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Jumping on the Bandwagon? Explaining fluctuations in party membership levels in Europe

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how party-specific contextual factors explain variations in membership levels. Based on a subset of MAPP data that includes 2898 yearly membership data points for 262 parties in 24 countries over a period from 1990 to 2014, it examines three sets of explanations: the lifecycle model (party age), the bandwagon model (electoral performances and governmental participation), and the competition model (effective number of parties). Our results confirm that membership ratios present an overall decreasing trend across parties over time. At the same time, we show that this trend is flattening and that there are important variations across parties. Fluctuations of membership are part of a party's lifecycle. Our results also point toward a bandwagon effect whereby party membership levels increase or decrease according to electoral performances, and to a patronage boost linked to governmental participation. Finally, we show that party system fragmentation decreases individual parties' membership ratios. Overall, our findings complement the story on party membership decline and calls for further investigations of party-specific explanations.

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Introduction

Some parties, such as the Danish Conservative People's Party (KF) or the British Conservatives, have faced tremendous difficulties remaining attractive membership organizations in the last decades. Their membership basis has dropped respectively by 66% and 84% between 1990 and 2010. However, in the same countries and during the same period, other parties have managed to increase their membership levels, such as the Danish People's Party (DF) or the British LibDems. These examples illustrate how membership trends can differ across parties from the same polity (Delwit 2011). However, despite a few recent exceptions, most studies focus on aggregate membership at the country level and emphasize a general decline over time.

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Understanding the conditions under which parties can recruit or retain members is important. Declining membership levels have been portrayed as problematic for parties, and for representative democracies at large. Membership decline is repeatedly interpreted as a symptom of erosion of conventional participation (Marien and Quintelier 2011), and larger party decline (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000) or changing role of parties in representative democracy (Katz and Mair 1995). Some have argued that membership can be replaced by functional equivalents, such as party supporters (Hooghe and Kölln 2020). This is, however, only partly true. Parties can rely on supporters to foster trust (Hooghe and Kern 2015), improve their image, or provide them with new ideas (Scarrow 1994, 2014). But there is a limit to the extent to which supporters and members bring equal benefits to parties. Members are unique, essential resources comes election time. Webb, Poletti, and Bale (2017) show that members tend to be more involved in campaigns than party supporters, especially when it comes to intensive tasks. Furthermore, Fisher et al. (2017) find that a large number of members in a district is a pre-condition for higher supporter activity, members acting as recruiters via their everyday contacts in the community. Members also bring benefits to party organizations outside election time. Kölln (2014) shows that membership decline induces parties to employ more staff, to spend more, to be more reliant on state subsidies, and to reduce their local anchorage. Ultimately, Bolleyer (2013) or Beyens, Lucardie, and Deschouwer (2016) show how parties that build grass-roots organizations have a higher chance of survival.

Therefore, we argue that members constitute a distinct and unique asset for parties as they bring specific benefits for parties to fulfil particular functions, and that it is crucial to better understand the conditions under which parties are able to maintain that specific linkage. The existing literature heavily focuses on macro-level explanations of membership trends. Whilst these models can partly account for the general decline of party membership over time, they cannot explain why some political parties are more affected than others. Interparty differences within countries cannot be the result of structural factors, national political culture or institutions, or of growing individualism and social atomization.

This paper explores how party-specific contextual factors explain variations in membership levels. Based on a subset of MAPP data that includes 2898 yearly membership data points for 262 parties in 24 countries over a period from 1990 to 2014, it examines three sets of explanations: the lifecycle model (party age), the bandwagon model (electoral performances and governmental participation), and the competition model (effective number of parties). Our results confirm that membership ratios present an overall decreasing trend across parties over time. At the same time, we show that this trend is flattening and that there are important variations across parties. Fluctuations of membership are part of a party's lifecycle. Our

results also point toward a bandwagon effect whereby party membership levels increase or decrease according to electoral performances and governmental status. Finally, we show that party system fragmentation decreases individual parties' membership ratios. Overall, our findings nuance dominant views on party membership decline and call for further investigations of party-specific explanations.

Explaining variations in party membership levels

Most studies that investigate variations in membership levels focus on aggregate membership trends at the country level (Bartolini 1983; von Beyme 1985; Sundberg 1987; Katz and Mair 1992a, 1992b; Mair and van Biezen 2001; Van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012; Whiteley 2011). These studies stress the overall decline in membership levels over time. They emphasize the role of supply side factors in this decline, such as broad structural social changes that would make citizens more reluctant to join political parties (Marien and Quintelier 2011), or the role of institutional factors such as the type of political regime (Bartolini 1983; Tan 2000), the size of the polity (Tan 2000; Weldon 2006), the electoral system (Norris 2002), or the degree of party competition and party laws (Pedersen 2003; Scarrow 1996).

Strikingly, despite the fact that membership is a party-related resource (Scarrow, Webb, and Poguntke 2017), only a few studies investigated it by looking at trends at the party level (for exceptions, see Delwit 2011; van Haute, Paulis, and Sierens 2017). Furthermore, even fewer studies mobilize the role of party-related factors to explain variations in membership levels across parties. Kölln (2016) looks at patterns of membership variations across parties based on their level of institutionalization and party family and confirms within-country variations. Kosiara-Pedersen, Scarrow, and van Haute (2017) look at the impact of parties' organizational arrangements, and more specifically, party affiliation rules (costs and benefits of affiliation, and alternative affiliation options). They stress that parties that set up higher costs, lower benefits, and offer alternative affiliation options, have fewer members, and that parties can therefore tailor their rules to meet their ambitions in terms of affiliation.

