followed.

The first one concerns the profile of party members. In this area, the extensive research programme undertaken by Seyd and Whiteley<sup>5</sup> on British party membership establishes the path to be followed by new research into this field. A number of scholars

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<sup>1</sup> T. POGUNTKE and P. WEBB (eds), *Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> K. PEDERSEN, 'Ballots and Technology in the Danish Parties: Enhanced Participation?', *ECPR Joint Session of workshops*, Grenoble, April 2001.

<sup>3</sup> R. KATZ and P. MAIR, 'Changing Models of Party Organization: the Emergence of the Cartel Party', *Party Politics*, 1/1, 1995, p. 5-28.

<sup>4</sup> E. VAN HAUTE, *Adhérer à un parti. Aux sources de la participation politique*, Brussels, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> P. WHITELEY, P. SEYD, and J. RICHARDSON, *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995; P. SEYD and P. WHITELEY, *New Labour's Grassroots: The Transformation of the Labour Party Membership*, Basingstoke-New

have tackled this subject in a range of countries<sup>6</sup>, and their results have been published in various special editions. Recently, a new European research initiative headed by Emilie van Haute and Wolfgang Rüdiger has been established<sup>7</sup>.

The second area focuses on the functions performed by party members. This question is again on the agenda of political scientists, as illustrated by the Cartel Party thesis and the debate on the role of party members in this new environment. In 1996, Voerman expressed the opinion that, in the case of the Social-Democrat parties, party members 'are from now on no longer an absolute necessity, either for the recruitment of the party's political staff or its representative leaders, or for communication between its elites and its grass roots'<sup>8</sup>. In 2001, Andolfatto insisted on the contrary on re-assessing the essential role of party members<sup>9</sup>. Some commentators were even predicting a re-energising of political participation and militant engagement via the party leaders and/or officers selection procedure:

'A democratization of the candidate selection process might be a way by which to increase the sense of involvement of either members or voters'<sup>10</sup>.

As for the third approach, it concerns the development of party membership in Europe and around the world. It took a concrete form in Mair and van Biezen's paper. It highlights the decline of party membership in established democracies in both relative and absolute terms:

'Thus while the overall number of members in a number of polities had actually remained stable or had even grown in the period from 1960 to the late 1980s, they had usually failed to keep pace with the enormous expansion of electorates in this same period, and hence had registered a relative decline. What we see here now, however, when extending these data through to the end of the 1990s is not only an accentuation of this decline in membership relative to the electorate, but also, for the first time, a strong and quite consistent decline in the gross numbers themselves'<sup>11</sup>.

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York, Palgrave, 2002; P. SEYD, P. WHITELEY, and A. BILLINGHURST, *Third Force Politics: Liberal Democrats at the Grassroots*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> A. WIDFELDT, *Linking Parties with People: Party Membership in Sweden 1960-1997*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1999; A. TAN, *Members, Organization and Performance: An Empirical Analysis of the Impact of Party Membership Size*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000; M. GALLAGHER and M. MARSH, *Days of Blue Loyalty: The Politics of Membership of the Fine Gael Party*, Dublin, PSAI Press, 2002; K. HEIDAR, 'Party Membership and Participation', in *Handbook of Party Politics*, London, Sage, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> See the MAPP working group website: [www.projectmap.eu](http://www.projectmap.eu).

<sup>8</sup> G. VOERMAN, 'Le paradis perdu. Les adhérents des partis sociaux-démocrates d'Europe occidentale. 1945-1995', in M. LAZAR (ed.), *La gauche en Europe. Invariants et mutations du socialisme en Europe*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> D. ANDOLFATTO, 'Les adhérents: une ressource réévaluée', in D. ANDOLFATTO, F. GREFFET, and L. OLIVIER, *Les partis politiques. Quelles perspectives?*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> L. BILLE, 'Democratizing a Democratic Procedure: Myth or Reality? Candidate Selection in Western European Parties, 1960-1990', *Party Politics*, 7/3, 2001, p. 364.

<sup>11</sup> P. MAIR and I. VAN BIEZEN, 'Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980-2000', *Party Politics*, 7/1, 2001, p. 5-21.

The creation of new political parties with new channels of communication and the new linkage potential<sup>12</sup> seems not to have affected the status quo. The ‘rough picture’ is confirmed by a number of studies. Susan Scarrow concludes that ‘[i]n short, this broad examination yields a fairly general picture of party memberships in decline by the 1990s, whether membership is measured in absolute or standardized terms’<sup>13</sup>; Heidar and Saglie comment on the situation in Norway: ‘Norwegian Parties lost more than 45 per cent of their total membership during the 1990s’<sup>14</sup>.

However, other indicators can somewhat nuance these catastrophic observations. In her impressive study of changes in political activism, Pippa Norris confirms the decline of party membership but add nuances from national contexts:

‘Official estimates confirm that party membership has ebbed since the early 1980s in Western Europe, it is true, but at the same time there has been growth in newer democracies like Slovakia and Hungary’<sup>15</sup>.

Pippa Norris emphasises the changes in political activity among citizens. There is no questioning of the decline of membership in Europe and the USA. But it is compensated to some degree by the (re)-emergence of new modes of political participation, in new social movements for example.

Our goal is to adopt a long-term perspective to deal with two questions which have received so far no clear answers. Firstly, is it really true that party membership is declining on the long term? Is there support for this claim? And secondly, using the data on party membership in the 1990s as our reference point, we will assess to what extent the decline is still accurate. Has party membership decline persisted during the first decade of the new millennium?

