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Abstract

The decline of party activism and membership in European democracies has been well documented, but not effectively explained. This article examines the state of party membership and activism across a wide spectrum of democratic countries and shows that membership is in decline in most of them. It tests two rival explanations of the decline using a cross-sectional multi-level analysis of data from the ISSP Citizenship survey of 2004. One hypothesis is that the decline is due to ‘state capture’, or excessive state regulation brought about by an ever-closer relationship between parties and the state which has the effect of stifling voluntary activity at the grassroots level. A second suggests that parties are being undermined by the growth of relatively new forms of participation, notably cheque book participation, and consumer and Internet participation. These provide alternative outlets for political action outside traditional forms of participation such as party involvement. There is evidence to support the first of these hypotheses, but not the second.

Keywords

comparative political participation, multi-level modelling, party regulation, party volunteers

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Introduction

The long-term decline in party activism and grassroots party membership in Europe is now well documented, although it is not well understood (Dalton, 2005; Katz et al., 1992; Mair, 1994; Mair and Van Biezen, 2001; Scarrow, 2000; Whiteley and Seyd, 1998). In this article, I examine whether a similar process of decline is taking place in other democratic countries as well as in Europe. This topic is important because political parties continue to play a central role in the governance of modern democracies, and so a decline in their voluntary base has important implications for the future of democracy. Such a decline is likely to weaken civil society by undermining key relationships between citizens and the state, many of which are sustained by political parties (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Scarrow, 1996; Webb et al., 2002).

These trends have been accompanied by another development, the ever-growing closer relationship between political parties and the state. It has been suggested that in many countries political parties are, in effect, becoming part of a state-sponsored cartel (Detterbeck, 2005; Katz and Mair, 1995). In the words of one researcher, this relationship is turning political parties in these countries into 'public utilities' (van Biezen, 2004).

I consider two alternative hypotheses for explaining the decline of grassroots party organizations across the democratic world. The first suggests that voluntary activity is being undermined by the relationship between political parties and the state. As parties become increasingly closer to the state, the growing regulation and control which accompanies this threatens to turn party volunteers, in effect, into unpaid state bureaucrats. This has the effect of undermining their incentives to participate. The other aspect of the same process is that if parties can rely on the state for funding their activities, then they have little incentive to recruit or retain members for financial reasons. Thus, the hypothesis is that the state may be smothering voluntary party activity.

The alternative hypothesis argues that political parties are losing their activists and members because of the rise of relatively new forms of political participation, having their origins in wider social and technological changes. One consequence of growing affluence is that in many countries consumer participation has become an increasingly important feature of politics. In European democracies, for example, large numbers of individuals participate by buying or boycotting goods for political or ethical reasons.¹ Such consumer participation is much easier to do than traditional forms like campaigning or joining a political party. If many people see this as a more effective form of participation than the more traditional activities, this could explain, in part, the observed trends in party membership.

A corollary of this is that while the advanced industrial democracies are becoming more affluent, many of their citizens are increasingly time-poor. Many are working long hours or, as in the case of females, participating in the labour force to a much greater extent than was true of earlier generations. One way to deal with time poverty is for the individual, in effect, to subcontract out their participation to others by donating money to interest groups and organizations which share their values and political goals. Giving money to a political party or an interest group instead of actively working for it allows individuals to feel psychologically engaged, even though they are not actively involved

(Jordan and Maloney, 1997). So a rise in political donations could undermine both party membership and activism.

Another important development is the rise of Internet participation, which involves activities like political forums and chat rooms, as well as signing electronic petitions and reading and writing political blogs (Gibson and Ward, 2000; Oates et al., 2006). The Internet provides a relatively new avenue for political participation which may itself undermine traditional forms of involvement such as party activism, as it diverts political activity to cyberspace.

These alternative explanations of the decline of party membership are not of course mutually exclusive. It is possible that both contribute to the decline of voluntary parties. To test the hypotheses we use a multi-level modelling strategy. First, three rival individual-level models of party membership and activism are tested using data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) Citizenship Study of 2004 conducted in 36 countries.² Second, country-level covariates which are derived from the two hypotheses are then added to the best individual-level model. In this way aggregate contextual effects can be taken into account as factors which can explain party decline.