Overall, existing studies heavily focus on country-level explanatory factors, and a burgeoning literature looks at party-organizational variables. While these studies introduce the idea that organizational arrangements matter and that parties have agency over their membership trends, what remains understudied is the role of context, looked at from a party-specific angle. Following Panebianco (1988) and Harmel and Janda (1994), we posit that membership change, as a form of party change, can be triggered by a good reason: contextual changes. We are interested in experiences that are specific to the party itself, and not shared by all parties in a system, and we want to analyze

whether these experiences constitute conditions under which parties can recruit or retain members. More specifically, we rely on three explanatory models of membership variation: the lifecycle model, the bandwagon model, and the competition model.

The lifecycle model investigates the relationship between a party's age and its membership size, and ties with the literature on party institutionalization (Bolleyer 2013; Beyens, Lucardie, and Deschouwer 2016). The dominant view is a sequential one, punctuated by "organizational thresholds" (Pedersen 1982; Panebianco 1988). New parties, as young organizations, would face the "liability of newness", i.e. a higher death risk as they generally lack sufficient resources to survive in volatile environments (March 1965). At this early stage, new parties would face difficulties in membership recruitment and retention. After passing a "survival threshold" (Panebianco 1988), parties would increase their membership size until they reach a "rigidification threshold" as mature organizations. This echoes findings from Fisher et al. (2017) who also oppose the recruitment capacity of young, outsider parties and older, mainstream parties. Kölln (2016) also finds that older parties have fewer members. Following this literature, we expect a curvilinear relationship between party age and membership size:

H1: Party age relates to membership size in a curvilinear pattern, with newer and older parties facing lower memberships compared to middle-aged parties.

Our second model investigates the effect of the electoral and governmental cycles on membership levels. Multiple studies hint at a link between party membership and electoral performances or governmental participation of parties (see e.g. Bartolini 1983). However, the nature of this link is poorly theorized, nor has it been systematically tested empirically. While some authors argue that parties recruit members prior elections, either to participate in the candidate selection process (Speck 2014; Cross 2015; Rahat and Kenig 2015) or to campaign on the ground (Hooghe and Dassonneville 2014), others argue that it is election results and subsequent government formation that constitute a trigger for party membership. Whiteley and Seyd (1998, 135) reconcile the debate when they argue that "there appears to be a dynamic process at work, with electoral failure producing a decline in grassroots campaigning, which in turn reduces the effectiveness of subsequent campaigning, thereby accelerating the electoral failure". In this paper, we are interested in the latter mechanism. These dynamics have not been investigated systematically with large-scale, comparative data, especially in proportional systems where the winner-loser distinction is less clear-cut. This paper intends to fill this gap. More critically, the theoretical mechanism behind the connection between party membership fluctuations and electoral cycles is not clear. Two basic interpretations are put forward: the bandwagon effect and the patronage boost.

In the bandwagon effect, the mechanism behind membership fluctuation is electoral performances and how they affect the recruitment and retention capacities of parties. Some case studies, which focus on the United Kingdom in particular, have shown that a party's membership is connected to its electoral fortunes, and that electoral success brings membership growth while electoral failure triggers membership decline (Whiteley and Seyd 1998; Fisher 2000; Fisher, Denver, and Hands 2006). Fisher et al. (2016, 3) emphasize "electoral popularity being a catalyst for recruitment" and show that "member retention is influenced strongly by electoral fortunes". Conversely, electoral defeat, especially when repeated, reduces participation in the party and can create a "spiral of demobilization" (Whiteley and Seyd 1998, 135), even if recent cases of electoral defeats have been shown to remobilize supporters under very specific sets of conditions (LibDems and Labour in 2015 in the UK – Bale, Webb, and Poletti 2020). In that perspective, electoral success can be a buffer against the trend of membership decline. This is due to individual-level mechanisms. Election studies have investigated how the electorate responds to an election outcome, and how losers respond to their loss (Anderson and Mendes 2006). They have shown that it has important consequences at the individual level. We expect that a party's election outcomes will have a strong impact on the behaviour of its closest supporters, the ones that may be the most affected by its defeat. Again, selective incentives are at play, where electoral defeat has "inhibited the incentives for participation associated with achieving policy goals" or has affected the expressive attachment to the party (Whiteley and Seyd 1998, 135). Conversely, an electoral success will boost (potential) members' political efficacy and attachment to the party, thereby increasing the party's recruitment and retention capacity. Therefore, we expect that:

H2: Better electoral performances generate larger memberships, while poorer electoral performances generate lower memberships.

In the "patronage boost" explanation, the underlying mechanism behind membership increase is governmental participation and the opportunities of party patronage that comes with it. Party patronage can be understood as "the use of public resources in particularistic and direct exchanges between clients and party politicians" (Müller 2006, 189). This use of public resources by parties is greatly enhanced when parties enter national government (Ennsner-Jedenastik 2014; Kopecky et al. 2016). Governmental participation puts parties in the position to resort to patronage to reward their members and offer them larger benefits, which potentially increases their recruitment and retention capacities. The "patronage boost" explanation, therefore, sees citizens as rational actors who seek to maximize their utility. In this view, citizens are clients who can gain benefits by claiming these public resources. As parties primarily allocate these resources to their

supporters, one way for citizens to claim these benefits is to join the party. Party membership research has highlighted that material reasons constitute one of the selective incentives for citizens to join parties (Whiteley 1995; Van Haute and Gauja 2015). As Whiteley and Seyd (1998) put it: “From the point of view of the individual party member hoping to build a political career, having his or her party in office is a big advantage”. These material incentives (in the form of service, job, career) are easier to supply if a party is in power. If this “patronage boost” explanation holds, we expect that:

H3: A party being in power generates larger memberships, while sitting in the opposition generates lower memberships.