In order to approach these questions we proceed via a series of steps. First, we will show the change in party membership for each European country using 7 specific years between World War II and the present day as our reference points: 1946, 1956, 1966, 1976, 1986, 1996, and 2006. This method allows presenting a table summarizing the changes in party membership in absolute terms (M). To put the contemporary situation into perspective, we will take 2006 as the reference year and standardise it as 100.

We will then compare the absolute figures with the number of registered voters (M/E). It will give us a good indicator of the changes affecting party membership in relation to their potential recruitment base. The number of registered voters does not provide a perfect indicator since some political parties allow membership from the age of sixteen, and since non registered citizens are not counted as registered voters. In addition, in order to register voters might have to follow a procedure. Even when

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<sup>12</sup> K. PEDERSEN, *loc. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> S. SCARROW, ‘Parties without Members? Party Organization in a Changing Electoral Environment’, in R. DALTON and M. WATTENBERG, *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 79-101.

<sup>14</sup> K. HEIDAR and J. SAGLIE, ‘A Decline of Linkage? Intra-party Participation in Norway 1991-2000’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 42, 2003, p. 761-786.

<sup>15</sup> P. NORRIS, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

it is compulsory some citizens may fail to complete the procedure. However, this ratio can be used to provide a good picture of the ‘real’ changes in party membership. Finally, we summarize the trends revealed based on the data.

### Protocol

The data collection has been under way since 2002. Two techniques have been used predominantly. The first consists of gathering data from all European political parties to seek information about their membership between World War II and the present day. We supplemented and/or made comparisons with data that we have been able to find in the scientific literature.

The work is not fully completed yet, nor has it been free of difficulties. The first problem is the actual definition of what being a member means: ‘It is of course no secret among party-watchers that ‘membership’ can mean very different things’, Heidar stressed in 1994<sup>16</sup>. The second problem was the complete silence of a number of parties, most often confirmed by the total lack of figures in the scientific literature. Thirdly, some parties only disclosed highly fragmented information. A great deal of the data is lacking. The fourth problem concerns the length of the period investigated. Some parties have not established a systematic method of registration of their members, or have simply not archived the information. Finally, some parties have simply no idea of the level of their membership because they had no central registry or because of their federal or decentralised structure. Some organisations even referred us to the existing literature for an estimate of their membership!

Clearly, the reliability and validity of the information supplied is problematic. Even when it is possible to cross-check the data with the existing literature or by questioning the regional branches of parties, the fact remains that almost all the data is provided by the party itself. Although some figures might appear unproblematic, it is not always the case. Parties sometimes claim highly dubious numbers. The French Gaullist Party, which became the *Rassemblement pour la République* (Unity for the Republic – RPR) in the 1970s, is a well known example. Estimates from the 1970s to the 1980s go from 1 to 10. More generally, as regard France, Françoise Subileau largely commented on the difficulties linked to accessing data and its mediocre quality<sup>17</sup>. In the UK, the peak of two million members of the Conservative Party during the 1950s is also highly suspect. And these are just a couple of examples.

Nevertheless, given that this study adopts a long-term perspective, we have been able to ‘correct’ some of the second-hand data found in the literature. It has made possible to get closer to the reality of party membership both in historical and contemporary terms. However, some problems of comparison arise from the fact that some parties have been, or still are, ‘indirect-membership’ parties<sup>18</sup>. To avoid meaningless comparisons, we have included only full members for the British Labour

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<sup>16</sup> K. HEIDAR, ‘The Polymorphic Nature of Party Membership’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 25, 1994, p. 61-86.

<sup>17</sup> F. SUBILEAU, ‘Le militantisme dans les partis politiques sous la cinquième République: état des travaux de la langue française’, *Revue française de science politique*, 31/5, 1981, p. 1038-1068.

<sup>18</sup> M. DUVERGER, *Les partis politiques*, Paris, Seuil, 1981, p. 48.

Party. We were unable, however, to distinguish full from associate members of the Swedish SAP until the shift to full membership in the early 1990s.

At this stage we have an excellent database for eighteen countries: Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. However, the data for Ireland only starts at the end of the 1960s. We were unable to get a long-term perspective for Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Macedonia, Malta, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia. We have very little information for some parties, and it makes impossible to provide any overall figure at the national level.

In order to analyse the changes affecting party membership over time, we have distinguished three categories of countries according to their status with regard to democratisation<sup>19</sup>. The first category covers the ‘old democracies’ and includes states which have been democratic for the entire period under examination – from the end of the war to the present day. Type two includes states which adopted representative democracy during the 1970s. Given the lack of adequate data for Greece and Cyprus, this category only deals with Spain and Portugal. Type three refers to the final wave of democratisation after the fall of the Berlin wall and includes all the former people’s republics. In the absence of sufficient or credible data for a number of parties, we were unable to offer any serious analysis for the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Estonia. To complete this incomplete panorama we have taken a look at the fate of party membership in the former ruling parties, a number of which having undergone a process of ‘social democratisation’.

### **The ‘old democracies’**

The evolution of the absolute levels of party membership in the old democracies reveals a variety of patterns (see the ratio delta/highest number of members for the period). At one extreme, the UK presents a substantial evolution over time: the highest number of members during the period is six times higher than the lowest number of members, which is considerable. The Irish situation, on the other hand, displays a high level of stability. The delta only reaches 22,600, which represents only 18% of the highest number of members for the period. Based on this indicator, six of the thirteen countries show an absolute number of members at its lowest level in the most recent period.