A full explanation of the decline of voluntary parties requires long-run longitudinal data, which are simply not available. The present analysis is cross-sectional, but takes advantage of the fact that there are wide variations in both membership and in grassroots party activity across these countries. The ISSP data examine membership and activism in most of the world's democracies with almost 50,000 respondents in total. In the first section of the article I examine the present state of grassroots party activity in these countries and also changes over time using supplementary data from the World Values Survey.³ The second section develops the rival models which are used to explain party involvement at the individual level and this is followed by a section in which the models are tested. In the fourth section, I discuss aggregate-level covariates of party involvement which are derived from the two hypotheses, and then multi-level models of party involvement are tested using the data from the International Social Survey. In the final section, conclusions are drawn about the implications of the findings for democracies more generally.

Party membership and party activism in contemporary democracies

The International Social Survey Programme study of Citizenship contained a question about participation in political parties, and the pooled responses to this question across all countries appear in Table 1. It can be seen that just under 20 percent of respondents were activists, members or ex-members of a political party. Not surprisingly, the number of party activists was relatively small, but active and passive members together amounted to more than 10 percent of the population.

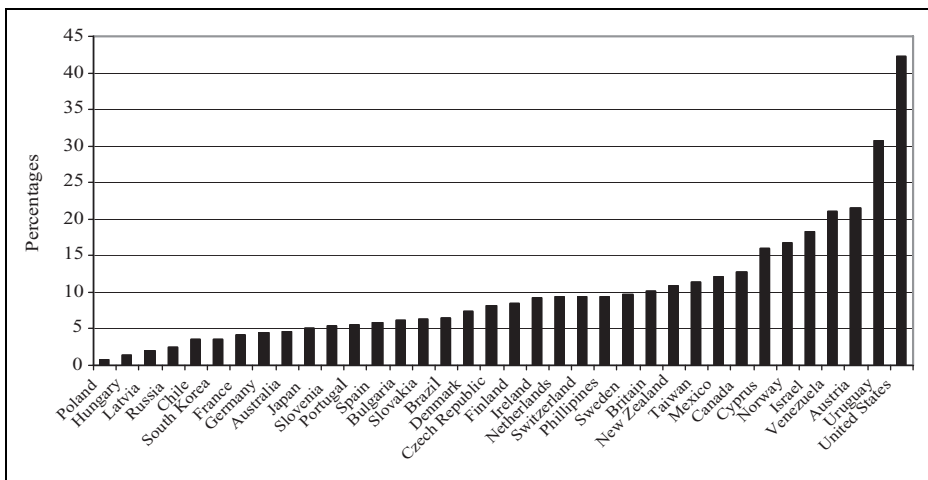
The average figures in Table 1 conceal large variations across countries. Figure 1 shows the percentage of people who were either activists or members in each of the countries. It can be seen that Poland had the fewest activists and members, closely followed by Hungary, Latvia and Russia. Obviously, Soviet-style communism left a legacy of weak civil society, and party activity was discredited in the eyes of many citizens in

Table 1. Party membership and activism in 36 countries in 2004

	Percentages
Belong to a political party and participate	3.4
Belong to a political party but do not participate	7.2
Used to belong to a political party	8.6
Have never belonged to a political party	80.9

Source: ISSP Citizenship Study, 2004, $n=48,923$.

Question: 'People sometimes belong to different kinds of groups or associations. For each type of group, please indicate whether you: belong and actively participate; belong but don't actively participate; used to belong but do not any more; or have never belonged to it'.

**Figure 1.** Party membership in 36 countries in 2004

Source: ISSP Citizenship Study, 2004.

these countries. At the other end of the scale, the country with the highest proportion of party members is the United States.