Our last model relates to the party system competition, and the number of competitors. A country’s electorate is fixed, putting a ceiling on the maximum number of members a party can potentially attract (as most parties set voting rights as one of the criteria for membership – see Van Haute and Gauja 2015). If we consider membership as a closed market, the number of parties competing for this market is likely to affect each party’s share. A new party can lower the retention rate of an existing party by providing a new exit option for members. Following this logic, we should find a negative relationship between the number of parties in a system and their membership size. However, others have argued that more parties means more political competition, and that competition boosts mobilization. Harmel and Janda (1994) identify the birth of relevant new parties as a potential external stimulus of party change. Election studies have considered these competing hypotheses on turnout and have found conflicting results: while Jackman (1987) finds that multipartyism reduces turnout, Blais and Carty (1990) report a curvilinear relationship and Blais and Dobrzynska (1998) a logarithmic relationship. Similarly, studies in organizational sociology find that organizational density affects organizational and membership growth in a curvilinear pattern (Hannan and Freeman 1977). Since we deal with the particular case of party membership and not turnout as type of political participation, we side with organizational studies and therefore expect a curvilinear relationship between the number of political parties in a system and a party’s membership size:

H4: The number of parties affects membership size in a curvilinear pattern, with low and high number of parties generating lower memberships for each individual party.

Data and methods

To measure our dependent variable, membership size, we use a relative measure called the membership ratio (M/E). It corresponds to the number

of registered members (M) divided by the electorate (E). Most studies calculate the M/E ratio at the country level and sum the membership (M) of all parties in the party system (Katz and Mair 1992a, 1992b; Mair and van Biezen 2001; Van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012). Yet as we are interested in variations across parties, not countries, we go back to Bartolini's (1983) original measure of membership ratio per party. The number of members of parties (M) is retrieved from the MAPP dataset (van Haute, Paulis, et al. 2017; van Haute, Paulis, and Sierens 2017) that covers 6307 yearly membership data points for 397 parties in 31 countries, based on objective measures of party membership provided by parties. From that dataset, we excluded parties for which the dataset only includes synchronic or limited longitudinal data points, and clear outliers that would affect our results.¹ We also restricted our analyses to European countries and to the period 1990–2014 (25 years). First, most parties included in the dataset have updated their data management practices and computerized their membership logs at the beginning of the 1990s. From then on, they were able to communicate more precise and more reliable membership data. Second, restricting the study to this period also allows to focus only on parties disclosing individual membership numbers. Lastly, it integrates parties in the new party systems of Central and Eastern Europe for the entire period. Ultimately, our analyses focuses on 2898 yearly membership data for 262 parties in 24 countries from 1990 to 2014. We chose not to interpolate missing yearly membership values (M). The size of the electorate (E) is measured by the voting age population (VAP) retrieved from IDEA (2019). We use VAP rather than registered electorate as our goal is to control for the size of a polity, independent of the specific electoral rules regarding registration and participation to elections in that country. As these data exist for election years only, we proceeded to a linear interpolation for the non-election years, assuming a linear growth/decline of electorates over time.

Other comparative studies have used the M/V ratio (Kosiara-Pedersen, Scarrow, and van Haute 2017), i.e. a party's membership size (M) relative to its own electorate (V), in order to assess parties' ability to convert their supporters into members. In this paper, we use the M/E ratio rather than the M/V ratio as we are more interested in the capacity of parties to connect with the entire electorate to test the linkage argument; furthermore, as one of our main independent variables is the parties' electoral fortunes (fluctuations in V), we opted for the M/E ratio to avoid endogeneity issues.

¹32 parties were excluded because of limited longitudinal data points in the MAPP database (LIF-Austria, NEOS-Austria, LDD-Belgium, PC-Belgium, HSP AS-Croatia, HL-Croatia, HSD-Croatia, ANO 2011-Czech Republic, RP-Estonia, EPE-Estonia, DK-Hungary, SEL-Italy, DK-Lithuania, 50+-Netherlands, PSL-Poland, KLD-Poland, UW-Poland, LPR-Poland, PEV-Portugal, PPV-Portugal, PTP-Portugal, PAE-Romania, PUNR-Romania, FD-Romania, PRN-Romania, FD-Romania, UPSC-Romania, PCM-Romania, PUER-Romania, Lipa-Slovenia, SMS-Slovenia, CDS-Spain). Observations from Icelandic parties were also excluded as their membership levels constitute a clear outlier in the data distribution.

Table 1. Membership Ratios (M/E) by Country.

Country	N Observations	N Parties	Mean	sd	M/E Change	Period
Austria	36	5	4.6	4.3	-0.30	(1990–2013)
Belgium	228	14	0.6	0.7	-0.39	(1990–2012)
Croatia	134	16	0.9	2.1	17.09	(1992–2011)
Cyprus	60	5	2.7	1.9	-0.57	(1990–2011)
Czech Republic	145	10	0.5	1	-0.91	(1990–2013)
Denmark	151	11	0.5	0.6	-0.44	(1990–2011)
Estonia	184	14	0.3	0.3	11.07	(1995–2011)
Finland	64	9	1.6	2	-0.60	(1990–2011)
France	108	12	0.2	0.2	-0.19	(1990–2012)
Germany	265	12	0.2	0.4	-0.48	(1990–2013)
Hungary	113	9	0.4	0.3	-0.19	(1990–2014)
Ireland	83	8	0.7	0.9	-0.23	(1990–2008)
Italy	137	22	0.4	0.6	-0.52	(1990–2013)
Lithuania	117	14	0.3	0.2	0.74	(1992–2012)
Netherlands	193	12	0.3	0.2	-0.50	(1990–2012)
Norway	199	9	0.8	0.8	-0.67	(1990–2013)
Poland	26	4	0.2	0.1	1.47	(1991–2011)
Portugal	44	7	0.9	0.7	-0.90	(1990–2011)
Romania	67	15	0.9	0.9	0.02	(1992–2012)
Slovenia	83	11	0.9	0.6	1.12	(1992–2014)
Spain	128	13	0.4	0.6	-0.68	(1990–2011)
Sweden	186	9	0.7	1.2	-0.84	(1990–2014)
Switzerland	37	12	0.6	0.7	-0.09	(1991–2007)
United Kingdom	110	9	0.2	0.3	-0.84	(1990–2010)

