



Membership of UK political parties

Standard Note: SN/SG/5125
Last updated: 17 August 2009
Author: John Marshall
Section: Social and General Statistics

This Note collates all available figures on party membership, and documents trends in membership since 1928. In 2005, only 1.3% of the electorate was a member of one of the main political parties. The latest figures show the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties have memberships of approximately 250,000, 166,000 and 60,000 respectively. At the peak of membership in the early 1950s, however, the Conservatives claimed nearly 3 million members while Labour claimed more than 1 million members.

Although there are a number of important limitations to the data, there is strong evidence of a trend decline in individual membership of the three largest parties since the 1960s. This trend appears to be continuing today. However, there is some deviation around what appears to be a relatively linear long-term decline – in the mid-1990s, for example, Labour managed to reverse the decline in its membership. This paper also provides an overview of theories used to explain this trend, which entails a brief examination of the generally upward trend in the membership of ‘green’ and political pressure groups.

In addition to membership figures for the Conservative, Labour and Liberal parties, this Note also presents recent membership figures for smaller parties, the broader Labour movement and the revenue streams derived from membership and subscription fees.

Finally, the UK experience is compared with Europe. The evidence shows that the UK now has one of the lowest rates of political party membership among established European democracies. However, the UK is not the only country to have undergone a significant decline in party membership since the 1960s – rather, there is evidence for a general decline in membership across almost all European countries.

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as being up to date; the law or policies may have changed since it was last updated; and it should not be relied upon as legal or professional advice or as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.

Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Trends in UK party membership	3
2.1	Data issues	3
2.2	Individual party membership, 1928-2008	5
	Largest three parties	5
	Table 1: Individual party membership: Conservative, Labour and Liberal Dem	8
	Chart 1: Party membership, 1928-2008	10
	Table 2: Party membership as a proportion of the electorate	12
	Chart 2: Party membership as a proportion of the electorate, 1964-2005	12
	Explaining long-term membership decline	12
	Chart 3: Membership of 'green' groups, 1971-2008	17
	Chart 4: Membership of political pressure groups, 1976-2005	17
	Chart 5: Trade union membership, 1892 - 2006-07	18
	Smaller parties	18
	Table 3: Individual party membership: BNP, Green, SNP and UKIP	19
	Chart 6: Membership of minor parties, 1998-2008	19
2.3	Broader membership of the Labour Party	200
	Table 4: Membership of the Labour Party movement	21
	Chart 7: Labour Party composition, 1900-01 - 2007	23
2.4	Membership revenues	233
	Table 5: Membership and subscription fee revenues, 2001-2007	23
3	European comparison	24
	Chart 8a: Trends in European party membership - high membership countries, 1960-1999	25
	Chart 8b: Trends in European party membership - low membership countries, 1961-2005	25

1 Introduction

While political party membership is likely to be less relevant as an indicator of political participation in the modern age, it remains an interesting indicator of the health of political parties. This Note collates all available figures on party membership, and documents trends in membership since 1928.

While there are a number of important limitations to the data, there is clear evidence of a relatively consistent decline in individual membership of the three main parties since the 1950s. The decline is not entirely uniform, but is punctuated by short periods of membership growth and stabilisation. Over this period, the Conservative Party has retained its status as party with the largest individual membership base. The latest figures show the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties have memberships of approximately 250,000, 166,000 and 60,000 respectively. By 2005, only 1.3% of the electorate was a member of one of the main political parties, falling from nearly 4% in 1983.

A number of explanations have been proposed for this decline. Although this paper does not seek to adjudicate between the competing theories, it does provide an overview of different arguments and briefly explores the proliferation of pressure groups in the UK.

It is important to explore the broader context of declining membership in the UK. Small political parties are generally expanding their membership bases in the UK, with the UK Independence Party registering the largest membership base with 15,900 members. The Labour Party's links with the trade union and socialist movement means that membership of the broad labour movement is in fact much larger than individual membership data suggests. Finally, the UK currently has one of the lowest rates of party membership in Europe, although it should be noted that Europe's established democracies have experienced declines in membership of a similar magnitude since the 1960s.

2 Trends in UK party membership

The *Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000* is the main piece of legislation specifically affecting political parties. It is principally concerned with the financial regulation of political parties. It does not, however, include any specific provisions regarding the membership of such parties, although it does require that registered political parties provide the independent political regulator established by the legislation – the Electoral Commission – with details of the party's leader, nominating officer and treasurer.¹

2.1 Data issues

There is no requirement for political parties to make their membership figures publicly available. Furthermore, changing membership structures have meant that the quality of the available data can dramatically differ between parties. However, there are a number of resources for obtaining historical membership figures.

Since its creation with the *Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000*, the Electoral Commission has required that all registered political parties publish financial statements.² Parties "that fail to submit their statements by the statutory deadline automatically incur a civil penalty."³ These statements, which run from 2002, often provide

¹ *Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000* (chapter 41), s24

² Electoral Commission, *Statement of Accounts Index*, retrieved 2 July 2009

³ *Ibid.*, p1

membership numbers; however, as the Conservative Party's annual reports illustrate, there is no requirement that parties publish details of their membership beyond its financial contribution to the party.

Until 2004, the Labour Party's National Executive Committee published an annual Conference Report providing details of its membership base. These documents provide a series running from 1928, when Labour first published figures for individual membership following the provisions of the *Trade Disputes Act 1927*. This Act significantly reduced the role of unions in political parties:

The provision in the 1927 Act to alter the basis of the unions' political levy to 'contracting in' rather than 'contracting out' led to a fall in the party's affiliated union membership from 3.5 to 2 million and a drop of approximately 20 per cent in its union income.⁴

The Labour Party now publishes membership numbers in its annual Financial Statements.

The Conservative Party, however, has never produced any systematic publication detailing its membership, although sporadic approximations have been made by various authors. As academics David Butler and Gareth Butler have noted, "The Conservative Party has seldom published figures of its total membership."⁵ This is partly explained by the fact that the Conservative Party is a much looser association than the Labour Party – party membership has generally been defined by the payment of a subscription fee, and many of the rosters kept by local parties have not been submitted or lost. Until recently, the Conservative Party claimed it did not keep a centralised membership database. The Party has chosen not to publish membership figures in its annual Financial Statements.

The Liberal Party was traditionally a decentralised organisation and, accordingly, did not publish any regular document containing membership figures. When the Liberal Party merged with the Social Democratic Party in 1988, a centralised membership system was engendered. However, membership details were not published regularly by the new Liberal Democrat headquarters until it was required to submit its accounts to the Electoral Commission. Membership figures have also been made available from the party's internal leadership and presidential elections.

Peter Mair and Ingrid van Biezen have observed that the figures claimed by parties are "inevitably crude estimates" in many cases.⁶ Many commentators have also cast doubt upon the integrity of party-provided membership figures, especially those for the 1945-1980 period. Mair and van Biezen explained that,

... it should also be recognized that the parties themselves are also not very reliable sources for data on party membership. For reasons that are perhaps too complex to go into in detail in this brief overview, there exists a tendency among both political parties and political analysts to place a particularly high value on the traditional notion of the 'mass' party. That is, both party leaders and political observers tend to assume that parties, when properly functioning, will enjoy a relatively large mass membership that is drawn from a wide range of society. Conversely, parties which lack such a mass base are often seen to be in some ways elitist or even as insufficiently legitimate. Hence almost all political parties, of whatever hue, claim to be active in the pursuit of

⁴ David Powell, *British Politics, 1910-1935*, 2004, Routledge, p149

⁵ David Butler and Gareth Butler, *Twentieth Century British Political Facts, 1900-2000*, 2000, p141

⁶ Peter Mair and Ingrid van Biezen, "Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980-2000", *Party Politics*, 7:1, 2001, p7

members, and become concerned if levels of affiliation appear to be in decline. Members in this sense offer a source of legitimation to parties, both within the parties themselves and also without. For this reason, parties are often likely to claim larger (active) memberships than seems in fact to be the case.⁷

Looking at the UK in particular, Butler and Butler suggest that Conservative figures before 1993 had been “greatly exaggerated”,⁸ while party membership specialists Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley have said that Labour “certainly exaggerated” its figures before the 1980s.⁹ Furthermore, Andrew Thorpe has explained that:

... the Labour party's individual membership figures have always been regarded as somewhat suspect, especially from 1956 when constituency Labour parties (CLPs) were forced to affiliate on a membership of at least 800, and still more from 1963 when that figure was raised to 1000, at which point, in theory, an actual membership of zero would have been recorded as 618,000.¹⁰

Now that political parties are required to publish their financial accounts, the figures (where given) are likely to be more reliable. Ultimately, however, the membership numbers claimed by political parties remain unverified and should be treated with an element of caution.

2.2 Individual party membership, 1928-2008

The figures presented here are aggregates for each party, and are thus insensitive to different categories of membership.

Largest three parties

Table 1 charts the individual membership numbers for the Conservative, Labour and Liberal parties in the UK. Chart 1 depicts these trends graphically, and fits a line of best fit where there is missing data in order to more clearly illustrate trends.¹¹ Table 2 and Chart 2 depict party membership as a proportion of the total electorate, and thus control for demographic shifts. It is important to note several issues before examining the tables and charts: firstly, the scale of the y-axis in Chart 1 varies by party because membership totals differ; secondly, the joined lines for Conservative membership in 1969 and 1970 indicate a range estimate (in both cases, 1.12 to 1.34 million); thirdly, as Table 1 clearly indicates, many of the early data points for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats are estimates that could entail a significant margin of error.

