

A new politics? The challenges of multi-speed party membership

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Opening up leader selection to non-member supporters is a growing trend among political parties. Qualitative research on Labour's new grassroots suggests that efforts to convert a larger electorate into an organised activist base need to appreciate the full range of motivations for partisan commitment.

The last year has witnessed significant change in the organisation of the Labour party. Though much of that change has been unique to the British Labour Party, the changing role for members and increased significance of non-member support raises important new questions for any party moving towards more open affiliation structures. The party's 2015 leadership contest attracted over 200,000 new members and supporters as well as nearly 150,000 affiliated trade union members: a tripling of the party's support base. These seemingly minor structural changes have had implications for the party, implications not limited to decisions about who should lead the party, but for the very nature of its grassroots. I have been exploring these implications from both the supply and demand side of partisan support – what does this change in the party mean for how the party organises and what does it mean for those who support it?

The move to a more open affiliation structure and the expansion of intra-party democracy are not unique to Labour in Britain. Parties across Europe have been

changing the way they engage with supporters, opening up affiliation options to looser forms of support. ‘Light’ supporter and online options are becoming more available and in some cases, parties are opening up political rights to these wider constituencies of support; such as voting rights in leader selections and policy development.¹

Models of engagement and involvement familiar in newer parties are being adopted by more traditional established parties. In some ways this is a logical response to the changes in society that have made formal party membership less attractive. Declines in class and social ties, and changes in leisure opportunities and communities, mean that party membership is an increasingly unusual choice, rather than the default it might once have been. Expanding affiliation options and making it easier to get involved in party activity outside of formal membership would seem to be the natural response to these shifts. But these organisational changes have consequences.

For established parties, the shift to wider engagement described by Susan Scarrow as ‘multi-speed’ membership, is not a complete transformation but rather a layering of new affiliation options on top of older structures. Scarrow argues that this is where the tension lies. Retaining formal membership whilst also appealing to a wider group of supporters with, in many cases, the same rights and privileges, raises questions about the distribution of influence within the party. The adoption of more open affiliation can challenge the party’s very ‘narrative of representation’.² Parties like Labour, that have grown out of a cleavage representation model, defending group interests and using membership to reinforce links to the groups they represent, have particular difficulties with the shift to a ‘multi-speed’ model of representation. In such parties, the widening of affiliation presents a significant shift in the party’s notion of political legitimacy: who the party represents and who should define its values.

Though Labour has moved a long way from the cleavage representation model, that ‘narrative of representation’ appears to still be strong. It helps explain why the party struggled with the notion of allowing supporters to sign up to vote in the leadership contest over the summer of 2015, and why the party has sought to restrict options this time around. In 2015, the party initiated a vetting procedure during the contest that involved rigorous checking of supporter sign ups; their social media activity, past political behaviour and support. Whilst this may have been aimed at avoiding legal challenge (and was no doubt fuelled by those who publicly sought to undermine the process such as high-profile members of other parties) it also suggests the party was struggling with the full implications of a ‘multi-speed’ way of organising. A year later, the party re-instituted the six month cut-off for member-

ship, restricted the period for registering as a supporter to a two-day window, and raised the price of doing so from £3 to £25. The act of establishing rules for who can and cannot have a vote, especially those based on previous affiliations and social media activity, is indicative of a party that demands pure allegiance and commitment, a party in the cleavage model, a party not entirely comfortable with ‘multi-speed’ organising.

Embracing a more open model of party organisation has consequences. It is not possible to open up engagement and involvement whilst demanding unwavering loyalty. Evidence from countries where primaries for candidate and leader selection are more established suggests that whilst such contests can increase membership, they may also lead to a less attached support base. Rahat *et al* have found significant fluctuation in party membership around selection contests in Israel where two of the largest parties have employed primaries for both candidate and leadership selections since the 1990s.³ Membership doubles, sometimes triples around these contests. But it is not just the numbers. Partisan support is also weak and volatile. Party members are not loyal, moving between parties and even voting for other parties. There is some evidence of these shifts in the British Labour Party where there have been significant fluctuations in membership around leadership contests and elections. Of those joining the Labour Party as full members in 2010, a year containing both an election and leadership contest, only 50 per cent were still members five years later. Twenty-five percent of these members didn’t last the year.⁴

The decision to move to a more open model of affiliation not only challenges the nature of representation in the party, changing who the party is responsible to, but can have consequences for organisational resource: what the support base does for the party. If party members and supporters who are attracted to the party in order to influence a leader selection are less likely to stay or remain loyal, what implications does this have for the party’s organisational capacity? Whiteley and Seyd’s work on Labour party membership during the last period of significant organisational change (when the rights to leader selection were expanded to individual members) suggests that an expansion in political rights does not lead to an expansion in active support. They found that whilst membership increased during the 1990s, average rates of participation declined. They concluded then that expanding opportunities for plebiscitary activity is ‘ultimately self-defeating’ if the aim is to encourage wider grassroots activity.⁵

Are we likely to see a similar dynamic in this latest shift in member organisation? It is too early to tell how active or loyal the new members of the party will be in the long-term. But we can take a look at the existing active and loyal mem-

bership and consider what it is that encouraged them to become active and remain within the party. Examining the reasons members give for their membership and what encourages them to stay in the party and be active within it expands our understanding of partisan activity, and in doing so it offers insight into how changes in the incentives the party offers may change the make-up of the party itself.