If we take 2006 as a reference point (100) for each country, the ‘worst year’ is in the large majority at the end or at the beginning of the period: six occurrences in 2006, one in 1996, two in 1946, and one in 1956. It largely corroborates the pattern described by Mair and van Biezen: party membership is declining in absolute terms in a considerable number of countries. Only two countries register their lowest levels in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, while the highest levels were reached in these decades in 7 cases out of 13, and never in 1996 or 2006.

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<sup>19</sup> S. HUNTINGTON, *The Third Wave. Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1992; G. HERMET, *L’hiver de la démocratie ou le nouveau régime*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2007.

**Table 1.** Party membership in the 'old democracies' of Europe (in bold the highest level; underlined, the lowest)

	1946	1956	1966	1976	1986	1996	2006	Delta	Delta / highest number of members
Austria	1,122,449	1,243,572	1,461,766	1,473,578	1,413,831	1,035,146	<u>900,088</u>	573,490	0.39
Belgium	<u>332,848</u>	443,136	479,244	593,790	<b>639,731</b>	488,875	404,638	306,883	0.48
Denmark	<u>554,180</u>	<b>601,929</b>	535,505	356,769	261,179	202,962	<u>173,023</u>	428,906	0.71
Finland	<u>235,611</u>	380,356	521,581	<b>590,757</b>	568,338	427,707	<u>356,851</u>	355,146	0.60
France	<b>1,314,163</b>	612,331	<u>555,000</u>	968,074	751,406	634,829	822,538	759,163	0.58
Germany	1,180,818	<u>935,219</u>	1,114,575	1,954,779	<b>1,969,278</b>	1,887,772	1,494,183	1,034,059	0.53
Ireland				<u>103,237</u>	<b>127,329</b>	106,143	104,738	22,591	0.18
Italy	3,728,282	<b>4,566,732</b>	4,497,829	4,199,732	4,033,205	2,073,285	<u>1,626,181</u>	2,102,101	0.46
Netherlands	722,235	<b>753,934</b>	576,984	386,096	385,062	<u>297,935</u>	301,444	455,999	0.63
Norway	263,435	391,418	408,636	385,320	<b>478,522</b>	249,369	<u>187,024</u>	291,498	0.61
Sweden		1,255,494	1,193,184	1,375,928	<b>1,504,510</b>	392,202	<u>333,762</u>	1,170,748	0.78
Switzerland				<b>392,100</b>	361,791	<u>302,872</u>	340,541	89,228	0.23
United Kingdom	1,604,280	<b>3,680,310</b>	3,235,772	2,392,587	1,672,575	925,325	<u>551,337</u>	3,128,973	0.85

**Table 2.** Party membership in the 'old democracies' of Europe: 2006 = 100 (in bold the highest level; underlined, the lowest)

	1946	1956	1966	1976	1986	1996	2006	Delta
Austria	125	138	162	<b>164</b>	157	115	<u>100</u>	64
Belgium	<b>82</b>	110	118	147	<b>158</b>	121	100	76
Denmark	320	<b>348</b>	309	206	151	117	<u>100</u>	<b>248</b>
Finland	<b>66</b>	107	146	<b>166</b>	159	120	100	100
France	<b>160</b>	74	<u>67</u>	118	91	77	100	92
Germany	79	<u>63</u>	75	131	<b>132</b>	126	100	69
Ireland				<u>99</u>	<b>122</b>	101	100	22
Italy	229	<b>281</b>	277	258	248	127	<u>100</u>	129
Netherlands	240	<b>250</b>	191	128	128	<u>99</u>	100	151
Norway	141	209	218	206	<b>256</b>	133	<u>100</u>	156
Sweden		376	357	412	<b>451</b>	118	<u>100</u>	<b>351</b>
United Kingdom	291	<b>668</b>	587	434	303	168	<u>100</u>	<b>568</b>

Are these trends still valid if we analyse party membership in relative terms, in relation with the total number of registered voters (M/E ratio)? As mentioned, the number of registered voters does not represent the entire recruitment base for parties. However, this ratio can be used to provide a good picture of the 'real' changes in party membership. Additional steps could be undertaken to fine-tune the data. A study related to the age structure of registered voters would be very instructive, for example, to the extent that it has been demonstrated that all forms of political participation decline sharply after a certain age.



The M/E ratio, or membership density, reveals the unwritten story of the ‘old democracies’. The ratio is the lowest for the last year studied (2006) for almost all instances. Switzerland narrowly escapes the observation, as does France. But once again, mention should be made of the specificities of the French context, where the two main parties – the *Parti socialiste* and the *Union pour le Mouvement populaire* – have set up extremely simple affiliation procedures in the perspective of the nomination of the 2007 presidential candidate. For the other countries, the ratio is the lowest in the contemporary period, and appears rather weak. In ten cases out of thirteen, the M/E ratio is below 6%. It is only higher in Switzerland, Finland, and above all in Austria where the ÖVP and the SPÖ remained sufficiently powerful to reach almost 15% in 2006.

Among the thirteen states under analysis, only Germany, France, and Ireland have never exceeded 6%. This means that the decline is well documented and sometimes spectacular. With the highest percentage as a reference point, the loss is 20.77 points for Sweden, 18.46 for Denmark, 17.80 for Norway, 11.59 for Austria, 11.31 for the UK, 10.81 for Italy, 9.88 for Finland, 9.85 for the Netherlands, 4.16 for Belgium, 3.91 for Switzerland, 3.63 for France, 2.43 for Germany and 1.84 for Ireland.