Historical overview

Membership of the Labour Party grew considerably before World War II, and unsurprisingly subsided significantly during the war itself. However, it was in the immediate post-war period that Labour's membership saw its largest rises as membership more than doubled its pre-war level. Neither the Conservative Party nor Liberal Party provided membership records before the war, although the Conservatives also registered a membership peak in the early 1950s.

⁷ Ibid., p7

⁸ David Butler and Gareth Butler, *Twentieth Century British Political Facts, 1900-2000*, 2000., p142

⁹ Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, “British Party Members: An Overview”, *Party Politics*, 10:365, 2004, p356

¹⁰ Andrew Thorpe, “Reconstructing Conservative Party Membership in World War II Britain”, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 62:2, p227

¹¹ For the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, a polynomial function is fitted where deemed appropriate – of fifth order in the case of the Conservatives and cubic in the case of the Liberal Democrats. The R^2 statistic – a measure of how well the regression line fits the observed data – for the two curves is 0.60 and 0.74 respectively. In the case of Labour, however, there is a full time-series and regression line is required.

The charts show that there has been a trend decline in the number of party members over the past 50 years. Table 2 reinforces this finding, showing that membership of the three main parties dramatically fell from 3.8% of the electorate in 1983, to just 1.3% in 2005. The fact that the electorate has been steadily increasing in size (by 20% between 1964 and 2005) – thereby further reducing the *proportion* of people who are members of a political party – suggests that the decline in party membership is actually more substantial than the raw numbers in Table 1 and Chart 1 suggest.

However, it should be noted that this trend has not been perfectly uniform. Rather, there is some deviation around what appears to be a relatively linear long-term decline. The most prominent deviation is the large drop in the number of members that had occurred by the 1980s from the heights of membership in the early 1950s; as suggested above, however, some of the changes may be attributed to over-reporting (the large drop in 1980, for example). The reduction in membership of all main parties between the 1987 and 1992 elections – depicted in Chart 2 – is also particularly marked. Labour punctuated the long-term decline and experienced an upturn in membership numbers, and as a proportion of the electorate, in the mid-1990s; shortly after forming, the Liberal Democrats also briefly increased their membership in the early 1990s.

Many of the recent periods of slower decline, or even membership increases, for the Conservatives and Labour coincide with their electoral fortunes: in general, parties are successful at accumulating members during periods of opposition than when in government. This is illustrated not only by the “Blair effect” that appeared to exist before Labour took power in 1997, but also by the dramatic decrease in membership experienced by the Conservative Party toward the end of the Thatcher Government and subsequent Major Government.

Conservative Party

While membership figures for the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties are fairly complete, there are significant gaps in the time-series for the Conservative Party. On this point, Butler and Butler explained:

In 1953 it was claimed that the party had reached an all-time record membership of 2,805,832, but this was a temporary peak. One estimate for 1969-70 suggests that the party's membership in Great Britain was then 1.12 to 1.34 million. The Houghton Committee estimated that in 1975 the Conservatives had an average membership of 2,400 per constituency, which is equal to about 1.12 million. Membership of the Young Conservatives fell from a peak of 157,000 in 1949 to 80,000 in 1959 and to 50,000 in 1968. In 1982 an internal study suggested that membership was just under 1.2 million and a similar figure was found in 1984. Estimates in the press in 1993 suggested that previous membership totals had been greatly exaggerated, and that the figure had in any case fallen sharply, so that in 1997 there were probably only a quarter of a million members.¹²

The Conservatives retained the largest *individual* membership of any British political party until the 1990s, with membership peaking at nearly 3 million in the early 1950s. By the mid-1990s, membership had substantially declined and stabilised at around 400,000. The *Daily Telegraph* report in July 2008 that the last official party estimate registered 290,000 members in 2006.¹³ A subsequent *News Of The World* report in December 2008 claimed to have

¹² David Butler and Gareth Butler, *Twentieth Century British Political Facts, 1900-2000*, 2000, pp141-142

¹³ *Daily Telegraph*, [Labour Party membership falls to lowest level since it was founded in 1900](#), 30 July 2008

uncovered Conservative Party documents showing that membership had fallen to 250,000 – if correct, this would imply a 40,000 drop over the duration of David Cameron’s leadership.¹⁴

Labour Party

Looking specifically at the Labour Party, we observe a rapid rise in individual membership during the 1930s. This growth, however, was wiped out by the onset of World War II. Following the war, Labour immediately surpassed their pre-war membership levels in 1945; this was the first year of a dramatic post-war expansion that saw membership peak at just over one million members in 1953.

Although membership shortly dipped below this peak, it was not until the 1960s that membership decline started to accelerate – by the late 1970s, membership had fallen to around 660,000. The large drop in membership registered in 1980 – from 666,000 to 348,000 – probably resulted from changing reporting standards: political party experts Seyd and Whiteley noted that “Labour’s membership figures were certainly exaggerated until the early 1980s”.¹⁵

Labour Party membership remained relatively constant through the 1980s and early 1990s, before experiencing a rise as Tony Blair led a major membership drive in the mid-1990s. Having reached 405,000 in 1997, membership has since steadily declined every year to reach 166,000 in 2008.

It is important to note that the Labour movement does not solely include *individual* party members, although Labour has specified that to be an official member of the party an individual must be a member of their constituency party.¹⁶ As the “Broader membership of the Labour Party” section explains in more detail below, the Labour Party’s individual membership has been supplemented by members of affiliated trade unions (who receive a block vote at the Party Conference) and the Socialist and Cooperative parties. Once these members are added, the Labour Party has been able to count many more members than the Conservative Party.

Liberal Democrat Party (and its predecessors)

Seyd and Whiteley have estimated that membership of the Liberal and Social Democrat parties peaked in the 1980s – reaching approximately 183,000 in 1983 and 138,000 in 1987.¹⁷ However, doubt over the accuracy over their figures arises from the sudden reduction that appears to occur once membership figures provided by the party became available in 1988. Alternatively, this departure in the series could be explained by a reduction in membership resulting from the merging of the two parties to form the Liberal Democrat Party in 1988.

Shortly following the inception of the Liberal Democrat Party, membership increased from around 80,000 to 100,000 – where it remained until 1996. However, between 1997 and 2001 membership fell steadily to reach approximately 70,000. Individual membership then remained fairly constant until 2006, whereafter it fell away to 60,000 in 2008.

¹⁴ *News Of The World*, [Gone-servative party!](#), 20 December 2008

¹⁵ Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, “British Party Members: An Overview”, *Party Politics*, 10:365, 2004, p356

¹⁶ *Labour Party Rule Book 2004*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p357

Table 1

Individual party membership: Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat

000s

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat
1928		215	
1929		228	
1930		277	
1931		297	
1932		372	
1933		366	
1934		381	
1935		419	
1936		431	
1937		447	
1938		429	
1939		409	
1940		304	
1941		227	
1942		219	
1943		236	
1944		266	
1945		487	
1946	911	645	
1947	1,200	608	
1948	2,200	629	
1949		730	
1950		908	
1951	2,900 c	876	
1952		1,015	
1953	2,806	1,005	
1954		934	
1955		843	
1956		845	
1957		913	
1958		889	
1959		845	
1960		790	
1961		751	
1962		767	
1963		830	
1964		830	
1965	2,250 c	817	
1966		776	
1967		734	
1968		701	
1969	1,120 - 1,340	681	
1970	1,120 - 1,340	680	
1971		700	
1972		703	
1973		665	
1974		692	
1975	1,120	675	
1976		659	
1977		660	
1978		676	
1979		666	
1980		348	145 c

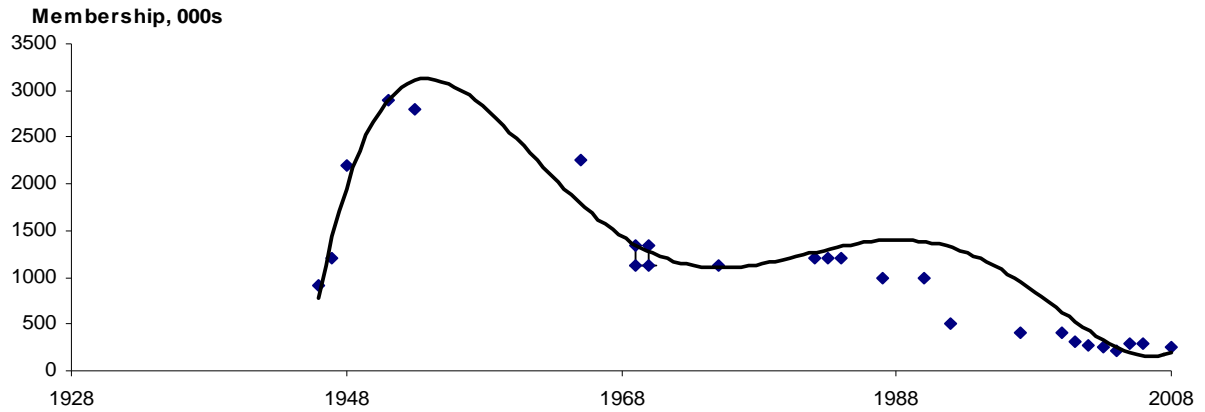
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat
1981		277	
1982	1,200 <	274	
1983	1,200 c	295	145 c,*
1984	1,200 <	323	
1985		313	
1986		297	
1987	1,000 c	289	138 c,*
1988		266	80 *
1989		294	81
1990	1,000 c	311	77
1991		261	91
1992	500 c	280	101
1993	400 c	266	101
1994		305	101
1995		365	94
1996		400	99
1997	400 c	405	87
1998		388	89
1999		361	83
2000	401	311	69
2001	311	272	73
2002	272	248	73
2003	248	215	71
2004	215	201	73
2005	300	198	73
2006	290 +	182	72
2007	na	177	65
2008	250 ?	166	60

Notes: * includes Social Democratic Party; c circa; < less than; na not available; ? News Of The World estimate; + *Daily Telegraph* estimate; dotted line indicates the merger of the Liberal and Social Democrat parties to form the Liberal Democrat Party.