Since May 2015 I have conducted interviews with party members who are, or have been, active in the party prior to the leadership contest. Interviewees were aged between 18 and 80 and had been members of the party ranging from three months to over fifty years. Their memberships were held across thirteen different constituencies and five regions of the UK (though most had spanned more than one constituency during their membership). All were, or had been, active members of the party, that is, they contributed more to the party than simply paying their membership fee. All interviewees had at some stage been active in campaigning (offline), attending meetings or had stood as representatives of the party: activities commonly defined as ‘high intensity’, those that require greater efforts on the party’s behalf. Interviews with these active party members explored when, how and why they joined, their first impressions, their expectations, what they do and what they did, what it means to them to be a party member and what they expect from the party in return. The interviews also directly addressed the issue of political rights, the leadership contest, and the new supporter scheme which gave these political rights to a group of supporters beyond the membership.

These interviews revealed interesting and unexpected subtleties in the relationship members have with their party and what draws them to party activity. Firstly, selective incentives (motivations stemming from personal benefit and opportunity, such as career opportunities or benefits accruing from the process of participation itself), featured more prominently in members’ narratives of how they came to join than the existing, predominantly quantitative, literature of membership has revealed. This was particularly so for younger and newer members. Secondly, party members did not rate political rights, rights to vote in leadership selections for instance, particularly highly. These benefits were of little value compared to other forms of engagement with the party. That’s not to say that members would be happy for these rights to be taken away, rather that they did not play a role in drawing members to the party. Perhaps unsurprisingly, active party members and supporters are attracted by opportunities for active participation, not political rights, and this raises questions about the incentives that parties offer and what they hope to get in return. Contrary to expectation, members do not wholly object to such rights being extended to non-members. For parties expanding affiliation options and offering political rights as incentives, the acceptance of that change by existing members is

important, but simply expanding the numbers of affiliates may not deliver a highly active membership base.

Joining the party

“[It] appealed to me from a quite self-interested perspective; I thought this is probably quite a good opportunity to practice my leadership skills.”

The incentives party members draw on in describing their routes to membership are multiple and complex. All of the incentives categorised in the oft-replicated General Incentives model devised by Whiteley and Seyd: selective process and outcome incentives, collective incentives (positive and negative) and ideological, expressive or altruistic ones, were mentioned by participants in my research.⁶ However, some motivations clearly played a far greater role than others and patterns emerge from these findings. Collective and ideological incentives have consistently come out on top in party member surveys.⁷ Yet while collective incentives were mentioned in interviews, selective incentives (either process or outcome ones) appeared to have a more influential role in prompting joining. Whilst there was often a tendency to downplay these personal benefits (perhaps because admitting to them is less acceptable in party culture), they were important in providing members with a reason to join the party. That opportunities to be politically active are valued by active members is perhaps unsurprising, but it is nevertheless important for parties who need volunteers, particularly those willing to engage in high intensity activities.

Notably, political rights did not feature in interviewees’ accounts of the incentives that drew them to party activity in the first place. Though it is clear that political rights do attract members and supporters to parties (over 105,000 new members and 112,000 supporters signed up in 2015 to have a vote in the leadership contest) for those that are active in the party, these rights don’t feature in their routes to activism. Political rights are being used by parties to attract wider constituencies of support, but an in-depth reading of what motivates the most active members suggests that organisationally, parties may not be offering the right incentives.

Expanding political rights

“I suppose there a tiny bit of me that says, if they have the same rights as me, why am I paying ten times the amount they are. But the majority of me thinks – this is what’s healthy for the party.”

We would expect to see a tension when political rights are expanded beyond formal membership. As noted, this shift in authority within the party is no minor administrative switch. It raises important questions about influence and ownership. Scarrow notes the potential conflict in trying to retain membership as well as expand affiliation.⁸ Parties wishing to retain members would be advised to limit rights to intra-party democracy, whilst those seeking to mobilise a wider support base would benefit from opening them up. Indeed, the recent expansion in political rights to non-member supporters in the Labour Party was not universally welcomed. But we might be at risk of overstating the scale of this tension. Party members in my interviews were surprisingly unconcerned by their rights being offered to non-members. Party members' commitment extends well beyond what they get out of it themselves. Whilst many expressed a personal concern or discomfort with the supporter scheme, they discounted these views in favour of an assessment of what was best for the party.

The willingness of party members to discount their own personal concerns in view of what is right for the party suggests that a purely cost-benefit reading of membership incentives is the wrong approach. A similar dual preference structure, part selfish, part altruistic, is discussed by Hirschmann in response to critiques of his theory of exit. He writes, 'it may be even more realistic to assume that every "political animal" is part ideologue and part reward-oriented, and is therefore willing to trade off a certain amount of opportunism on the part of the party for its power and success at the polls'.⁹ This dual preference structure was fairly uniform across all interviewees both young and old, new and longstanding. Even those who were disappointed at the outcome of the leadership election, and members whose contribution over many years far outweighed the commitment of £3 supporters, were able to rationalise the change from the party perspective.