Source: Authors' own dataset retrieved from van Haute, Paulis et al. 2017. *MAPP dataset*. <https://zenodo.org/record/61234>.

There is a large variation of M/E ratio in our dataset. Table 1 displays summary statistics. Over the 25 years covered in this study (1990–2014), the average M/E ratio per party has decreased in most countries, which confirms the general declining trend observed by Van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke (2012). Nonetheless, in some countries such as Croatia, Estonia, Lithuania, or Poland, parties have on average managed to increase their M/E ratio. Yet these average M/E ratios per party hide important variations, as shown by the standard deviation in each country. This confirms big cross-party variations. Most of the variance in M/E ratio in our database is due to differences across parties (between variance = 1.12), with some party families (Conservatives, Christian Democratic and religious parties, or Social Democratic parties) displaying higher membership ratios than others (Greens, Regional and Ethnic, or Nationalist parties). There is also an important variation over time (within variance = 0.34) that confirms the overall decline.

As regard our independent variables, “Time” is included as a baseline in our models to account for the general decline in party membership in our dataset. We measure party age both as a continuous and as a categorical variable by the way of two measures. To test our hypothesis of curvilinear relationship between party age and membership size, we used party age as a continuous variable in order to measure the differential fit of the model when this variable is introduced under a polynomial form. To test

the joint effect of time and party age, we used a categorical version of party age because time and party age are highly correlated (> 0.8). Including time and age as continuous variables in the same model would create a problem of multicollinearity (Johnston, Jones, and Manley 2018).² We grouped parties according to three categories: “old parties” (parties born between 1834 and 1945, 18% of the cases in our dataset), “medium parties” (parties born between 1946 and 1988, 27% of the cases in our dataset), and “young parties” (parties born between 1989 and 2013, 55% of the cases in our dataset). This categorization rests on a pragmatic argument linked to the distribution of our data, but also on the theoretical argument of organizational development and institutionalization developed in the lifecycle model. Nevertheless, we recognize that the categorization may partly mirror the development of party organizational models over time, from mass to catch-all to cartel (Katz and Mair 1995) and that the 1990s mark the rise of new parties especially in Central and Eastern Europe and correspond to a renewal of the party competition across Europe, which we come back to in the discussion and interpretation.³ Note that former Communist parties in Central and Eastern Europe were counted as continuing parties, which ensures variation in party age in these countries.

Electoral performances (Vote Share) is the percentage of votes won by a party in the general elections for the lower Chamber. Values between electoral years were replaced by a linear interpolation between the two election results.⁴ Government participation (OppGvt) is measured by a dichotomous variable, where 0 represents no governmental participation during the legislature and 1 represents governmental participation during the legislature. Data for both measures were retrieved from ParlGov (main source – Döring and Manow 2019), Clea (Kollman et al. 2016) and GED (Brancati 2019) (for missing values in the ParlGov database).

The number of parties is measured with the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) as calculated by Gallagher (2019). As we are interested in parties effectively competing in election, we assume this variable to evolve only at electoral time.

²We followed Allison’s recommendation and computed the VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) for the variables included in the models. While authors differ in their interpretation of the cut-off value of the VIF, most consider that a VIF < 5 is acceptable. When we include the centred version of the variables “time” and “age” in the models, the VIF remains around 4.1, which would be considered acceptable. However, the quadratic version of the models that include the variables “time square” and “age square” display a higher VIF for these variables. It is relatively normal to have a collinearity between a variable such as “time” and “time square”. The problem was that when we include the highly correlated quadratic version of continuous variables “time” and “age”, then the VIF of most variables is >5 which makes the model difficult to interpret. We therefore decided to group parties according to three age categories and thus transform the continuous variable in a categorical one.

³As we have more missing values for younger parties, we have 25% of observations corresponding to old parties, 37% corresponding to medium old parties and 38% corresponding to young parties.

⁴We have run the analyses with a fixed measure of vote share between electoral cycles and obtained similar results.

Our analyses proceed in two steps. First, we test the differential effect of time and age on parties' membership levels. Second, we consider several hierarchical models including party-level and country-level controls. Multilevel regressions fit particularly well our theoretical framework and the nested structure of our data (yearly membership observations are nested into parties, which are themselves nested into countries). We use "random intercept models" that allow to capture systematic between-party and between-country differences, while other effects are assumed to be constant (Stegmueller 2013). Each independent variable was centralized around its mean, as recommended by Enders and Tofighi (2007). Since we deal with time-series data, we also control for autocorrelation within panel data with fixed effect by computing a robust standard errors matrix.⁵ Finally, to test the causal mechanisms at the heart of our three models, we display a model in which our independent and dependent variables are measured simultaneously on the same year, but we also display lagged models where our independent variables are lagged, to see whether the effects are larger when our independent variables precede our measurement of membership ratio. Note that we tested models controlling for party family as categorical variable retrieved from the MAPP dataset, as previous research has shown that not all party families face the same trends in membership (van Haute, Paulis, and Sierens 2017), and as parties' ideological and organizational features might make them more or less responsive to the dynamics tested in our models. As adding the variable did not improve the general fit of our models, we did not include it in our final models. The absence of effect of this control variable can be related to the fact that our categorical measure of party age partly captures sequences in the development of party families. It could also stress that further studies should disentangle the effect of ideological and organizational variables at the party level.