Sources: Butler and Butler, *Twentieth-Century British Political Facts*, 2000; *Daily Telegraph*; Electoral Commission; Liberal Democrat HQ; *News Of The World*; press reports from recent leadership contests; Seyd and Whiteley, "British Party Members: An Overview", *Party Politics*, 2004; *The Independent*; Andrew Thorpe, "Reconstructing Conservative Party Membership in World War II Britain", *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2009.

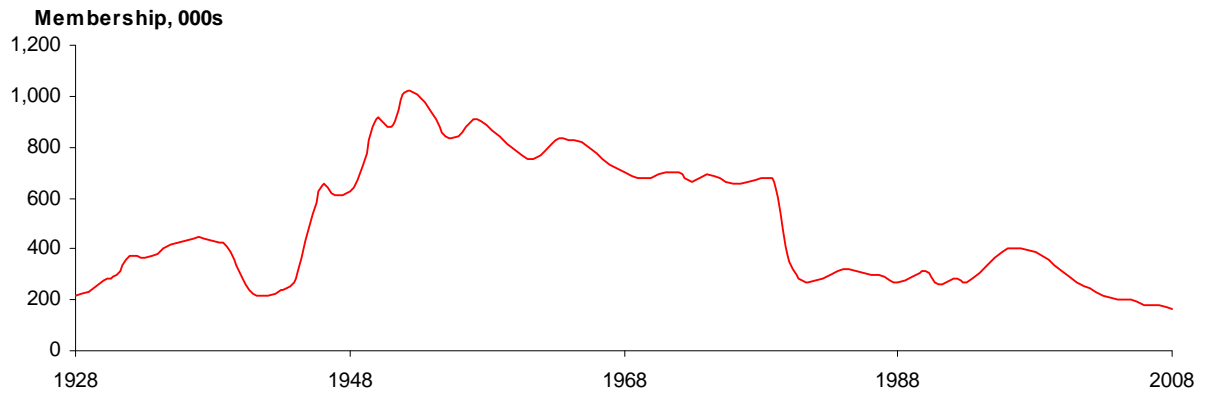
Chart 1: Party membership, 1928-2008

Conservative Membership



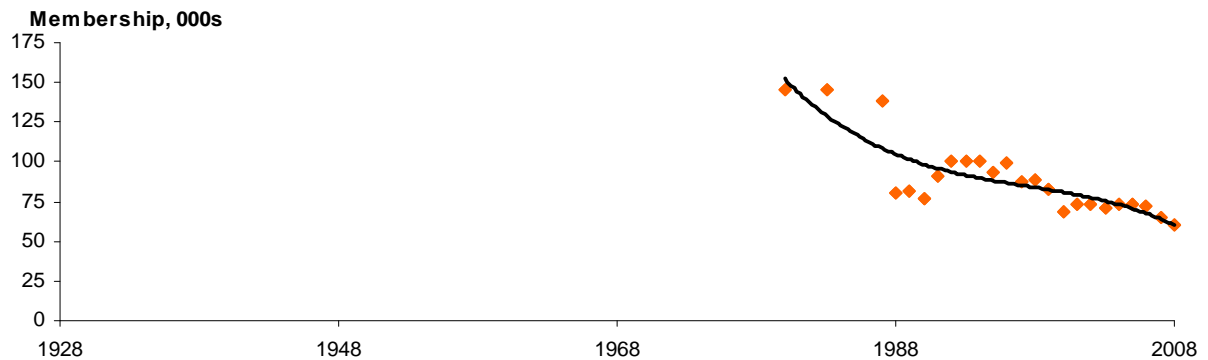
Sources: Butler and Butler, 2000; Electoral Commission; Daily Telegraph; *News Of The World*; recent leadership contests; Seyd and Whiteley, 2004; Thorpe, 2009.

Labour Membership



Sources: Butler and Butler, 2000; Electoral Commission.

Liberal Democrat Membership



Sources: Electoral Commission; recent leadership contests; Seyd and Whiteley, 2004.

Table 2

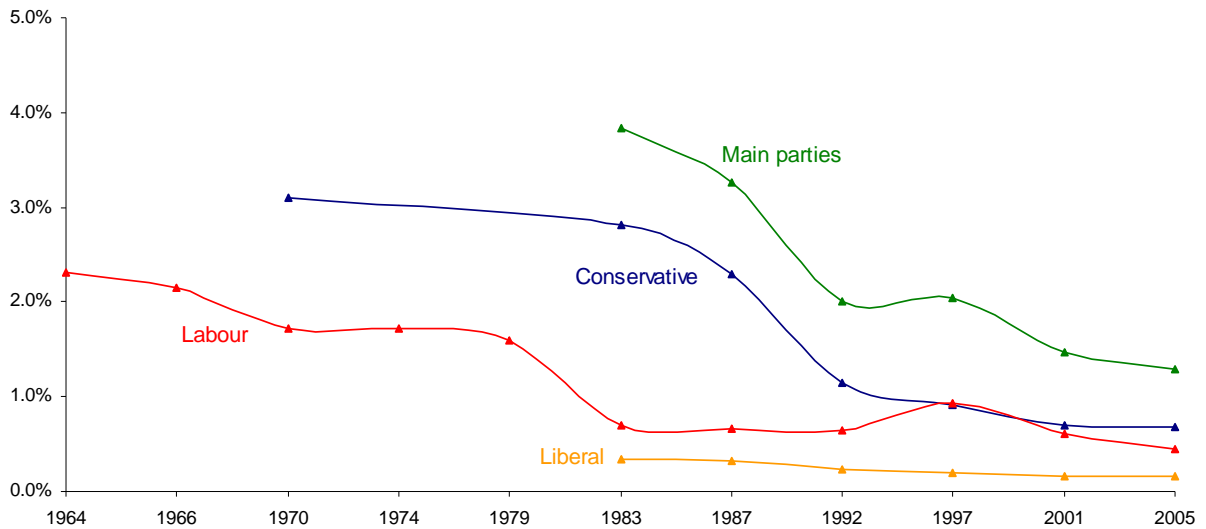
Party membership as a proportion of the electorate

	Membership of party, % of electorate				Electorate, 000s
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal	Main parties	
1964		2.3%			35,894
1966		2.2%			35,957
1970	3.1% *	1.7%			39,615
1974		1.7%			40,256
1979		1.6%			41,573
1983	2.8%	0.7%	0.3%	3.8%	42,704
1987	2.3%	0.7%	0.3%	3.3%	43,666
1992	1.1%	0.6%	0.2%	2.0%	43,719
1997	0.9%	0.9%	0.2%	2.0%	43,846
2001	0.7%	0.6%	0.2%	1.5%	44,403
2005	0.7%	0.4%	0.2%	1.3%	44,246

Note: * takes the centre of the range specified in Table 1.

Sources: Office for National Statistics, *Annual Abstract of Statistics*, 2008; see Table 1.

Chart 2 - Party membership as a proportion of the electorate, 1964-2005



Sources: see Table 2.

Explaining long-term membership decline

A host of political and societal factors have been posited as explanations of changes in party membership – both unique to the UK and experienced more widely among developed democracies. Summarising previous academic research, Thanapan Laiprakobsup recently identified two strands of explanation – sociological and individual-level theories:

One group of political scientists concentrates on the impact of '*sociological factors*' on party organization. Primarily, they argued that political parties and party systems in Western Europe derive from the historically ideological and cultural conflict. The structure of party organizations is determined by the ideological conflict of different social cleavages. Lipset and Rokkan (1967) argued that the Western European party system resulted from the conflict-integration dialectic process. The national and industrial revolutions determined the political conflicts which were along the social class line. The effort of the central governments to unify and bureaucratize the nations led to the conflict between urban versus rural dwellers and major versus minor cultures. On the other hand, the emergence of industrialized and manufactured economies brought about the conflict between the employers and the workers and between the urban industrialists and the peasant land owners. According to Lipset and Rokkan (1967), political parties function as the political organizations representing particular social cleavages, and they tried to mobilize citizens along the demographic (or social cleavage) line.

As a result, the structural organization of political parties was created and organized in accordance with what social classes the founders were affiliated with. The political parties of the upper and middle class were created by the groups of noble men, financier, and urban industrialists (with the collaboration of rural peasant and land owners) in order to oppose the emergence of mass-based political organizations by the working class. Duverger (1954) pointed out that instead of expanding party memberships, the right wing parties did not pay much attention to party membership, but they carefully recruited the members. As a result, the size of the rightist parties is smaller than that of the leftist parties. On the other hand, the left-wing parties increased recruiting memberships from the affiliated organizations such as trade unions or worker associations.