**Table 3.** Party membership density (M/E) in the ‘old democracies’ of Europe (in bold the highest level; underlined, the lowest)

	1946	1956	1966	1976	1986	1996	2006
Austria	<b>32.54</b>	26.95	29.91	29.36	25.89	17.95	<u>14.74</u>
Belgium	5.91	7.44	7.87	<b>9.40</b>	9.14	6.79	<u>5.24</u>
Denmark	<b>22.76</b>	21.71	16.93	10.04	6.68	5.09	<u>4.30</u>
Finland	9.73	14.59	<b>18.62</b>	15.79	14.15	10.46	<u>8.74</u>
France	<b>5.25</b>	2.29	1.97	2.81	2.05	<u>1.62</u>	1.87
Germany	3.78	2.64	2.89	<b>4.65</b>	4.34	3.11	<u>2.42</u>
Ireland				4.87	<b>5.21</b>	4.03	<u>3.37</u>
Italy	13.31	<b>14.08</b>	12.65	10.39	8.85	4.25	<u>3.27</u>
Netherlands	13.69	<b>12.31</b>	7.74	4.06	3.59	2.53	<u>2.46</u>
Norway	13.43	<b>17.03</b>	16.98	13.86	15.43	7.53	<u>5.47</u>
Sweden		<b>25.61</b>	21.91	23.14	24.07	5.94	4.84
Switzerland				<b>10.50</b>	8.58	<u>6.59</u>	6.93
United Kingdom	4.83	<b>10.56</b>	9.00	5.97	3.87	2.11	<u>1.25</u>

The observation on the contemporary low level of party membership is thus generalised. However, national contexts reveal various developments over time. Three broad patterns can be distinguished. Figure 1 highlights a relatively linear decline from World War II to the present day. The extent of the decline varies across countries but the linearity is fairly well established. Seven countries are characterised by this pattern: Austria, Denmark, the UK, Italy, Norway, the Netherlands, and Switzerland.

**Figure 1.** Linear decline in the ratio of party members to registered voters (M/E)

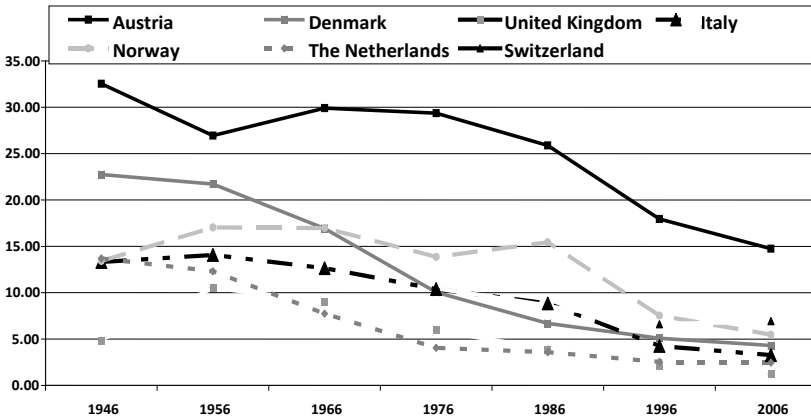
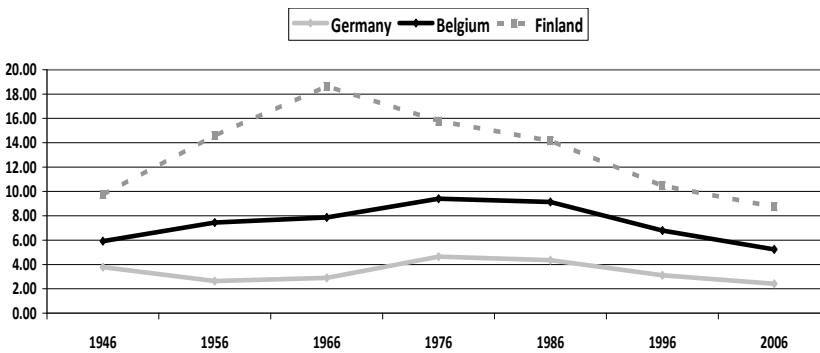


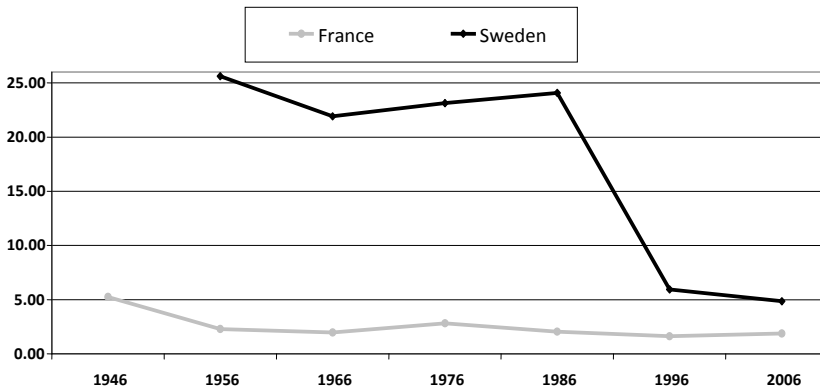
Figure 2 presents inverted ‘U’ curve patterns. In this case, we observe a positive development of the M/E ratio until the mid-1960s or the 1970s, followed by a persistent decline. Three countries follow this pattern: Germany, Belgium, and Finland.