Results

In a first step, we test a baseline model that includes time and party age (Table 2). Time is included in the baseline, as previous research has confirmed a general membership decline (van Haute, Paulis, and Sierens 2017). We added party age (to test the lifecycle hypothesis) in the baseline model as well, as it explains an important part of the variance and is significantly lowering the coefficient of the constant. This is also confirmed by the log-likelihood, Akaike Information Criteria and Bayesian Information criteria. The overall explanatory power of party age is stronger than the other two models (bandwagon and competition). Therefore, we considered it as the most parsimonious explanatory models to account for the observed variation

⁵We also have computed a panel data model with fixed effect and reached the same results.

Table 2. Multilevel Explanatory Models of Party Membership Ratios (M/E) – Time and Party Age.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Time	−0.016*** (0.001)	−0.038*** (0.005)		
Time^2		0.001*** (0.0002)		
Party Age			−0.016*** (0.001)	0.007*** (0.002)
Party Age^2				−0.0003*** (0.00002)
Constant	0.827*** (0.120)	0.908*** (0.120)	0.636*** (0.120)	0.636*** (0.120)
σ ²	0.171	0.169	0.17	0.156
T ₀₀ , Party	1.187	1.187	1.202	1.204
T ₀₀ , Country	0.216	0.212	0.224	0.224
N _{Party}	262	262	262	262
N _{country}	24	24	24	24
Observations	2898	2898	2898	2898
Log Likelihood	−2102.985	−2099.586	−2102.886	−1998.748
Akaike Inf. Crit.	4215.970	4211.171	4215.771	4009.496
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	4245.829	4247.002	4245.630	4045.327

Note: Multilevel regression models using random intercept models to capture between-party and between-country differences. Independent variables were centralized around their mean. Autocorrelation within panel data is controlled with fixed effect by computing a robust standard errors matrix. * $p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$.

in the data. Our idea behind the lifecycle hypothesis is that, although there is a general decline in party membership levels across Europe, parties will be affected differently according to their age. We expect to find a curvilinear pattern between party age and membership ratios (H1). In order to test the differential effect of time and age, we have assessed separate models. The first two models (1 & 2) estimate the effect of time on party membership ratios across the period. The last two models (3 & 4) estimate the effect of party age (measured as a continuous variable) on party membership ratios across the period. Models 1 & 3 estimate the effect of our variables as linear, while models 2 & 4 estimate the effect of our variables as curvilinear.

Model 1 confirms the idea of a general decline of party membership across parties during the period from 1990-2014. An increase of one year generates an erosion of approximately 1% of parties' membership respective base. However, Model 2 nuances a little bit the idea of linear decline. While the linear coefficient is a negative one, its polynomial form is positive. Yet, the effect is very modest and Model 2 only improves modestly the general fit of our model.⁶ This confirms results obtained by Kölln (2016), but it also indicates that the decline has slowed down over time. After 2007, there is an inflection in the curve and a modest revival of party membership. Figure 1 illustrates this trend.

⁶The Akaike information criteria and the Bayesian Information criteria both indicate a lower fit of Model 2 compared to Model 1.

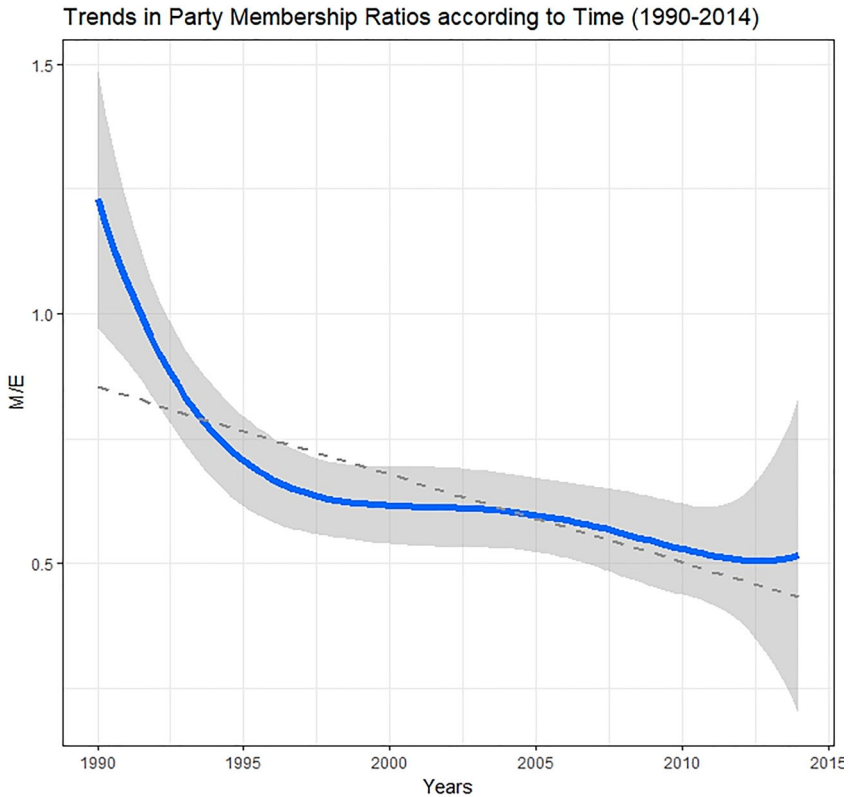


Figure 1. Linear and Quadratic Regression Lines between Time and Party Membership Ratios.