A second group of political scientists concentrates on the '*rational-individual decision*'. They argued that the change of party organization derives from the decision of party leaders. Influenced by circumstances, the party leaders make a decision whether the parties need to expand party memberships or to pursue other purposes. Sometimes the leaders believe that expanding party memberships does not help the party win elections. Kirchheimer (1966) believed that modern political parties do not attempt to associate with particular social classes and expand party memberships and branches. Instead, the leaders are more likely to appeal to every group of voters and interest groups which can generously provide financial support. According to Kirchheimer (1966), the change of party's strategy results from the economic transformation referred to the transformation from manufacturing-oriented to service and technological-oriented economy. This transformation has changed how people perceive politics and societies in that they are being detached from political parties and partisanship, and they individualize their voting decision (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Inglehart 1990). As a result, the modern political parties are less likely to increase party membership because party leaders want to appeal more to voters rather than only to party members. The leaders' decision whether to expand party memberships depends upon how much the parties have to pay for electoral costs (campaign or recruitment) and which strategies can provide adequate budget for costs.

It does not mean that party leaders are not going to concern about the decrease of party membership. Scarrow (1996) pointed out that both the Labour and SPD leaders have been concerned with the gradual decline of party membership. The leaders sometimes put party membership issue aside, but they sometimes consider it as an urgent problem. Nevertheless, when the election time (every 4 or 5 years) comes, the leaders cannot rely on membership dues to support the election costs which always increase. Moreover, since people have been less affiliated with political parties, and they have increasingly participated in other political activities (Dalton 2000), the level of membership dues has also decreased. As a result, the leaders cannot rely on membership dues, and they have to find some other efficient ways. Party leaders probably choose to be temporarily supported by organized interest groups during election campaign, and the parties will campaign the issues which the groups want the public to hear. The leaders may choose to receive governmental support such as party aids. As elected officials, party leaders can extract some portions of governmental budget in order to redistribute to their constituents (Katz and Mair 1995). These ways can more efficiently reduce party's election cost than membership dues.

The leaders' decision is more or less influenced by external factors such as illegal immigrants or globalization. Scarrow (1996) argued that whether or not party leaders are concerned about party membership trend depends on the demand and supply of the electoral market. If voters see that the number of party's memberships is declining, they can no longer support the party because it means that even their loyal members are no longer supporting the party. As a result, the leaders will try to recruit more party members in order to show the public that they are still in business. On the other hand, if voters do not care about party membership trend, then the leaders will not waste their time on the issue, and they consider other venues of support. This group of political scientists is more likely to focus on the demand of voters.¹⁸

Looking at the UK case in particular, political historian David Powell pointed to a divergence between the Conservative and Labour parties on the one hand, and the Liberal Party on the other, in the early part of the twentieth century. Powell argued that the Conservative and Labour parties more effectively adapted to the expanded franchise, the emancipation of women and political divisions to develop mass membership political groups:

After 1918, however, the expansion of the electorate made it ever more vital to the parties that they appeal successfully to the previously excluded groups – to women voters especially – and that party organisations became as inclusive as possible. The Conservatives were most successful in this regard, just as they had been in late Victorian times, supplementing a mass-membership Conservative party with a range of constituency-based social clubs and other organisations that drew even larger numbers of people into the orbit of Conservative activity. Labour built a mass membership on an individual and constituency basis following the party's constitutional reorganisation in 1918, complementing its strong links with the trade unions and the labour and cooperative movements. The Liberals were least successful at appealing to and incorporating the new voters, partly because of the divisions and organisation deficiencies of the party, partly because some of the former bastions of Liberal strength such as the Nonconformist churches and pressure groups were in decline, partly perhaps because Liberalism, as some historians have argued, was intrinsically less

¹⁸ Thanapan Laiprakobsup, "Economy and Political Parties: The Impact of the Economic Conditions on the Party Membership Trend in England and Germany, 1950-1994", *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the MPSA Annual National Conference, Palmer House Hotel, Hilton, Chicago, IL, 3 April 2008, pp3-6*

suited to the electoral populism and social camaraderie that other parties were able to employ.¹⁹

Andrew Thorpe investigated how party structures fared during World War II, and argued that whilst Labour partly benefited from more of their members remaining in the country, this was also a cleverly constructed myth designed to benefit the Conservative Party. More specifically, Thorpe explained:

One of the key starting points for this book [*Parties at War*] is the notion, much propagated after the war by leading Conservatives, that Labour's organisation had held up much better in wartime due to the fact that whereas Conservative organisers had gone off to fight, Labour organisers had often been in reserved occupations and so were able to stay at home and plan for victory at the post-war general election. For the Conservative MP Quintin Hogg, writing in 1945, 'whilst some of the poor derided Tories were fighting the enemy' Labour and its allies were 'sowing discord in the ranks at home behind our backs and attacking our sincerity and personal honour'. The wartime premier, Winston Churchill, for his part, argued in 1952 that, whereas Conservative agents had gone off to fight, the 'core' of the Labour party's constituency-level personnel was in reserved occupations, and so were exempted from military service; and that once Britain's 'mortal danger had passed' they had become increasingly partisan in pushing Labour's interests forward. 'Thus on the one side there had been a complete effacement of party activities, while on the other they ran forward unresisted.' This, he concluded, was 'not a reproach, but a fact'. In fact, as the book shows, this view was not wholly without foundation, but it was a gross over-simplification and, in particular, underestimated both the extent to which the war affected Labour and the degree to which Conservative activity at the grassroots continued in wartime. It was, in that sense, a political myth constructed and sustained to allow the Conservatives to pull back together after a bruising electoral defeat and to avoid recriminations about the years down to 1945 which might have torn the party apart: and, in that sense, it was the essential basis for the party's rapid post-war recovery.²⁰

Seeking to explain more recent membership trends in the UK, Seyd and Whiteley argued:

It is important to note that the trend in membership has not been permanently downwards since the 1980s. Between 1994 and 1998 the British Labour Party *expanded* its membership. A combination of factors help to explain this growth. First, a divided and demoralised Conservative Party was confronted by a Labour Party with a new, young leader, and this assisted membership recruitment. Most importantly, however, Tony Blair and his colleagues wanted new members for both inter- and intra-party reasons and were therefore willing to put considerable party resources (personnel, money and time) into their recruitment (see Seyd and Whiteley, 2002). Blair's Labour Party provided a range of incentives to encourage individuals to join. For example, members had the opportunity to influence the choice of party policies and personnel following the introduction of new organizational structures. Furthermore, members were encouraged to believe that they would be contributing to significant policy changes in Britain if they helped Labour to be elected as the governing party. As a further incentive, the party emphasized that new recruits would be joining a growing, vibrant, social organization. These particular incentives were no longer so powerful after Labour had been elected to office in 1997, and from 1998 onwards party membership began to decline again. Whether this membership growth over four years was just a temporary blip in an otherwise inexorable decline, or evidence of fluctuation, is open to debate (see Mair, 2000; Seyd and Whiteley, 2002). The answer depends

¹⁹ David Powell, *British Politics, 1910-1935*, 2004, Routledge, p196

²⁰ Andrew Thorpe, "Reconstructing Conservative Party Membership in World War II Britain", *Parliamentary Affairs*, 62:2, p228

upon whether structural or choice-based reasons are believed to be more important in explaining the decline in membership numbers. Structural explanations of these trends emphasize the importance of societal trends which are generally beyond the control of parties but which reduce the number of people joining or being active. Choice-based explanations emphasize the importance of various types of incentives in promoting membership and activism which the parties themselves can influence to make participation more attractive to would-be members. Our research shows generally that incentive-based models of participation work better than structural-based models (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). This means that the decline of membership can be turned around with the right incentives.

To begin, we distinguish between supply-side and demand-led explanations of the decline in membership numbers. There are three supply-side explanations. The first argues that membership is drying up because the political marketplace is becoming more competitive. The people who may be intent on becoming involved in politics now have a wider range of alternative options open to them. Parties are just one of an increasing number of political organizations competing for people's attention. Single-issue groups, in particular, have emerged to compete with parties for people's support and they may attract potential party members. The second explanation stresses the competing pressures on people's time, whether these be work, leisure or entertainment, which have reduced the pool of potential members. Thus there is competition beyond the political marketplace for people's time and energy. The third explanation suggests that socioeconomic and demographic changes have served to bring this about, particularly the decline of traditional working-class communities, the expansion of the suburbs, the decline of trade union membership and the growth of female employment. These developments drain the pool of potential party members.

On the demand side, the single most powerful explanation for the decline is that party leaders now have less need for individual members. With the emergence of mass electorates in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, parties needed to organize and mobilize new voters. At this time, members provided the resources, both human and financial, for the political mobilization of voters. However, the development of mass communications and marketing has enabled parties to reach voters directly, particularly at times of elections, and so a major impetus for membership recruitment has now largely disappeared. Furthermore, as parties have succeeded in attracting large donations from corporate organizations and wealthy individuals, they have become less reliant upon the relatively small subscriptions and donations from individual members.