**Figure 2.** Inverted ‘U’ curve of the ratio of party members to registered voters (M/E)



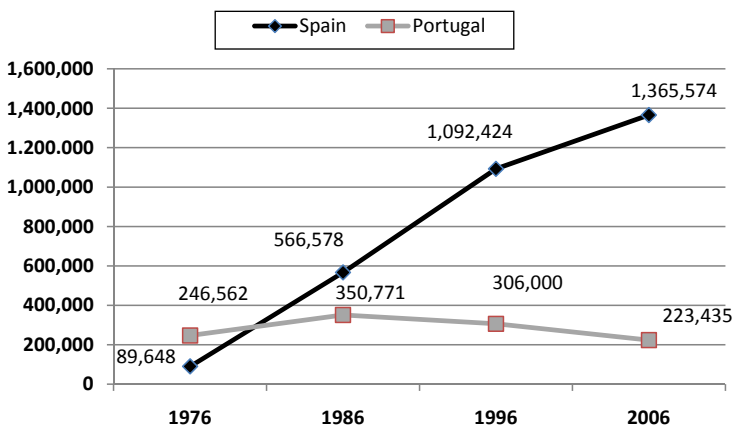
Finally, two countries stand out with specific or deviant patterns: Sweden and France. In Sweden, it is extremely difficult to conduct a longitudinal study because of the SAP’s new status of direct membership party at the beginning of the 1990s. This conversion meant that the million membership of the Social Democratic Party became 150,000 members in the mid-2000s. The effect on the M/E ratio is obviously exceptional and a spectacular drop was recorded between 1986 and 2006.

The French case is different. The trend differs from that of the other old democracies because of its cyclical nature. After a decline in the 1950s and 1960s, the ratio rose during the 1970s and began to fall again during the 1980s and 1990s. However, during the contemporary period the ratio has begun to rise again the context of the 2007 presidential election.

**Figure 3.** Deviant cases of M/E ratio

### Party membership in new democracies

What are the characteristics of party membership in the new democracies of Southern Europe after the fall of the authoritarian regimes in the mid-1970s? Only partial answers can be offered to this question since the data available for Greece and Cyprus are insufficient to support a serious case.

**Figure 4.** Membership of Spanish and Portuguese parties (M)

As regard Portugal, party membership is declining. In Spain, starting from a pattern of very low levels of party membership, growth has been recorded throughout the period in the context of an increasingly bipartisan political system opposing the People's Party (PP) and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). Both parties have run large-scale recruitment campaigns<sup>20</sup>. It explains how the number of party members in Spain has grown from 90,000 to 1,350,000 in 30 years.

<sup>20</sup> P. DELWIT, 'Les partis socialistes d'Europe du sud: des organisations performantes?', *Pôle Sud*, 27, 2007, p. 21-41; F. CHADEL, 'Le partido popular. Transformations organisationnelles

In Portugal, after a period where the ‘new’ parties attracted members after April 1974, membership rapidly stagnated. A peak was reached in 1986 with a total of 350,000 members. Since then, a noticeable decline has begun. In 2006, Portuguese political organisations counted only 225,000 members left.

As regard the M/E ratio, Portugal is in line with the trends identified for the ‘old’ democracies.

- The country entered a phase of linear decline in party membership once the democratic transition was over;
- The country also witnesses contemporary low levels of membership.

Spain, however, stands out as an exception. Not only has the absolute level of party membership (M) increased steadily over time, but the same can be said of the relative level (M/E). Spain is the only country in Europe with an absolute and linear increase in party membership. At the end of the period under analysis, the membership ratio, albeit modest – 4.03% – is Spain’s highest. In 2006, it was 3.62 points higher than the lowest point recorded at the beginning of the transition in 1976.

**Table 4.** Party membership density (M/E) in the ‘new’ democracies in Europe (in bold the highest level; underlined, the lowest)

	1976	1986	1996	2006
Portugal	3.80	<b>4.53</b>	3.51	<u>2.50</u>
Spain	<u>0.38</u>	1.95	3.36	<b>4.03</b>

Referring to the statement made by van Biezen and Mair, can we agree on the idea of a persistent decline in party membership over time, both in absolute and relative terms? In the majority of cases, the answer is positive.

Since the publication of their work, the figures have shrunk even further in a number of countries. Considering the thirteen ‘old’ democracies, to which we now add Spain and Portugal, we observe the persistence of the decline in seven cases: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The table that appears in *Party Politics* needs refinement, however. Four countries show a pattern of stabilisation of party membership: Austria, Ireland, Italy, and the Netherlands. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the two deviant cases of France and Spain.

In France, the number of members has been growing since 2005, reaching the levels of the end of the 1990s. Spain is the ‘perfect exception’. After the transition to democracy, party membership has grown steadily, even if Laura Morales recorded stagnation after 2003<sup>21</sup>. In this context, the present levels are noticeably higher than the levels recorded 10 years ago.

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au service d’une efficacité électorale’, in P. DELWIT (ed.), *Démocraties chrétiennes et conservatismes. Une nouvelle convergence?*, Brussels, Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 2003, p. 147-166.

<sup>21</sup> L. MORALES, ‘Ever less engaged citizens? Political participation and associational membership in Spain’, *ICPS Working Paper*, 220, 2003.

### Party membership in ECE countries

Let's now turn our attention to the levels and evolution of party membership in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989.