Figure 1 highlights a key problem for the comparative analysis of party activity, namely the different meanings attached to party membership across the democratic world. In most European democracies, joining a political party means paying a subscription to the party organization and possibly agreeing to abide by some broad principles which it supports (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). However, in other countries, notably the United States, party membership is not defined in these terms. As is well known, Americans can identify themselves as party supporters when registering to vote, but this does not involve paying dues to a party organization. This fact has encouraged some American researchers to equate European-style party membership in the United States with donating money to a candidate's campaign, rather than registering as a party supporter (Rapoport and Stone, 2006). The International Social Survey Programme avoids

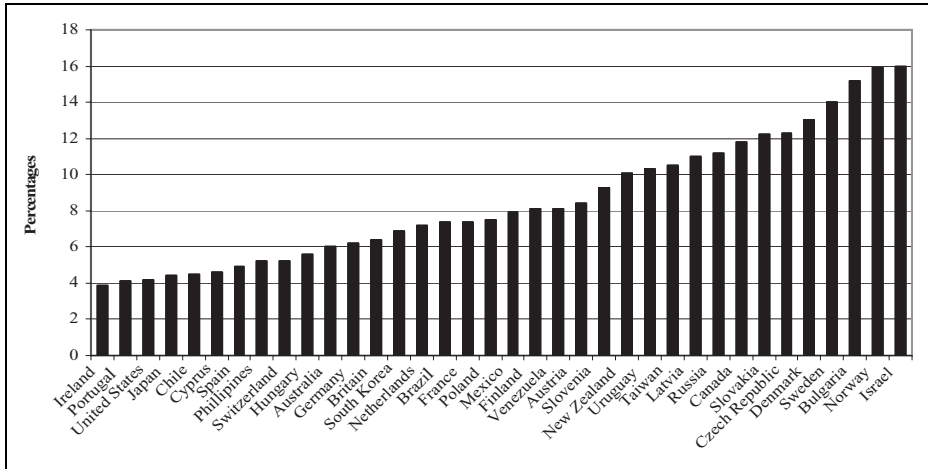


Figure 2. Percentages of former party members in 36 countries in 2004
 Source: ISSP Citizenship Study, 2004.

this problem by allowing respondents to define membership subjectively. So the question captures the extent to which individuals think of themselves as being a member of a political party, even though the meaning of this varies across countries.

A rough guide to the health of voluntary party organizations in each country is provided by the figures on the number of former party members. These are shown in Figure 2 and they vary from 3.9 percent in Ireland to 16 percent in Israel. These figures suggest that membership is a dynamic phenomenon with individuals moving between activism, membership and ex-membership as well as in the opposite direction over time. A comparison with Figure 1 also shows that ex-members outnumber current members in many countries, suggesting that overall membership is in decline in these cases.

It is possible to chart trends over time more directly with data from another source, the World Values Survey.⁴ This survey identifies changes in party membership in 25 of the countries in the ISSP study over the period 1989–93 to 1999–2004. They appear in Figure 3, which shows that membership has declined in all but four of these countries. The largest reductions were associated with the collapse of the communist parties in countries like Russia and Latvia, but significant declines also occurred in Austria, Germany, Britain and Finland. In the period 1989–93, an average of 6.9 percent of respondents were party members in these countries, but by 1999–2004 this was 4.8 percent, an overall decline of about 30 percent.

Existing explanations of the decline in voluntary activity in political parties tend to focus on the rise of modern political communication and campaigning which, it is argued, have greatly reduced the role of party members as ‘ambassadors in the community’ (Scarrow, 1996). The argument is that if party members have only a very marginal role in communicating with and mobilizing voters at election times, then party organizations will be much less interested in recruiting and retaining them (Epstein,