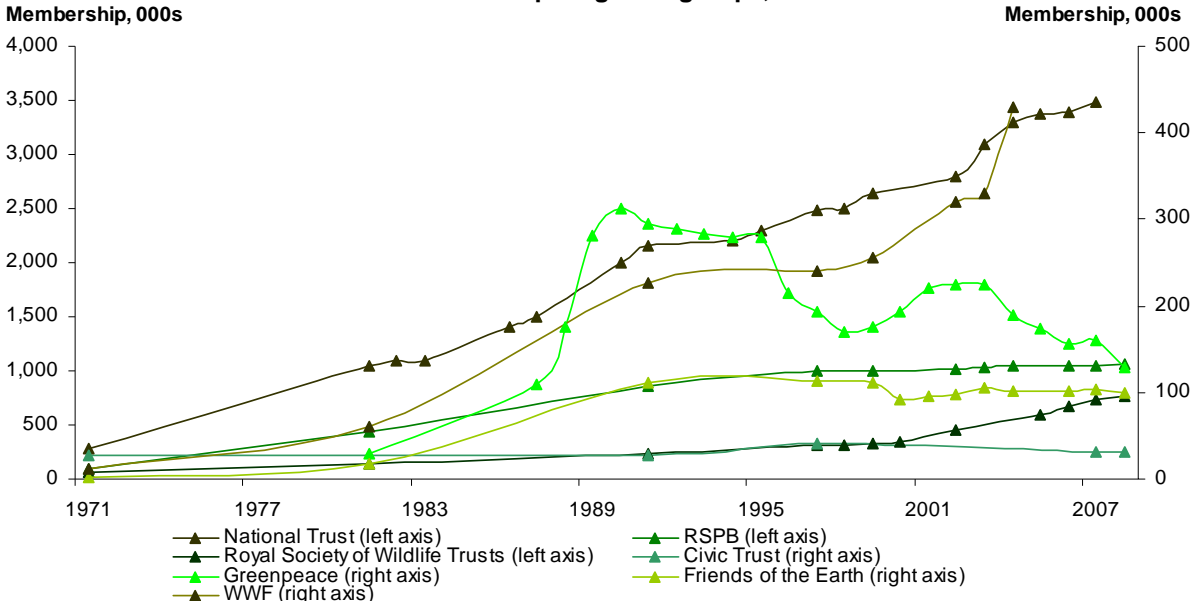
Some of the factors which explain the decline in party membership are outside of the parties' control. For example, parties can have no immediate impact upon the hours that people devote to work, leisure or entertainment, or upon employment patterns. Others, however, are within their remit. For example, they have the powers to create incentives within their own organizations to attract would-be members.²¹

One of the supply-side arguments proposed by Seyd and Whiteley – namely, that the marketplace for membership has expanded – is supported by the proliferation of non-party groups. Charts 3 and 4 highlight the rise in membership of 'green' groups and some political pressure groups over the last 40 years. Many academics and social commentators have suggested that the rise in support for groups that are not political parties reflects the changing social cleavages. In particular, it has been suggested that modernisation – and the consequent post-materialism and single-issue interest that has emerged – has cross-cut

²¹ Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, "British Party Members: An Overview", *Party Politics*, 10:365, 2004, pp358-360

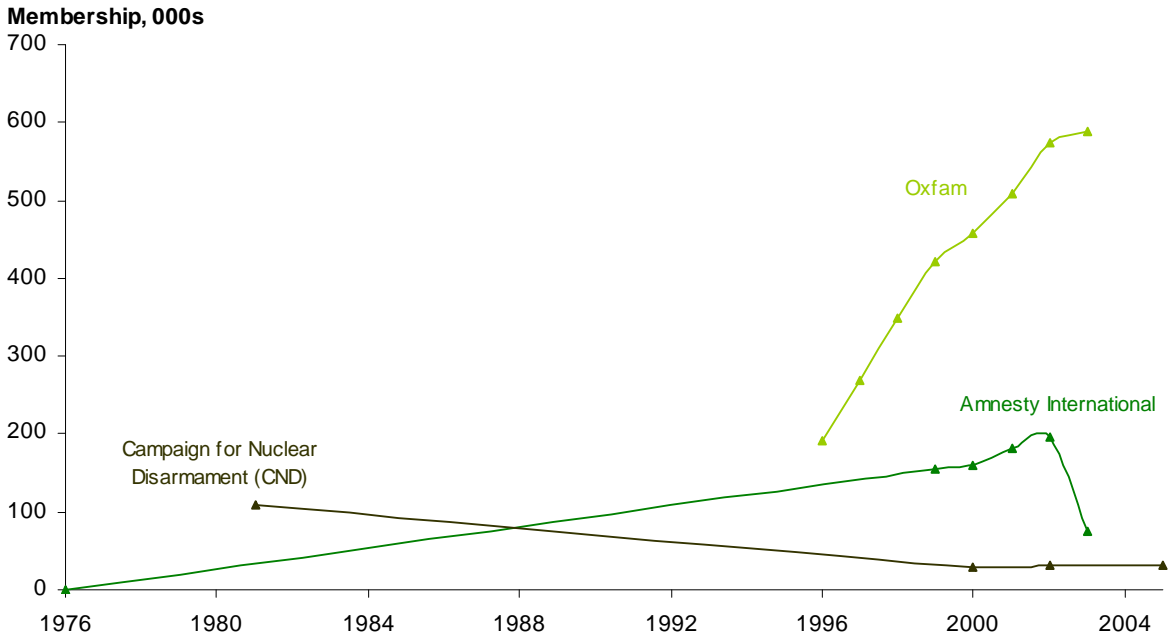
traditional lines of division between political parties, and thus provided fertile ground for new social movements to attract new members.²²

Chart 3: Membership of 'green' groups, 1971-2008



Sources: Group Annual Reports and Reviews; NCSR, *British Social Attitudes 18*, 2001/02.

Chart 4: Membership of political pressure groups, 1976-2005

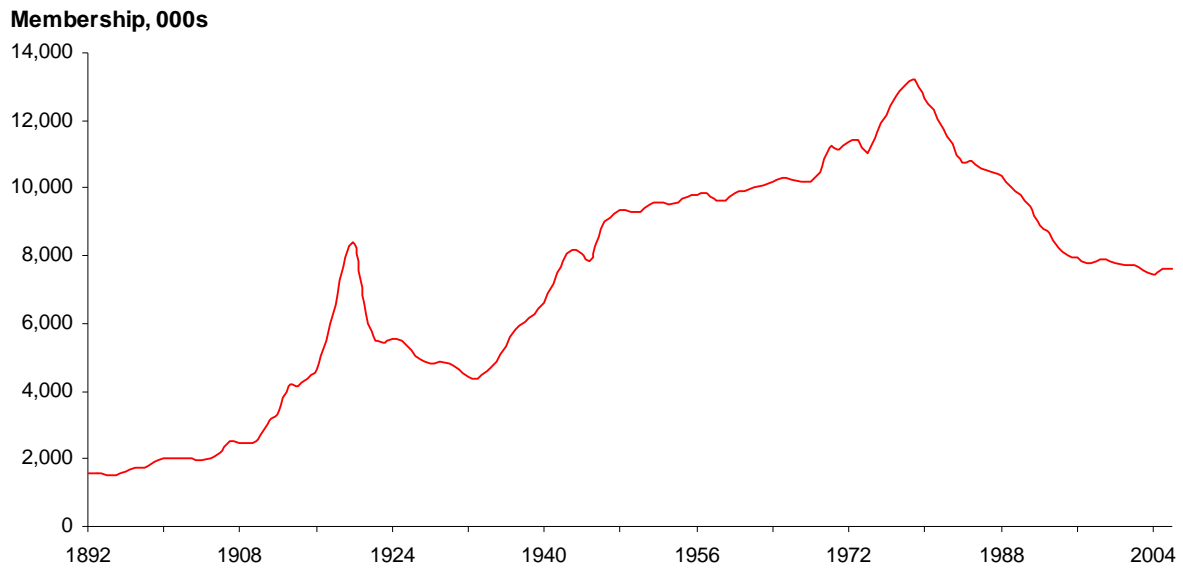


Note: figures for Oxfam are from their committed donor list as they do not have members.
Sources: Annual Reports; news reports.

Trade union membership, on the other hand, has fallen dramatically over a similar period. From its height of 13.2 million in 1979, Chart 5 shows that trade union membership in 2006-07 reached 7.6 million following a period of membership stabilisation in the late 1990s.²³

²² For example, Russell Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion And Political Parties In Advanced Industrial Democracies*, 4 Edition, CQ Press, 2005

Chart 5: Trade union membership, 1892 - 2006-07



Notes: 1999 onwards denotes 1999-2000; 1974 marks new coding.

Source: BERR, *Trade Union Membership 2008*, April 2009.

Seyd and Whiteley also identified that among party members, activism has also significantly declined:

Perhaps of even greater significance for British parties than the decline in the number of members is the decline in members' levels of activism. Members' activities range widely, and at least four types of activities can be distinguished. First, members contact both their fellow party members and also other members of the community on behalf of their party. Second, they campaign for their party and this involves fund-raising, recruiting members and preparing for and running local election campaigns. Third, they represent their party by holding office, either within the party organization or in a range of outside bodies. Finally, they give money to their party.