Interestingly, the link between party membership and party age follows a different logic. Model 3 emphasizes that the older a party becomes, the fewer members it has. This effect is consistent with the first two models. However, when a second-order polynomial is introduced (Model 4), it reveals a more nuanced situation. All the estimated coefficients are significant, but the model fit (measured by Akaike Information Criterion or by Bayesian Information Criterion)⁷ is the highest when the relationship between party age and party membership is considered as curvilinear (H1 supported). Model 4 shows that older parties have more members relative to younger parties, pointing to their institutionalization in the party system, but also to the fact that parties born before 1945 tend to have roots in the mass party model. But we also observe a curvilinear relationship between party age and party membership. This means that, during the period considered,

⁷AIC and BIC are based “on the likelihood of the data given a fitted model penalized by the number of estimated parameters of the model” (Nakagawa and Schielzeth 2013).

when new parties are created, the older they become, the more members they attract, but after a while this relationship starts to reverse, taking the form of a bell-shape (Figure 2). It confirms that, while new parties face the challenge of recruitment (Beyens, Lucardie, and Deschouwer 2016; Bolleyer 2013), older parties face the challenge of renewal and retention. In other words, older parties have more members to lose and they are losing them, pointing to organizational challenges and the failure of the mass party model (Delwit 2011; Katz and Mair 1995; Kölln 2016). This challenge that older parties face is what drives membership decline over time.

In a second step (Table 3), we estimate several multilevel models testing for the simultaneous effects of our three models (lifecycle, bandwagon, and competition) and their related independent variables (party age, electoral performance, governmental participation, and number of parties) on party membership ratios. As the continuous variables time and party age are strongly correlated, we use party age as a categorial variable, as specified above.

Model 1, the lifecycle model, introduces party age as a categorial variable and its interaction effect with time. It confirms our previous results (H1 supported): older, traditional mass parties, have a baseline M/E ratio that is higher than parties born between 1945 and 1989, while younger parties have a lower baseline M/E ratio than these parties, ie. they start with less members. However, over time, the decline faced by older, mass parties is

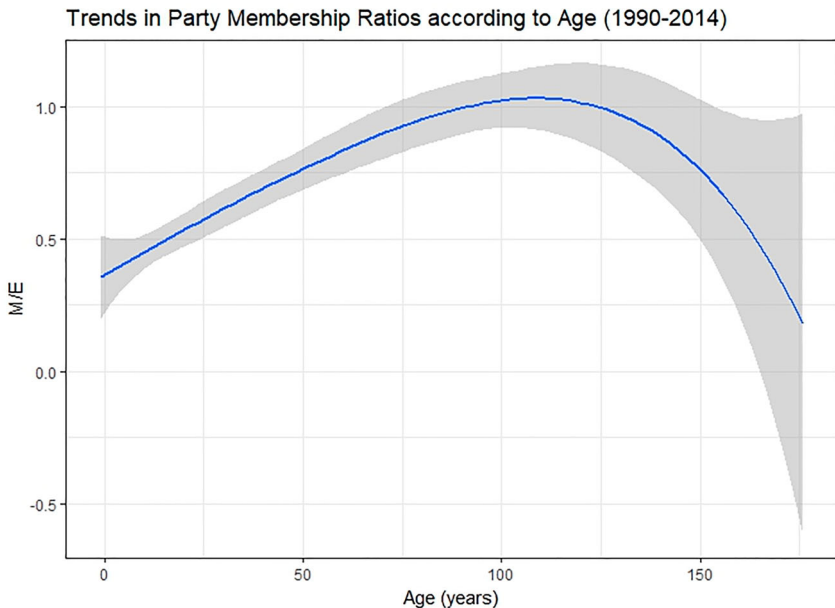


Figure 2. Quadratic Regression between Party Age and Party Membership Ratios.

Table 3. Multilevel Explanatory Models of Party Membership Ratios (M/E) – Lifecycle, Bandwagon, and Competition Models.

	Model 1 <i>Lifecycle</i>	Model 2 <i>Bandwagon</i>	Model 3 <i>Competition</i>
Time	−0.022*** (0.006)	−0.025*** (0.006)	−0.032*** (0.006)
Time^square	0.001*** (0.0002)	0.001*** (0.0002)	0.001*** (0.0002)
Medium_Age Parties (Ref cat: Young)	0.083 (0.177)	0.079 (0.176)	0.085 (0.172)
Old_Parties (Ref cat: Young)	1.289*** (0.209)	1.250*** (0.207)	1.218*** (0.203)
Time*MediumAgeParties(Ref cat: Young)	0.006* (0.003)	0.006* (0.003)	0.006* (0.003)
Time*OldParties (Ref cat: Young)	−0.042*** (0.003)	−0.040*** (0.003)	−0.037*** (0.003)
Vote Share		0.010*** (0.003)	0.011*** (0.003)
Opp/Gvt		0.072*** (0.020)	0.068*** (0.020)
Vote Share*Opp/Gvt		0.011*** (0.004)	0.006 (0.004)
Effective Number Parties			−0.032*** (0.010)
Effective Number Parties^2			−0.013 (0.010)
Constant	0.523*** (0.152)	0.518*** (0.150)	0.576*** (0.155)
σ^2	0.152	0.147	0.137
τ_{00} , partyidmapp	1.112	1.091	1
τ_{00} , country	0.215	0.213	0.254
Npartyidmapp	262	262	261
Ncountry	24	24	24
Observations	2898	2898	2829
Log Likelihood	−1,962.767	−1,927.926	−1,792.534
Akaike Inf. Crit.	3945.534	3881.852	3615.068
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	4005.252	3959.485	3704.283

Note: Multilevel regression models using random intercept models to capture between-party and between-country differences. Independent variables were centralized around their mean. Autocorrelation within panel data is controlled with fixed effect by computing a robust standard errors matrix. * $p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$.

significantly higher, while young parties face (modest) membership growth over time.⁸ This relationship is displayed in [Figure 3](#).