Incentives and representation

"I definitely wouldn't have paid £3 to have those rights"

This support for a scheme that would appear, on the face of it, to diminish the hard-won rights of full members, may seem surprising. An explanation may be found in the motivations that have drawn active members to the party in the first place. The significance of selective outcome and process incentives revealed in this research is key. Active members join for active opportunities. New members cannot derive benefits such as job opportunities and learning new skills without getting involved face to face. Selective process benefits, such as being part of a campaign with like-minded people, cannot be realised from a sedentary position. These

benefits are not diminished by the extension of political rights. Perhaps such rights take little away from party members simply because they are not highly prized in the first place. Or at least compared to other party ties, they don't figure that highly.

Another explanation is to be found in the history of the party itself. Representation within the Labour party has always involved affiliation as well as membership. It was not until 1918, several years after it was founded, that individual members were allowed to join the party directly. Being founded on collective affiliation, the member and supporter distinction has always been more complicated in the Labour Party. Until the 2015 rule change, the number of Trade Union affiliates with leader selection rights vastly outnumbered the membership. So perhaps for party members there is not an expectation of exclusive rights. The party's 'narrative of representation' therefore might just be broad enough to accommodate the move to 'multi-speed' affiliation successfully.

Conclusion

The changing environment makes adaptation necessary, especially for parties which still heavily rely on volunteer campaigning and donations. Whilst party membership is not a redundant concept, it is also clear that parties need to branch out beyond their membership base if they are to survive. Expanding political rights, such as votes in leadership selections, has proved a popular means of attracting a wider constituency of support and, as the Labour party's recent experience would demonstrate, one that has proved successful in recruiting a larger party base.

There are tensions inherent in this model however. A simple rule change has implications for the nature of representation in the party: who it is responsible to, who has ownership of the party. The change has not been a comfortable one for the party despite its history of affiliation. The vetting of supporters who signed up under the 2015 rules, and the subsequent narrowing of the terms of affiliation, suggests that the party is not comfortable with operating in a flexible 'multi-speed' way. If this widening of affiliation follows the patterns seen elsewhere, however, a more loosely attached and changing membership base might be the inevitable outcome, and this raises a second important question for the party: what sort of grassroots is being appealed to and what will it deliver organisationally?

Qualitative research with active party members suggests that political rights are not enough to sustain an active grassroots. It would appear that those most active in high intensity forms of participation are not drawn to the party by such rights. Instead selective outcome and process incentives are key. These opportunities

prompt those whose values align with the party to make the move to membership and to contribute more than the membership fee. Whilst the extension of political rights may not greatly concern those whose attachment to the party is sustained by more involved activities, the kinds of supporters that are attracted by such incentives might not be the type of support base the party needs.

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Notes

- 1 S.E. Scarrow, *Beyond party members: changing approaches to partisan mobilization*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.
- 2 Ibid., p207-9.
- 3 O.Kenig, G.Rahat, M.Philippov and O.Tuttnauer, *Shifting Political Sands: When Politicians, Voters and [Even] Party Members are on the move*, Paper prepared for ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops ‘Contemporary Meanings of Party Membership’, Salamanca, 10-15 April 2014.
- 4 National Executive Committee, 21 July 2015, unofficial minutes – Ann Black’s report July 2015 executive, <http://www.leftfutures.org/2015/07/ann-blacks-report-from-labours-july-executive-2/>.
- 5 P.Whiteley, and P.Seyd, *High-intensity participation: the dynamics of party activism in Britain*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press 2002, p147.
- 6 Ibid., P.Seyd and P.Whiteley, *Labour’s grass roots: the politics of party membership*, Oxford, Clarendon 1992; P.Whiteley, P.Seyd, J.Richardson, P.Bissell, ‘Explaining Party Activism: The Case of the British Conservative Party’, *British Journal of Political Science* 24, 1994.
- 7 A.Gauja and E. van Haute, ‘Members and Activists of Political Parties: A Comparative Perspective’, Presented at the IPSA World Congress of Political Science panel “What is party membership”, Montreal, 19-24.7.14; K.Heidar, “‘Little boxes on the hillside’. Do all party members look the same?’ Presented at the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops “Contemporary Meanings of Party Membership”, Salamanca, 10-15.4.14; K.Pedersen, L. Bille, R.Buch, J.Elklit, B.Hansen, H.J.Nielsen, ‘Sleeping or Active Partners?: Danish Party Members at the Turn of the Millennium’, *Party Politics*, 10, 2004; Scarrow, *Beyond party members*.
- 8 Scarrow, *Beyond party members*.
- 9 A.O.Hirschman, “‘Exit, Voice, and Loyalty’: Further Reflections and a Survey of Recent Contributions’, *Social Science Information* 13, 1980, p447.