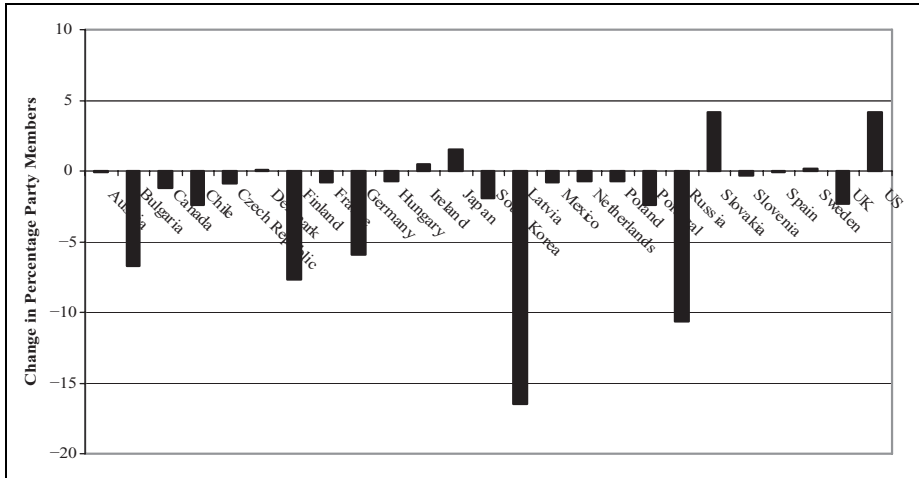


Figure 3. Changes in party membership in 25 countries 1989–99 to 1999–2004
 Source: World Values Surveys, 1989–99 and 1999–2004.

1967; Farrell and Webb, 2000; McKenzie, 1955; Panebianco, 1988; Ware, 1987). There are, however, difficulties with this explanation. Recently, a number of political leaders have revised their party constitutions in order to give members a greater role in the recruitment of candidates, the election of leaders and in the policy-making process more generally (Pennings and Hazan, 2001; Scarrow et al., 2000; Seyd and Whiteley, 2002). It is not clear why they would do this if they feel that members are marginal to the political process. Second, a growing body of evidence suggests that party activists can be quite important both in communicating political ideas to the public and in mobilizing voters in election campaigns (Denver and Hands, 1997; Green and Gerber, 2004; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1992; Seyd and Whiteley, 1992). These findings are clearly inconsistent with the argument that members and activists are irrelevant, and it may be one of the reasons why political leaders are trying to recruit them.

More generally, this interpretation of decline assumes that in the heyday of the mass party organization in the middle of the 20th century, party leaders relied on a mass membership in order to get their message across. But this was an era of mass newspaper circulation and large radio audiences even though television was still in its infancy. So it is not clear that the role of party members in communicating and mobilizing the public has actually changed much over the years. Arguably, it has always been important, while at the same time being overshadowed by the media.

To understand changes in party membership over time we need to locate these trends in the context of a theoretical understanding of political participation. In the next section I examine three alternative individual-level models of political participation with the aim of explaining why some people join a political party and subsequently why some of them become active. I also investigate why some of the members subsequently leave their chosen party.

Rival models of party membership and activism

There are a number of models of political participation that can be applied to the task of explaining why individuals should join a political party and why some of them might become active (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). Indicators available in the ISSP Citizenship Survey make it possible to test three of these models.⁵ They are the civic voluntarism, cognitive engagement and the social capital models. I consider each of these in turn.

The civic voluntarism model

The civic voluntarism model is perhaps the best known model of political participation, and is associated with the work of Sidney Verba and his various collaborators (Parry et al., 1992; Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1978, 1995). The core idea of the model is that participation is largely determined by the individual's resources. Verba and Nie underlined this point in their original study of participation in America:

According to this model, the social status of an individual – his job, education, and income – determines to a large extent how much he participates. (1972: 13)

Subsequent work has defined these resources as 'time, money and civic skills' (Verba et al., 1995: 271), and has incorporated additional motivational variables into the model. The latter measure the individual's psychological engagement with politics as well as their sense of political efficacy. However, within the theoretical framework the motivation variables are seen as being largely derivative of the individual's resources, and they play a linking role between social characteristics, on the one hand, and political participation, on the other.

Though developed in the context of American politics, the model was subsequently applied to the task of explaining cross-national political participation. This later work stressed the distinction between individual and group resources in explaining participation, arguing that: 'organization – and we might add ideology – is the weapon of the weak' (Verba et al., 1978: 15). Thus, ideological ties between individuals and institutions such as political parties and trade unions can compensate for a lack of individual resources and boost individual participation. The context in which individuals find themselves is important in explaining their political involvement.

For purposes of individual-level estimation, variables such as the individual's social status, their educational attainment and the spare time they have available are included in the model as indicators of resources. In addition, political efficacy captures motivational aspects of civic engagement, and voluntary activity and religious attendance are included as indicators of civic skills. There are additional controls for age and sex. The indicators in all three models are examined in more detail in the Appendix.