Model 2 investigates the bandwagon model. It confirms that a party's gain in vote share is associated with an increase of its M/E ratio (H2 supported). A change in a party's governmental status also positively affects its M/E ratio (H3 supported). These findings point to a combined bandwagon effect and patronage boost. In order to test the two mechanisms further, an interaction

⁸Given that our data is unbalanced, we also checked for potential attrition or selection bias through the variable addition test developed by Nijman and Verbeek (1992). We did not find any significant attrition bias.

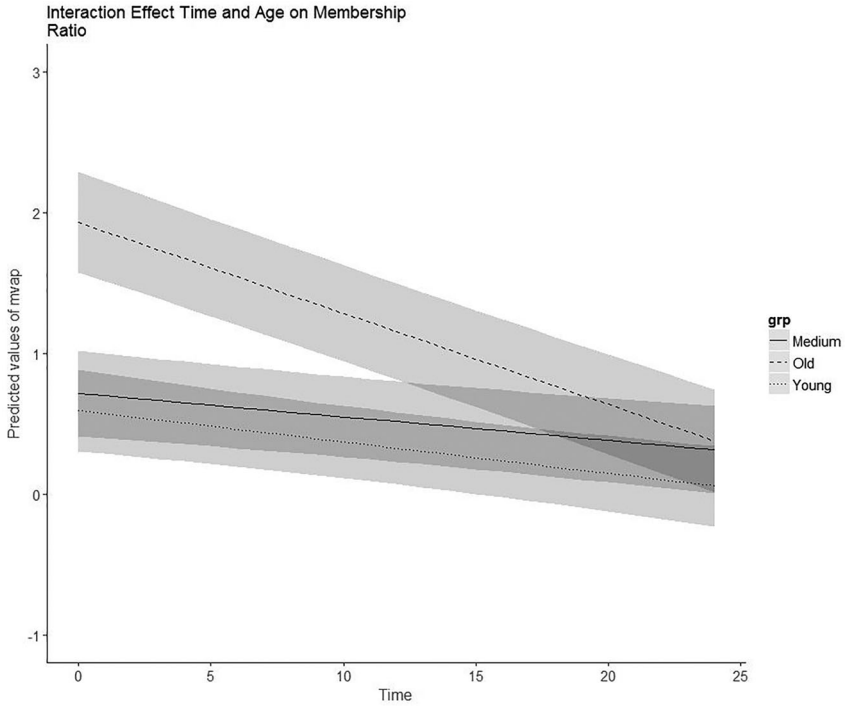


Figure 3. Interaction between Time and Party Age Group.

effect between vote share and governmental status was computed (Figure 4). The effect is positive and significant, although it remains rather modest. It points to an additional membership increase through a combined increased vote share and governmental participation.

Model 3 tests our hypothesis that the number of competitors influences the number of members that each parties may attract. Our results confirm the idea that an increase in the number of competing parties is associated with a decrease in the M/E ratio for the remaining parties. However, we did not find evidence of the curvilinear nature of this relationship (H4 partly supported).

Finally, Model 3 is also an integrated model that tests the combined effect of all variables. All prior results are confirmed, with the exception of the interaction effect of electoral performance and governmental participation. It means that, controlling for the number of competitors in the system, we do not find a reinforced effect of electoral performances and governmental participation.

In a last step (Table 4), we estimate several multilevel models testing for the lagged effects of our models. More specifically, we use three lagged independent variables (time, vote share, governmental/opposition) measured at t-1.

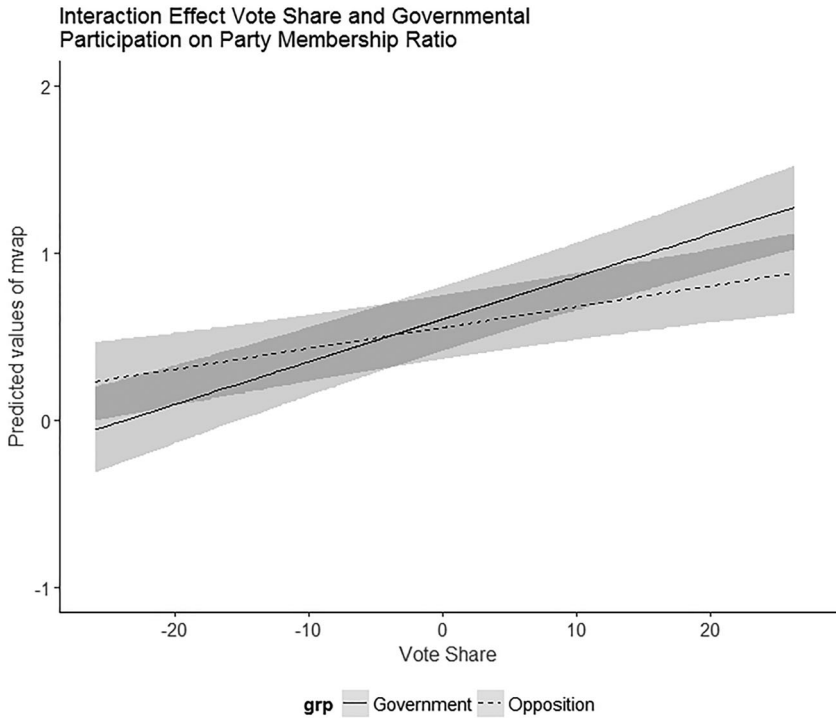


Figure 4. Interaction between Vote Share and Governmental Status.