In Britain there is clear evidence that a decline in most forms of activism has occurred (a similar conclusion is drawn in this volume by the authors of the Danish and Norwegian party membership studies). A simple way of measuring this decline is by asking Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat party members whether they had become more or less active in the party over the previous five years and then subtracting the percentage of those reporting more activity from those reporting less activity. We see in Table 2 that the decline figures are 11 percent among Labour Party members, 17 percent among Conservative Party members and 26 percent among Liberal Democrats.

Another overall measure of activism is the amount of time members spend on party work in the average month. We see in Table 3 that Labour and Conservative members are now spending less of their time on party activities.

Whereas in 1990 almost 1 in 2 Labour members devoted none of their time to party activities, by 1999 this figure had risen to almost 2 in 3. Over a 10-year period there has been a significant growth in the proportion of members who do not work for the party in a typical month. This trend is also apparent for the Conservatives, albeit over a much shorter period of time between 1992 and 1994. We do not have trend figures for

the Liberal Democrat members, but we see that 1 in 2 of them spent no time on party activities.

Finally, when we examine specific party activities we see in Table 4 that Labour members were less 'frequently' or 'occasionally' engaged in displaying an election poster, signing a party-sponsored petition, delivering party leaflets during an election, attending a party meeting and canvassing voters on the doorstep on behalf of their party. Only the proportions of members canvassing voters by telephone and donating money to party funds had increased, and then only slightly.

Supply-side and demand-led explanations of declining levels of activism can again be utilized. For example, on the supply side, the pressures on people's time, in particular the amount of time spent at work, in domestic commitments or at leisure, make party activism less attractive. On the demand side, parties now have less need for their activists as fund-raisers and election campaigners and, as a consequence, they have reduced their incentives to become activists. For example, for Labour the activists' powers to choose party personnel, such as the party leader and parliamentary candidates, and to have an input into policy-making, have all been reduced. All three parties now elect their leaders by balloting the membership as a whole. Similarly, the selection of parliamentary candidates is by ballot of all local members rather than by local activists. These powers have been given to the members, irrespective of the time and effort that they devote to party activities, so there are now fewer rewards for becoming an activist.²⁴

More generally, Peter Mair and Ingrid van Biezen argued that,

... as party identities have waned, and as partisan politics itself has become eroded, individual citizens are themselves probably less likely to be willing to devote the time and energy that is often required by active party membership.²⁵

However, Mair and van Biezen also suggested that the parties themselves have evolved to ensure that a mass membership base is less important to their effective functioning.

The main political parties have repeatedly launched recruitment drives in recent years. The Conservative Party has, for example, offered membership to younger persons at significantly reduced rates. In 2006, the Labour Party sought to arrest their declining membership by relaxing their rules on the length of time that a member must be part of the party before they are eligible to vote in leadership elections.

Smaller parties

Over the past twenty years, there has also been an upsurge in membership for some smaller political parties. Table 3 and Chart 5 provide details of all available membership figures for the British National Party (BNP), the Green Party, the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Like the Conservative Party, Plaid Cymru chose not to publish membership figures in their Financial Statements. Over the 2002-2008 period, the Green Party has experienced steady growth – seeing membership increase by approximately 60%. Following dramatic rises in their membership in 2003 and 2004, UKIP has since experienced a year-on-year decline in its membership. However, the BNP has shown by far the most rapid membership expansion up to 2007, registering a near-fivefold increase since 2001. SNP membership has grown strongly after a substantial decline in 2003.

²⁴ Ibid., pp358-360

Individual party membership: BNP, Green, SNP and UKIP

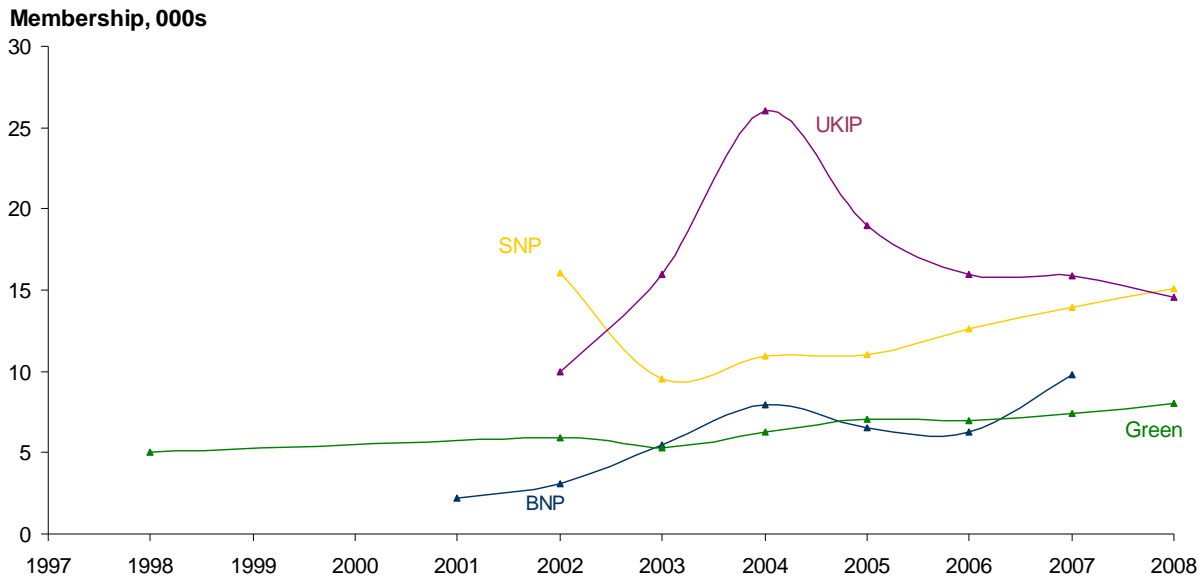
000s

	BNP	Green	SNP	UKIP*
1998		5.0		
1999 e,s				
2000				
2001 w	2.2			
2002	3.1	5.9	16.1	10.0
2003 s	5.5	5.3	9.5	16.0
2004 e	7.9	6.3	10.9	26.0
2005 w	6.5	7.1	11.0	19.0
2006	6.3	7.0	12.6	16.0
2007 s	9.8	7.4	13.9	15.9
2008	na	8.0	15.1	14.6

Notes: * UKIP figures are approximate in each year except 2007; ^e election to European Parliament; ^s election to Scottish Assembly; ^w election to Westminster; na not available.

Sources: Electoral Commission; Green Party website; SNP website.

Chart 6: Membership of minor parties, 1998-2008



Sources: Electoral Commission; Green Party website; SNP website.

The growth in BNP membership has not been uniform: in particular, it appears to decline or slow after national-level elections. The Green Party's expanding membership has shown a fairly secular rise, experiencing the largest gains during 2004 and 2005 – the years of European and Westminster elections. The SNP's membership figures have grown steadily since 2003 without showing any obvious sensitivity to the European, Scottish or Westminster electoral cycles. Unsurprisingly, UKIP registered its highest membership figures in 2004 – a year of elections to the European Parliament.

²⁵ Peter Mair and Ingrid van Biezen, "Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980-2000", *Party Politics*, 7:1, 2001, p14

2.3 Broader membership of the Labour Party

The Labour Party has traditionally maintained strong links with the trade union movement in the UK. Its affiliated trade unions (ATUs) currently retain a significant block vote at the Labour Party Conference, although it has declined from levels as high as 90% as recently as in 1992.²⁶ The ATUs contribute significant affiliation fees (as well as other payments) to the Labour Party in return. In 2008, Labour's accounts showed that the party received £8 million from its affiliated groups.²⁷ This figure is more than double the £3.9 million received in individual membership fees.

Table 4 and Chart 7 show how the Labour movement's broader membership has varied over time. Although the Labour Party Conference Report ceased to publish membership figures for the ATUs and the Socialist and Cooperative (Soc&Coop) parties in 1993, it is clear that a considerable portion of the Labour Party's broader membership has comprised of ATU members. According to the Conference Report figures, ATU membership peaked in 1979 at 6.5 million following an explosive post-war rise and steady subsequent growth. Since 1979, however, ATU membership has fallen precipitously, reaching 4.6 million at the end of the published records in 1992.

Individual party membership also contributed a significant number of members to the Labour movement in the post-war period era (representing as much as 16.6% of total membership in 1953). However, the number has been in decline since peaking at over 1 million members in the mid-1950s, although it did register a brief reversal in the mid-1990s. As noted above, the decline accelerated in the 1980s and has continued its downward trend until the latest data point in 2007.

Finally, Soc&Coop membership has comprised a far smaller proportion of the Labour movement – peaking at 60,000 in 1984 and 1985 – and never counted more than the 6.1% of the broader movement it represented in 1900-01.

These figures should, however, be treated with caution. As Seyd and Whiteley noted above, Labour's membership figures may have been generously massaged before 1980.