According to the civic voluntarism model, highly educated individuals with high social status should be more likely to join and become active in a political party. Similarly, individuals with more spare time available, perhaps because of working part time, should also be more active. Similarly, political efficacy should boost participation. The efficacy scale in the model is based on three indicators, which are scaled with a principal

components analysis that explains 58 percent of the variance, with all factor loadings exceeding 0.70. A high score indicates a strong sense of efficacy, that is, a willingness to disagree with statements such as 'People like me don't have a say in what government does'. Another important variable in the model, voluntary activity, should also boost party involvement. The two indicators of voluntary activity relate to sports, leisure or cultural organizations and to voluntary organizations other than parties. Active engagement in these types of non-political voluntary organizations should enable individuals to acquire civic skills which can be utilized in supporting their political participation. Finally, active engagement in a religious organization should have a similar impact as voluntary activity and boost participation.

The cognitive engagement model

The second individual-level model of participation is the cognitive engagement model. The core idea here is that an individual's political participation is motivated by their ability and willingness to process and understand information about politics and society (Clarke et al., 2004; Dalton, 2005; Norris, 2000). In this model, factors such as their educational attainment, their knowledge of politics and attention to political events, as well as their overall engagement with the political process, explain their participation. Education is at the core of the model, since it increases the individual's ability to process and to understand political information. In the civic voluntarism model, education is primarily a measure of resources, whereas in the cognitive engagement model it plays a rather different role. It is an indicator of the individual's ability to make sense of the political world. In the contemporary world, the costs of acquiring information have fallen sharply over time, and with the proliferation of media outlets it is easier than ever for the citizen to become informed. A multitude of television and radio channels, the growth of 24-hour news media, and above all the rapid rise of the Internet, make it relatively easy for individuals to become 'critical citizens' (Norris, 1999). Such individuals are not only relatively knowledgeable about politics, but they can evaluate the effectiveness of policies and judge the records of incumbent parties in delivering on their election promises. Viewed from the perspective of classical political theory, cognitively engaged citizens are close to the Greek conception of the good citizen, who is an informed member of the *polis* and who fully participates in the process of government.

In the cognitive engagement model, education, media consumption of politics, an interest in politics and civic norms which support participation should all be positive predictors of party involvement. As the Appendix shows, the media usage measure combines indicators of television, radio, newspaper and Internet usage into a cumulative scale. Similarly, civic norms are scaled by means of a principal components analysis of four items which explains 50 percent of the variance, and has loadings that all exceed 0.60.

The social capital model

The third individual-level model is the social capital model. The core idea here is that individuals who are embedded in relatively strong networks of social and voluntary

relationships trust their fellow citizens and are more likely to participate as a consequence. Putnam defines social capital as 'features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating co-ordinated actions' (1993: 167). For Coleman (1990), social interactions in a voluntary setting help to generate 'credit slips' of obligations and they foster norms of reciprocity. Such relationships help to build trust between citizens, allowing these credit slips to be utilized to solve collective action problems. Social capital can have many effects, but one of them is to stimulate political participation. Thus, if an individual trusts others and works with them in a voluntary capacity, they are more likely to join a political party and become active as a consequence (Putnam, 2000).

For most researchers, trust is the key indicator of social capital (Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Fukuyama, 1995; Pattie et al., 2004; Van Deth et al., 1999). Interpersonal trust allows individuals to move beyond their own immediate circle of family members and friends and engage in cooperative behaviour with strangers. In the dominant model of social capital, interactions between individuals in voluntary associations generate interpersonal trust and social capital (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Whiteley, 1999). Thus the voluntary activity measures, which also appear in the civic voluntarism model, are particularly important in this model. Other indicators in the social capital model include interpersonal trust and trust in government. The two measures are theoretically distinct from each other, but individuals who trust the government as well as their fellow citizens should be more likely to get involved in party activity. Marital status is included as an indicator of social ties which are likely to foster social capital. Finally, respondents were asked to describe their communities, since there is evidence to suggest that social capital is weaker in large cities than in small towns (Oliver, 2000). This variable is included to test this proposition.