Predictions have been hardly encouraging. In 1998, Hofferbert claimed:

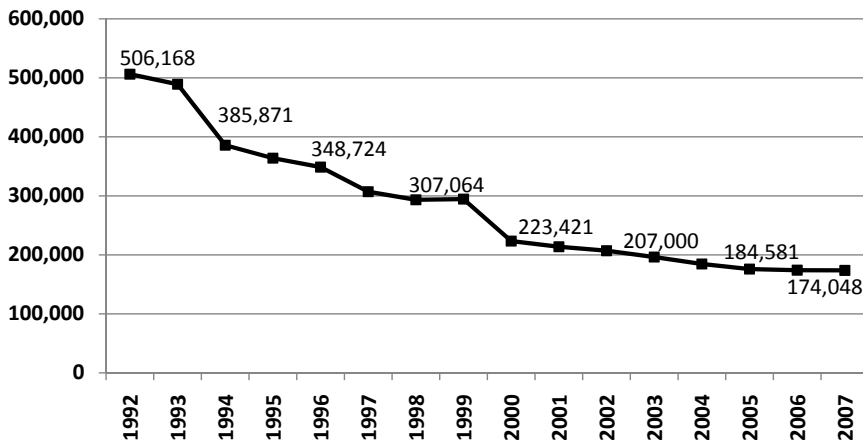
‘On the other hand there is little evidence, in the emerging democracies that mass membership will be a principle defining characteristic of the parties’<sup>22</sup>.

Ingrid van Biezen points out the absence of any recruitment efforts:

‘More generally, and in contrast with many of the externally created parties (in particular socialist ones) in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western Europe, a strong membership organization was not perceived to be an ‘organizational necessity’ (Epstein, 1980). Indeed, a membership organization was seen to provide few benefits to the party not already available from alternative human or financial resources’<sup>23</sup>.

Empirical verification is no easy task since for a large number of countries the data is either really scarce or not credible. At this stage it is only possible to depict the evolution for three countries: the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Slovakia. Rather surprisingly, the trend is completely different for each of the three cases.

**Figure 5.** Party membership in the Czech Republic (M)



The Czech Republic is characterised by a complete collapse of party membership. From a total of 506,168 members in 1992, the figure fell to 170,048 in 2007. This dramatic drop is due to for a large part to the dwindling membership of the

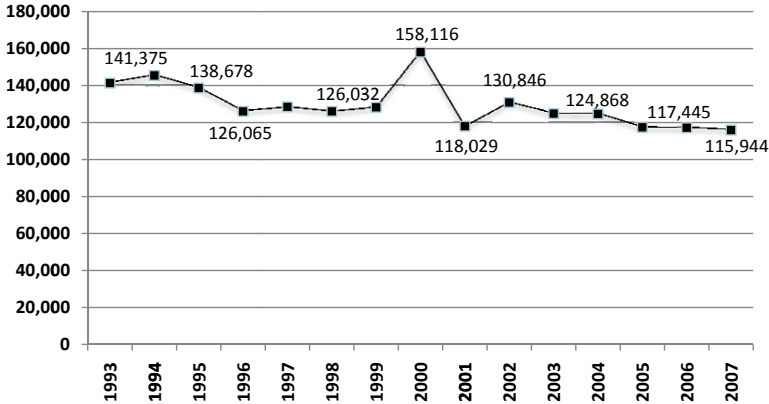
<sup>22</sup> R.I. HOFFERBERT, ‘Introduction: Party Structure and Performance in New on Old Democracies’, *Political Studies*, 46, 1998, p. 423-431.

<sup>23</sup> I. VAN BIEZEN, ‘On the Theory and Practice of Party Formation and Adaptation in New Democracies’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 44, 2005, p. 154.

Communist Party. In fact, the membership of the Social Democrats (CSSD) and the Civic Democrats (ODS) has not followed this pattern of decline.

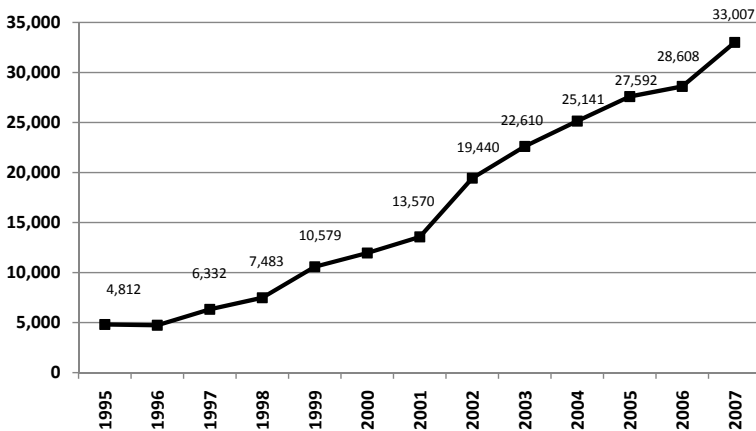
In Slovakia a certain degree of stability can be observed since the division of Czechoslovakia into two independent states. We must definitely refute the claim made by Norris; there is no sign of increase over time. Party membership has stagnated around 120,000 with a peak of 158,000 members in 2000.

**Figure 6.** Party membership in the Slovak Republic (M)



Finally, the picture is quite different in Estonia. Since the mid-1990s, when data became available, party membership has grown steadily. In twelve years it has been multiplied by 7. From less than 5,000 members in 1995, it has risen above 30,000 in 2007. The trend is similar to that we have described for Spain: a low number of members at the start, and a steady increase over time.