²⁶ *The Independent*, [Union leaders toe the line on block vote cut](#), 23 July 1992

²⁷ Labour Party, [Financial Statements 2008](#)

Table 4

Membership of the Labour Party movement, 1900-01 - 2008

000s, unless given as %

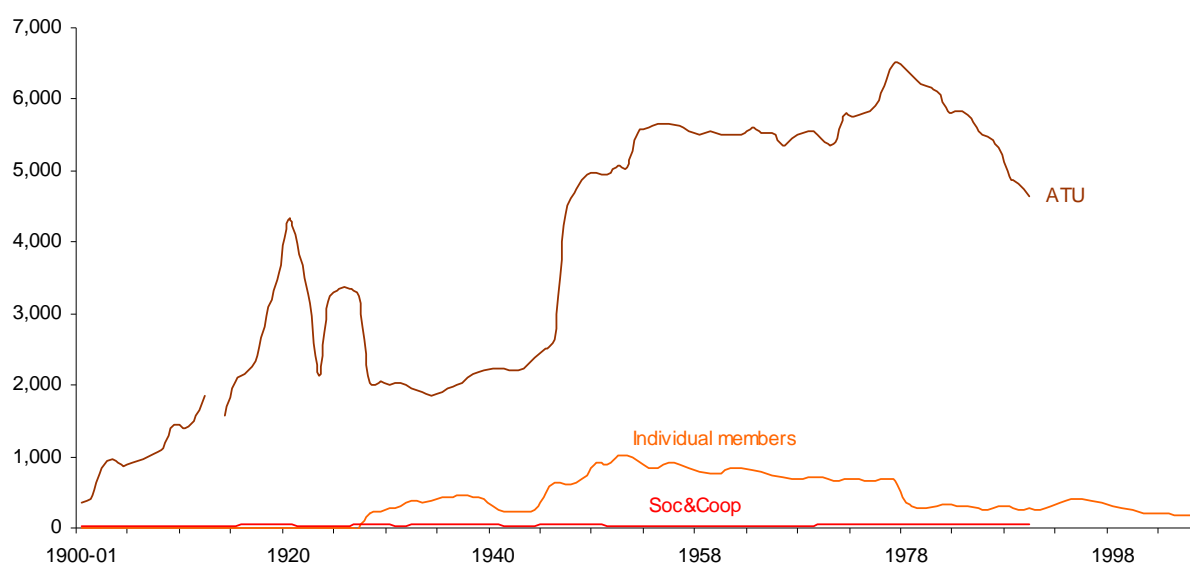
	Individual members		ATU		Soc&Coop		Total
	Members	% of total	Members	% of total	Members	% of total	Members
1900-01	-	-	353	93.9%	23	6.1%	376
1901-02	-	-	455	97.0%	14	3.0%	469
1902-03	-	-	847	98.4%	14	1.6%	861
1903-04	-	-	956	98.6%	14	1.4%	970
1904-05	-	-	855	98.3%	15	1.7%	870
1905-06	-	-	904	98.2%	17	1.8%	921
1906-07	-	-	975	97.9%	21	2.1%	996
1907	-	-	1,050	97.9%	22	2.1%	1,072
1908	-	-	1,127	97.7%	27	2.3%	1,154
1909	-	-	1,451	97.9%	31	2.1%	1,482
1910	-	-	1,394	97.8%	31	2.2%	1,425
1911	-	-	1,502	98.0%	31	2.0%	1,533
1912	-	-	1,858	98.4%	31	1.6%	1,889
1913	-	-	-	-	33	-	-
1914	-	-	1,572	97.9%	33	2.1%	1,605
1915	-	-	2,054	98.4%	33	1.6%	2,087
1916	-	-	2,171	98.1%	42	1.9%	2,213
1917	-	-	2,415	98.1%	47	1.9%	2,462
1918	-	-	2,960	98.2%	53	1.8%	3,013
1919	-	-	3,464	98.7%	47	1.3%	3,511
1920	-	-	4,318	99.0%	42	1.0%	4,360
1921	-	-	3,974	99.1%	37	0.9%	4,011
1922	-	-	3,279	99.0%	32	1.0%	3,311
1923	-	-	2,120	98.3%	36	1.7%	2,156
1924	-	-	3,158	98.9%	36	1.1%	3,194
1925	-	-	3,338	98.9%	36	1.1%	3,374
1926	-	-	3,352	98.9%	36	1.1%	3,388
1927	-	-	3,239	98.3%	55	1.7%	3,294
1928	215	9.4%	2,025	88.4%	52	2.3%	2,292
1929	228	9.8%	2,044	87.7%	59	2.5%	2,331
1930	277	11.8%	2,011	85.7%	58	2.5%	2,346
1931	297	12.6%	2,024	85.8%	37	1.6%	2,358
1932	372	15.7%	1,960	82.6%	40	1.7%	2,372
1933	366	15.9%	1,899	82.4%	40	1.7%	2,305
1934	381	16.7%	1,858	81.5%	40	1.8%	2,279
1935	419	17.6%	1,913	80.5%	45	1.9%	2,377
1936	431	17.6%	1,969	80.5%	45	1.8%	2,445
1937	447	17.7%	2,037	80.6%	43	1.7%	2,527
1938	429	16.3%	2,158	82.1%	43	1.6%	2,630
1939	409	15.4%	2,214	83.1%	40	1.5%	2,663
1940	304	11.8%	2,227	86.6%	40	1.6%	2,571
1941	227	9.1%	2,231	89.7%	28	1.1%	2,486
1942	219	8.9%	2,206	89.9%	29	1.2%	2,454
1943	236	9.4%	2,237	89.4%	30	1.2%	2,503
1944	266	10.0%	2,375	88.9%	32	1.2%	2,673
1945	487	16.0%	2,510	82.6%	41	1.3%	3,038
1946	645	19.4%	2,635	79.3%	42	1.3%	3,322
1947	608	12.1%	4,386	87.0%	46	0.9%	5,040
1948	629	11.6%	4,751	87.6%	42	0.8%	5,422
1949	730	12.8%	4,946	86.5%	41	0.7%	5,717
1950	908	15.3%	4,972	84.0%	40	0.7%	5,920
1951	876	15.0%	4,937	84.4%	35	0.6%	5,848
1952	1,015	16.6%	5,072	83.0%	21	0.3%	6,108
1953	1,005	16.5%	5,057	83.0%	34	0.6%	6,096

	Individual members		ATU		Soc&Coop		Total
	Members	% of total	Members	% of total	Members	% of total	Members
1954	934	14.4%	5,530	85.1%	35	0.5%	6,499
1955	843	13.0%	5,606	86.5%	35	0.5%	6,484
1956	845	12.9%	5,658	86.6%	34	0.5%	6,537
1957	913	13.9%	5,644	85.7%	26	0.4%	6,583
1958	889	13.6%	5,628	86.0%	26	0.4%	6,543
1959	845	13.1%	5,564	86.5%	25	0.4%	6,434
1960	790	12.5%	5,513	87.1%	25	0.4%	6,328
1961	751	11.9%	5,550	87.7%	25	0.4%	6,326
1962	767	12.2%	5,503	87.4%	25	0.4%	6,295
1963	830	13.1%	5,507	86.6%	21	0.3%	6,358
1964	830	13.1%	5,502	86.6%	21	0.3%	6,353
1965	817	12.7%	5,602	87.0%	21	0.3%	6,440
1966	776	12.2%	5,539	87.4%	21	0.3%	6,336
1967	734	11.7%	5,540	88.0%	21	0.3%	6,295
1968	701	11.5%	5,364	88.1%	21	0.3%	6,086
1969	681	11.0%	5,462	88.6%	22	0.4%	6,165
1970	680	10.9%	5,519	88.7%	24	0.4%	6,223
1971	700	11.1%	5,559	88.5%	25	0.4%	6,284
1972	703	11.4%	5,425	88.0%	40	0.6%	6,168
1973	665	11.0%	5,365	88.4%	42	0.7%	6,072
1974	692	10.6%	5,787	88.8%	39	0.6%	6,518
1975	675	10.4%	5,750	88.9%	44	0.7%	6,469
1976	659	10.1%	5,800	89.1%	48	0.7%	6,507
1977	660	10.0%	5,913	89.4%	43	0.6%	6,616
1978	676	9.7%	6,260	89.5%	55	0.8%	6,991
1979	666	9.2%	6,511	90.0%	58	0.8%	7,235
1980	348	5.1%	6,407	94.1%	56	0.8%	6,811
1981	277	4.2%	6,273	94.9%	58	0.9%	6,608
1982	274	4.2%	6,185	94.9%	57	0.9%	6,516
1983	295	4.6%	6,101	94.5%	59	0.9%	6,455
1984	323	5.2%	5,844	93.8%	60	1.0%	6,227
1985	313	5.0%	5,827	94.0%	60	1.0%	6,200
1986	297	4.8%	5,778	94.2%	58	0.9%	6,133
1987	289	4.9%	5,564	94.2%	55	0.9%	5,908
1988	266	4.6%	5,481	94.5%	56	1.0%	5,803
1989	294	5.2%	5,335	93.9%	53	0.9%	5,682
1990	311	5.9%	4,922	93.1%	54	1.0%	5,287
1991	261	5.1%	4,811	93.9%	54	1.1%	5,126
1992	280	5.6%	4,634	93.3%	51	1.0%	4,965
1993	266						-
1994	305						-
1995	365						-
1996	400						-
1997	405						-
1998	388						-
1999	361						-
2000	311						-
2001	272						-
2002	248						-
2003	215						-
2004	201						-
2005	198						-
2006	182						-
2007	177						-
2008	166						-

Notes: From 1993, reports to the conference stopped including data on affiliated groups; statistics for 1913 are unavailable.

Sources: Butler and Butler, *Twentieth-Century British Political Facts*, 2000; Electoral Commission.

Chart 7: Labour Party composition, 1900-01 - 2008



Notes: From 1993, reports to the conference stopped including data on affiliates; figures for 1913 are unavailable.
Sources: Butler and Butler, *Twentieth-Century British Political Facts*, 2000; Electoral Commission.