Testing the models of party activism

The models are tested using a multinomial logistic regression specification in which the effects of the predictors for activists, members and ex-members are identified separately, with non-members being the reference category. The individual-level models are estimated first, before aggregate covariates are subsequently added to the best model arising from this exercise. Table 2 contains estimates of the three models, and the results suggest that the cognitive engagement model has the most explanatory power. The pseudo-R square statistic and the Aikake information criteria (Burnham and Anderson, 1998) both imply that the model is marginally better than its rivals. However, the differences in fit are not large, and it is likely that variables from each of the models might contribute to explaining party involvement. The least successful model is the social capital model. Likelihood ratio tests show that if governmental trust and marital status are removed from the social capital model, the explanatory power is not reduced.⁶ In contrast, none of the variables from the civic voluntarism or cognitive engagement models can be removed without loss of fit.

Another way of evaluating the models is to see how consistent they are with theory. In the case of the civic voluntarism model, educational attainment and social status both have a positive impact on membership and activism, as does the number of hours worked

Table 2. Multinomial logistic models of party membership and activism

Predictors	Activists	Members	Ex-members
Civic voluntarism model			
Highest educational attainment	0.05***	0.08***	0.18***
Subjective social status	0.03*	0.03***	-0.007
Hours worked in average week	0.003**	0.005***	0.005***
Efficacy scale	0.20***	0.12***	0.04***
Voluntary organizational activity	0.46***	0.30***	0.24***
Religiosity	0.08***	0.03***	-0.05***
Age	0.06***	0.03***	0.10***
Age squared	-0.0005***	-0.0001	-0.0006***
Male	0.57***	0.21***	0.38***
<i>Pseudo R-squared</i>		0.07	
<i>Aikake information criterion</i>		62275.3	
<i>Change in LR χ^2</i>		860.1	
Cognitive engagement model			
Highest educational attainment	0.02	0.08***	0.14***
Interest in politics	1.16***	0.47***	0.28***
Discussion of politics	0.48***	0.27***	0.32***
Media consumption of politics	-0.02***	-0.03***	0.02***
Civic norms	0.52***	0.30***	0.01
Age	0.06***	0.03***	0.09***
Age squared	-0.0005***	-0.0001***	-0.0006***
Male	0.36***	0.17***	0.33***
<i>Pseudo R-squared</i>		0.10	
<i>Aikake information criterion</i>		59982.4	
<i>Change in LR χ^2</i>		3146.6	
Social capital model			
Interpersonal trust	0.14***	0.10***	0.07***
Trust in government	-0.004	-0.03	-0.09***
Size of community	-0.07***	-0.06***	-0.05***
Marital status	0.01	0.02	0.03*
Voluntary organizational activity	0.53***	0.37***	0.31***
Age	0.07***	0.04***	0.10***
Age squared	-0.0005***	-0.0002***	-0.0007***
Male	0.63***	0.30***	0.48***
<i>Pseudo R-squared</i>		0.05	
<i>Aikake information criterion</i>		63381.0	
<i>Change in LR χ^2</i>		49.0	

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$

in the average week. The former estimates are consistent with theory, while the latter is not. It appears that respondents with full-time occupations are more likely to get involved in political parties than part-timers or the retired, so a lack of spare time does not deter party involvement. In other respects the estimates of the civic voluntarism model are consistent with theory, since efficacy, voluntary activity and religiosity all positively influence party involvement. Efficacy has a stronger impact for activists and

members than for ex-members, and the same is true for voluntary activity. Religiosity promotes activism and membership and inhibits exiting, so all of these effects work as expected.

Again, all of the predictors in the cognitive engagement model, apart from media consumption, are consistent with theory. Membership and activism are stimulated by interest in politics, discussion of politics with friends and by civic norms. The latter are particularly important since they promote both activism and membership, but have no influence on exiting, suggesting that they act as a barrier to party decline. At the same time media consumption is negatively related to activism and membership, and it appears to promote exiting. This hints at a 'media malaise' phenomenon at work, whereby media consumption serves to demobilize individuals. However, further analysis, discussed below, suggests that the negative signs are the product of the restricted specification of the model, rather than a real effect.