These analyses confirm the causal mechanisms hypothesized. The effect of time, party age and party competition are reinforced compared to the simultaneous models, supporting the lifecycle and party competition models. These additional analyses are especially useful to disentangle the causal mechanisms behind the bandwagon model (Model 2). Our lagged models confirm that a party's gain in vote share is associated with an increase of its M/E ratio (H2 supported). It means that we do not simply point to a popularity factor whereby parties would see their electoral appeal increase at the same time as their membership base. Rather, we see a bandwagon effect where the increased vote share leads to an increase in membership. We also confirm the patronage boost mechanism. We show that being in government at $t-1$ is not positively associated with an increase of its M/E ratio. Rather, it is the change of governmental status of the party from opposition to government that drives a party's M/E ratio up. In order to test the two mechanisms further, an interaction effect between vote share and governmental status was computed. The effect is positive and significant, even in Model 4 when controlling for the number of competitors in the system for government entrance. These findings confirm the combined bandwagon

Table 4. Multilevel Explanatory Models of Party Membership Ratios (M/E) – Lifecycle, Bandwagon, and Competition Models – Lagged Models.

	Model 1 <i>Lifecycle</i>	Model 2 <i>Bandwagon</i>	Model 3 <i>Competition</i>
Time L1	-0.045*** (0.005)	-0.044*** (0.005)	-0.045*** (0.005)
Time^square_L1	0.002*** (0.0002)	0.002*** (0.0002)	0.002*** (0.0002)
Medium_Age Parties (Ref cat: Young)	0.143 (0.173)	0.072 (0.1765)	0.098 (0.169)
Old_Parties (Ref cat: Young)	0.895*** (0.205)	0.836*** (0.204)	0.781*** (0.207)
Vote Share_L1		0.011*** (0.003)	0.012*** (0.002)
Government		0.044* (0.025)	0.028 (0.018)
Opp/Gvt_L1		0.001 (0.024)	
Effective Number Parties			-0.042*** (0.010)
Effective Number Parties^2			-0.007 (0.009)
Time_L1*Age		-0.003** (0.002)	-0.003** (0.001)
Voteshare*Opposition		0.007** (0.003)	0.005 (0.003)
Voteshare*Government		0.015*** (0.004)	0.009*** (0.003)
Constant	0.618*** (0.148)	0.670*** (0.152)	0.729*** (0.153)
σ2			
τ00, partyidmapp			
τ00, country			
Npartyidmapp			
Ncountry			
Observations			
Log Likelihood	-2090.983	-2053.516	-1,374.330
Akaike Inf. Crit.	4197.967	4135.032	2778.660
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	4245.738	4218.632	2866.747

Note: Multilevel regression models using random intercept models to capture between-party and between-country differences. Independent variables were centralized around their mean. Autocorrelation within panel data is controlled with fixed effect by computing a robust standard errors matrix. * $p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$.

effect and patronage boost and point to an additional membership increase through a combined increased vote share and governmental participation.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at explaining differences in membership levels across parties. In contrast with the dominant literature that looks at micro- and macro-level explanations of membership trends, this paper developed party-specific contextual models to explain variations of membership

levels across parties. To test our hypotheses, we relied on an original dataset related to the MAPP project that includes 2898 yearly membership data points for 262 parties in 24 countries over a period from 1990 to 2014. By using time-series data, it has been possible to refine previous explanations of membership fluctuations and diagnoses of membership decline. More specifically, the paper examined three sets of explanations: the lifecycle model (party age), the bandwagon model (electoral performances and governmental participation), and the competition model (effective number of parties).

Overall, our results point to interesting findings. Membership ratios are overall decreasing. At the same time, we show that this trend is flattening and that there are important variations across parties. Some parties see their membership ratios remain stable or even increase over time. Our dynamic analysis revealed that this trend is related to parties' lifecycles. We found a curvilinear relationship between a party's age and its membership ratios. While new parties face the challenge of recruitment, older parties face the challenge of renewal and retention. In other words, we show that older parties have more members to lose and that they are losing them. It points to challenges specific to organizational development, but also more largely to changing organizational models over time and the crisis of the mass party model. This specific challenge that older parties face is what drives membership decline over time.

Moreover, we also found that parties gaining votes or entering government tend to increase their membership ratios, and that the effects are reinforced when combined. This leads us to conclude that there is both a bandwagon effect between electoral cycles and membership cycles and a patronage boost related to governmental participation. Finally, we show that the higher the number of competitors in a party system, the lower the membership ratio of the existing parties.

Overall, our findings emphasize that parties do not function in a vacuum and are not isolated islands: they operate in a specific context that is unique to each of them depending on their lifecycle, position in the party system, and electoral and governmental fortunes. These party-specific contextual factors are crucial to understand fluctuations in membership levels and the capacity of parties to recruit and retain members. These findings nuance dominant views on party membership decline, complement our understanding of membership dynamics, and calls for further investigations of party-level explanations. An interesting ground to test these new avenues for research could be to include cases outside Europe, that are not characterized to the same extent by a general decline and where party-based explanations can make an even bigger difference in understanding membership dynamics.

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