2.4 Membership revenues

The *Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000* requires that all registered political parties submit their annual financial statements to the Electoral Commission. Table 5 shows the revenues obtained from membership and subscription fees. These figures do not include donations or party affiliations. Labour has clearly received the largest revenues, reaching £4.4 million in 2007 before slightly subsiding in 2008, while many of the smaller parties receive only several hundred thousands pounds in revenues.

In the most part, membership revenues reflect the size of a party's individual membership. However, it is interesting to note that while membership *numbers* have dwindled among the three main parties, membership *revenues* have actually been increasing quite quickly. Furthermore, despite having fewer individual members in recent years, Labour continues to receive revenue equivalent to approximately four times that received by the Conservative Party. This finding is likely to be a consequence of differing membership structures and pricing strategies.

Table 5

Membership and subscription fee revenues, 2001-2008

£, 000s

	BNP	Conservative	Green	Labour	Lib Dem	Plaid Cymru	SNP	UKIP
2001	35.6			3,399	589.7	15.0		
2002	59.6	665	78.1	3,093	680.0	41.6	136.4	119.4 *
2003	92.0	814	87.4	3,452	680.2	53.3	126.1	209.6
2004	129.0	814	99.5	3,492	709.5	86.1	169.1	198.8
2005	114.6	843	113.7	3,685	768.5	93.9	195.4	181.4
2006	145.4	1,191	118.0	4,376	832.1	81.8	244.0	148.1
2007	201.4	1,214	142.2	4,447	803.7	98.2	310.8	167.1
2008		1,229	141.1	3,930	807.8	88.5	367.1	193.7

Notes: * 16-month period starting September 2001; revenues for the year to 31 December; Conservative and Labour figures are only available to the nearest thousand.

Source: Electoral Commission.

3 European comparison

The POWER Inquiry – an independent report led by the Joseph Rowntree charitable foundations that examined democracy in the UK – reported in 2006 that the decline in party membership was not just a UK phenomenon:

Two separate studies found significant aggregate falls in party membership across thirteen and sixteen established democracies respectively since the 1950s. A cross-national study found that identification with a political party had also dropped across the advanced democracies.²⁸

Starting with Richard Katz and Peter Mair *et al.* in 1992,²⁹ academics have noted a significant decline in party membership across Europe. Mair and Ingrid van Biezen, in a paper published in 2001, noted that:

... in each of the long-established European democracies, without exception, the absolute numbers of members have now fallen, and sometimes quite considerably. What we see here, in other words, is concrete and consistent evidence of widespread disengagement from party politics.³⁰

Using the data provided in these papers we can see from Charts 8a and 8b that many European countries have experienced declines in party membership of a similar magnitude to that experienced in the UK. As with Chart 1, a line of best fit is added to better illustrate historical trends.³¹ Membership figures disaggregated by party, which are not presented here, are available in the full articles. Recent evidence from European countries not included in Charts 8a and 8b (due to limited data) is also available.

Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK, have experienced the largest declines in the proportion of the electorate who are members of a political party. Belgium and Sweden³² – and until the 1990s, Germany and Norway – have not registered large declines. Mair and van Biezen, who examined 20 European countries, find that the average proportion of the electorate that is a member of a political party in the late 1990s is 4.99%.³³ This is significantly higher than the 1.5% registered in the UK in 2001 (1.3% in 2005). Katz and Mair found that as recently as the late 1980s, a similar European average was 10.5%; at the beginning of the 1960s the figure was almost 15%.

Significant differences in party membership across countries persist, despite the general decline observed in most cases. The UK, which only counts membership of the three largest parties, has one of the lowest rates of party membership in Europe, with 1.3% of the electorate choosing to affiliate with a party in 2005. Austria, on the other hand, continues to consistently register the highest levels of membership. It is also noticeable that the

²⁸ POWER Inquiry, *Power to the people – the report of the Power, An Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy*, March 2006, p51

²⁹ Richard Katz and Peter Mair *et al.*, "The membership of political parties in European democracies, 1960-1990", *European Journal of Political Research*, 22, 1992, pp329-345

³⁰ Peter Mair and Ingrid van Biezen, "Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980-2000", *Party Politics*, 7:1, 2001, p6

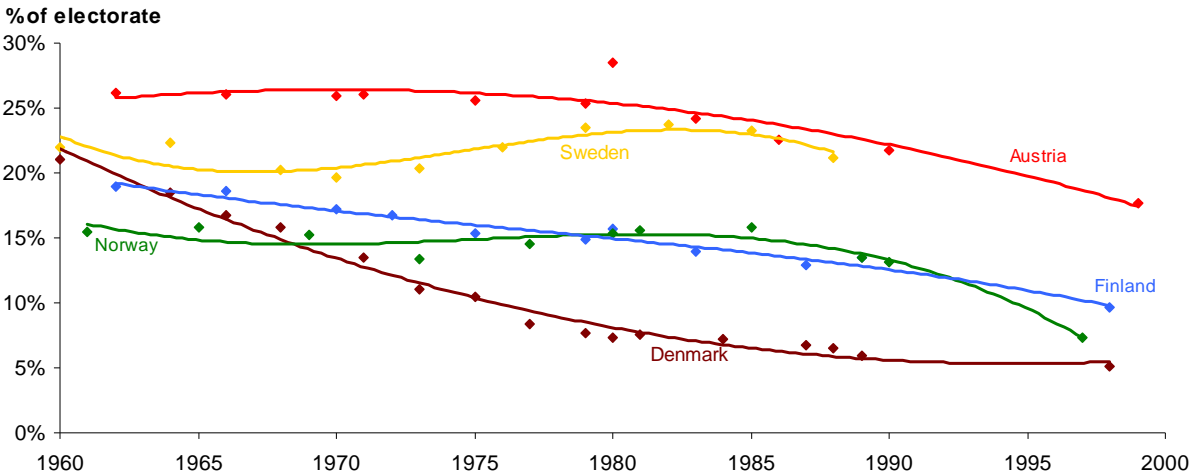
³¹ A cubic function is fitted to each of the 10 countries. The R^2 statistic – a measure of how well the regression line fits the observed data – for countries are as follows: Austria, 0.85; Belgium, 0.88; Denmark, 0.98; Finland, 0.97; Germany, 0.92; Italy, 0.92; Netherlands, 0.92; Norway, 0.92; Sweden, 0.69; UK, 0.99.

³² In the case of Sweden the more recent figures given by Mair and van Biezen are not presented due to difficulties of comparability. However, the more recent figures do suggest that membership numbers have declined, and are substantially lower than shown in Chart 5a.

³³ Peter Mair and Ingrid van Biezen, "Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980-2000", *Party Politics*, 7:1, 2001, p9

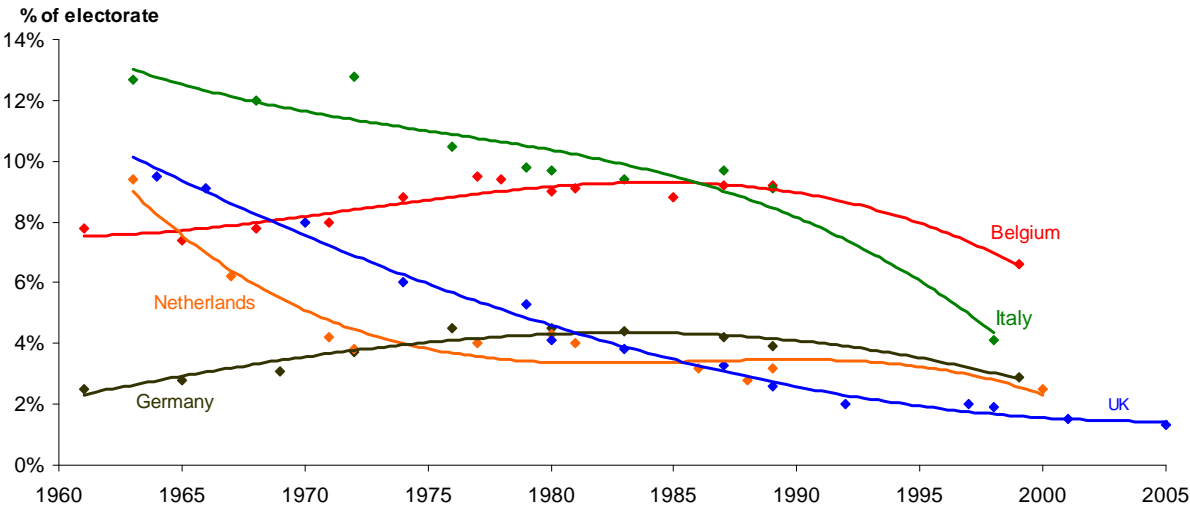
Scandinavian countries are grouped together among the highest rates of party membership, while post-Communist countries were all below the 20-country average at the turn of the millennium.³⁴ It should be cautioned that the scale on the y-axis differs between the subsets of high- and low-membership societies.

Chart 8a: Trends in European party membership - high membership countries, 1960-1999



Sources: Katz and Mair, 1992; Mair and van Bitzen, 2001.

Chart 8b: Trends in European party membership - low membership countries, 1961-2005



Sources: Katz and Mair, 1992; Mair and van Bitzen, 2001.

³⁴ Ibid., p9