**Figure 7.** Party membership in Estonia (M)



### The fate of the former ruling communist parties

A relatively important factor affecting party membership in Eastern and Central European countries is the fate of old communist parties. To a large extent their fate has defined how the M/E ratio progresses. At the start of the period, they were the only parties with mass membership potential, with the possible exception of some agrarian or peasant parties<sup>24</sup>. Most of these organisations have become ‘social democratised’, becoming the social democratic parties of the political system. Two iconic examples illustrate this: the Polish Social Democratic Party, which is the descendant of the Polish Workers’ Party, and the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the heir of the Bulgarian Communist Party. There is, however, a notable exception: the Bohemia-Moravia Communist Party, which has retained both its name and communist identity.

What was the fate of party membership for these three parties? Overall we witness a very sharp drop in membership levels. This was expectedly marked in the initial years following the fall of the Berlin wall. But it has carried on ever since. This data makes it possible to grasp the very low party membership, insofar as it is possible to make a reasonable assessment on former People’s Republics.

The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the Baltic States display different situations but the fact remains that party membership levels are low. Romania is a very difficult case to assess since the data supplied by the parties is not very reliable.

**Table 5.** Party membership of former communist parties (M)

	<i>KSCM</i>	<i>KSS</i>	<i>SDRP-SLD</i>	<i>BSP</i>
1990	562,529			485,896
1995	196,224	8,893	60,000	320,437
2000	125,000	19,032	98,283	206,493
2005	90,000	22,831	79,978	201,708

At this stage, some conclusions can be drawn. Over the long term, the decline in party membership is confirmed, in both absolute and relative terms. In comparison with the three decades after World War II, the contemporary situation reveals noticeably lower levels of party membership in Europe. In the short term, the situation is less clear cut. Out of the thirteen old democracies included in our study, seven show evidence of persistent membership shrinkage, but six do not. From this comparative examination, some nuances can be added to the picture of general decline.

- The first concerns the organisational changes which a party may undergo. Parties switching from indirect membership to direct membership see their numbers decimated almost inevitably. The example of the Swedish Social Democrats is striking: from one million members at the end of the eighties to 150,000 in the new century.

<sup>24</sup> J.-M. DE WAELE, ‘Les partis agrariens en Europe centrale et orientale’, in D.-L. SEILER and J.-M. DE WAELE (eds), *Les partis agrariens et paysans en Europe*, Brussels, Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 2009, p. 69-84.

- The second concerns the fate party membership of the old communist parties in Central and Eastern Europe. The sharp decline in their party membership is not compensated by the members joining the new parties in the context of the democratisation of these countries.
- It is therefore possible to suggest one common hypothesis. Are some parties more affected than others by dwindling party membership? We suggest that mass parties<sup>25</sup> or community parties are proportionally more affected by the decline than cadre parties<sup>26</sup>.

To test this hypothesis we selected 10 mass-based parties and 10 cadre parties. For the first category we selected the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany, the Labour Party and the Conservative (Tory) Party in the UK, the Danish Social Democrats (SD), the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and their heir, the Democratic Left (PDS), the Norwegian Labour Party (DNA), the Swedish Social Democrats (SAP), the Dutch Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and the French Communist Party (PCF).

The selected cadre parties are the German Liberal Party (FDP), the Swedish Christian Democrats (KD), the French Socialist Party (PS), the British Liberal Democrats (LD), the Irish Labour Party (ILP), the Danish Venstre (V), the Swedish Moderate Party (MSP), Democratie66 in the Netherlands and the Flemish Liberals in Belgium (OpenVLD).

**Table 6.** Evolution of membership figures in mass-based parties (1975-2005)

	2005	1975
CDU	93.80	100
SPD	56.21	100
Labour	27.02	100
Tory	16.67	100
SD	43.39	100
PCI-PDS	31.48	100
DNA	36.43	100
SAP	13.03	100
CDA	61.63	100
PCF	27.49	100
<b>Average</b>	<b>34.30</b>	<b>100</b>

For both groups of parties we chose 1975 (= 100) as our reference year, and we compared the situation with how it stands thirty years later (2005).

<sup>25</sup> M. DUVERGER, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> P. DELWIT, 'European Social Democracy and the World of Members. The End of the Community Party Concept?', in P. DELWIT (ed.), *Social Democracy in Europe*, Brussels, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2005.



As regard mass parties, the decline is particularly striking for the majority of the parties. On average and in absolute terms, the parties have lost two thirds of their members over thirty years. None of the parties have more members in 2005 than in 1975. Only the CDU avoided the dramatic decrease, but it is only due to the fact that its recruitment base grew after the German reunification. The other parties have faced huge losses. The British Labour Party has lost three-quarters of its members, and the Conservatives, 85%! The bloodbath of the communist parties is equally striking. In 2005, the heir of the Italian Communist Party could claim no more than 30% of its level of 1975. The French Communist Party has simply collapsed, clinging onto no more than a quarter of its 1975 membership roll.

What can be said about the cadre parties? Here too, the total number of members is on average lower in 2005 than it was in 1975. But the proportions are quite different: 88%, against 34.3% for the mass parties.

**Table 7.** Evolution of membership figures in cadre parties (1975-2005)

	2005	1975
FDP	87.83	100
KD	44.10	100
PS	96.91	100
LD	45.16	100
ILP	224.12	100
V	88.59	100
MSP	95.39	100
D66	1.923.09	100
Open VLD	166.69	100
Average	<b>87.66</b>	100

For three of the cadre parties, the membership is larger in 2005 than it was in 1975: the Irish Labour Party, D66 in the Netherlands, and Open VLD in Belgium. The French Socialist Party maintained its level. In fact, only two organisations have suffered a very pronounced decline of their membership: the British Liberal Democrats and the Swedish Christian Democrats.

This distinction between party types suggest a new approach to party membership change. We may have to refer to a decline of membership in mass-based or social inclusion parties rather than a general decline<sup>27</sup>. If it is the case, the perspective

<sup>27</sup> S. NEUMANN (ed.), *Modern Political Parties: Approaches to Comparative Politics*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1956.

suggested by Duverger would be turned on its head: Duverger saw no future for political parties except for the mass-based parties!

In order to break down this scenario one step further, what can be said of the contemporary levels of party membership? This question can be investigated with a new angle: an examination of the green parties. Indeed, most of them emerged in the 1980s<sup>28</sup>.

Two main observations can be made based on the politically significant parties for which we have data.

- Their membership levels are not high. Green parties do not draw on a huge base of followers. This statement may be linked to two of their general characteristics:
  - (a) The formal act of joining the party had (originally) a very relative meaning. In the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s there was often no systematic recruitment campaign or a centralised membership register;
  - (b) When a formal membership system existed, it required usually a more demanding procedure than in the majority of the other parties. Pre-membership or probationary periods were common. Formal membership was only validated when the applicants had given proof of a minimum commitment in the party. For a long time – and it is still sometimes the case – green parties were not interested in gaining political legitimacy via a large membership roll.
- The initial levels have increased, but for the most part very modestly. This growth may be partly related to institutionalisation of these new parties, but also to the increasing attention paid to the recruitment, and the loosening of the recruitment rules. After its electoral victory in the regional and European elections in 2009, the French-speaking Belgian Green Party (Ecolo) made a formal appeal to its supporters and members to confirm their membership status and to officially become members: ‘A lot of you have supported Ecolo in the last few years. United, we can stand as a force for innovative and (im)pertinent proposals and we can provide new responses to old or new questions by continuing to play our part, with our future-oriented, imaginative approach; in short, we can continue to be a positive inspiration for society, to animate the public debate and to seek for consensus on our proposals. Membership to Ecolo means expressing your support for a political project. Plus, it will be a financial boost, so that we can keep you regularly informed. It implies the chance of an involvement in a wide range of events and the right to vote in the meetings. To continue or to become a member, all you have to do is (please) pay your subscription fee for 2010 without delay’<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> P. DELWIT and J.-M. DE WAELE (eds), *Les partis verts en Europe*, Brussels, Editions Complexe, 1999.

<sup>29</sup> Email from Ecolo to its members and supporters sent on December 28, 2009.

**Table 8.** Party membership of green parties (M)

	<i>Grunen</i>	<i>Ecolo</i>	<i>VIHR</i>	<i>Les verts</i>	<i>Gleng</i>	<i>Groen- Links</i>	<i>MPG</i>	<i>Groen!</i>	<i>Grüne</i>	<i>Verdi</i>
1980	18,320									
1981	15,352						1,979			
1982	25,000						5,800	870		
1983	25,222						2,500			
1984	31,078	808		992			3,000	835		
1985	37,024	959		1,079			4,000	959		
1986	38,170	836		1,122			5,000	1,113		
1987	42,419	617		1,198			5,500	1,375	2,000	
1988	40,768	891		1,825			8,500	3,000	2,000	
1989	41,171	1,403	674	4,915			8,000	2,499	2,000	
1990	41,316	1,212	596	5,076		15,900	7,600	2,130	2,000	
1996	48,034	1,968	1,147	3,000	218	11,700	6,950	3,272		15,992
2001	44,053	4,008	1,660	10,372	267	15,037	6,701	6,271	1,810	15,956
2006	44,695	4,231	2,713	8,513	440	21,383	7,213*	5,462	4,237	39,440*

\* 2005 figures.

### Conclusion

The days of mass party membership are over. Analysed over a long period of time, the decline of party membership is beyond doubt. All the old democracies give evidence of a clear decline, both in absolute and relative terms. In the short term, however, the picture is not so clear. Some parties face a persistent decline beyond any doubt. However, some cases invalidate the idea of a continuous and linear decline.

In the new democracies of the 1970s and 1990s, the analysis highlights modest levels of membership. In Eastern and Central Europe, the members/registered voters ratio (M/E) is below 5%. The new democracies have started with what has become the norm: relatively few members. However, the course of events since the transition to democracy has followed various directions: in Spain and Estonia, party membership has increased over time, while in other countries it has shrunk, as in Portugal or the Czech Republic. These different fates are comparable to the various trends in the 'old' democracies. Next to the linear decline between World War II and the present day we find occurrences of an inverted U curve.

Analysed through the lens of the organisational characteristics of the parties, we have identified an important element to be taken into account: there is a significant difference between mass-based parties and cadre parties; between parties which have historically based a substantial part of their political influence on significant grassroots and those for which this dimension is absent or less obvious. As far as the mass parties are concerned, there is no doubt that membership is melting away. On average, our study showed that they lost two-thirds of their members between 1975 and 2005. However, the cadre parties display a much lower tendency to crumble. On average, their levels stand in 2005 at 88% of their levels in 1975. If this trend can be verified on a larger scale, it would be more accurate to speak of a membership decline

of mass-based parties, whose fate appears to be sealed, than of a general decline in party membership in Europe. The analysis of a significant number of green parties as a case study of new parties tends to confirm this view. These parties emerged with a small number of members. Their membership grew at the turn of the new century. Yet they are characterised by low membership levels.