In the social capital model, the two key variables of interpersonal trust and voluntary activity are positive predictors of both activism and membership. However, these variables are also positive predictors of ex-membership, suggesting that these measures do not act as barriers to party decline. The trust in government measure is particularly interesting, since it has no effect on membership and activism. It does, however, help prevent individuals from exiting a party, and so in that sense influences party decline. Finally, marital status has no influence on membership and activism, but it does have a weak effect on exiting. The size of community effect is negative, suggesting that urban communities have a bigger impact on participation in political parties than small towns or rural communities.

The demographic variables have the same effects in all three models. They show that older people are more likely to be activists, members and ex-members, but these effects are non-linear and decline with age. It is also the case that men are more likely to be over-represented in all three groups compared with women. Overall, the models in Table 2 indicate that there are some core variables which really matter in explaining party involvement and some peripheral variables of lesser importance, some of which have inconsistent signs. The estimates suggest that resources, on the one hand, associated with variables like education and social status, and political engagement, on the other, associated with variables like efficacy and interest in politics, drive party involvement. Accordingly, we combine the variables from the civic voluntarism and cognitive engagement models to provide the best composite 'civic engagement' model of party involvement.

Aggregate-level effects

The aggregate-level covariates are derived from the two hypotheses considered earlier. The 'state capture' thesis is not new, since the potentially perverse effects of over-regulation have been a key theme in economic analysis for many years (Peltzman, 1998; Stigler, 1971). Equally, the growing relationship between the state and political parties has been discussed in the party research literature for some time. Katz and Mair (1995), in particular, have argued that the links between political parties and civil society have weakened while parties have grown ever closer to the state. The growth in state

funding, in particular, has ensured that parties have become more dependent on the taxpayer and less dependent on voluntary contributions from their supporters (see also Bartolini and Mair, 2001; Kopecký and Mair, 2003; van Biezen and Kopecký, 2007). This process is likely to undermine voluntary activity in parties for two reasons. First, it reduces the incentives of political leaders to be attentive to their active supporters. If financial contributions from the members are increasingly irrelevant to the professional party organization because of state support, parties can develop into the electoral-professional organizations that can easily ignore their grassroots volunteers (Panebianco, 1988). Political leaders will have less interest in recruiting and retaining party members. A second effect is that a close relationship between political parties and the state brings with it greater regulation, since state funding is accompanied by audit trails of various kinds. A growing burden of regulation falls on the shoulders of active volunteers at the local level as they struggle to comply with the ever more complex rules governing their organizations. This reduces their incentives to become active participants.

Party regulations vary quite a lot across Europe. The Scandinavian countries, like Sweden and Denmark, have relatively light-touch regulation in comparison with the former communist countries such as Poland or southern European countries like Italy (van Biezen and Kopecký, 2007). The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) evaluates the regulatory environment in which political parties operate. It examines the disclosure rules and financial restrictions on both party income and expenditures, prohibitions on certain sources of income and the regulatory system for party finance. Accordingly, a party regulation index is constructed from IDEA sources for each of the countries in the survey, the details of which appear in the Appendix. If the 'state capture' thesis is correct, then a high score on the scale should be associated with reduced individual-level party involvement.

A second more general indicator of the regulatory environment is derived from the governance measures developed for the World Bank by Kaufmann and his associates (Kaufmann et al., 2006). These are constructed from several hundred variables that measure perceptions of governance drawn from a multitude of sources. One of these is called 'regulatory quality' and it refers to the ability of governments to formulate and implement effective regulatory regimes.⁷ Comprehensive regulation can have positive effects by stimulating economic activity and controlling corruption, but it can easily develop into over-regulation, which is our focus in this case. It is possible that countries that regulate extensively may also over-regulate their party systems. If the 'state capture' thesis is correct, then a high score on this measure will undermine the voluntary dimension of party organization.

The second hypothesis relating to new forms of participation has also received limited attention in the literature. Jordan and Maloney (1997) have discussed the phenomenon of 'cheque book' participation in which individuals, in effect, sub contract their participation to professional campaigners in lobbying organizations (see also Richardson, 1979). These individuals give money to organizations they support, but do little else. It is possible that a culture of political donations in a country will inhibit party involvement if giving money acts as a substitute for political action.

Unlike political donations, the effects of consumer participation and Internet participation on party activity have not been examined. One interpretation of consumer

participation is that it can be seen as the consequence of a growing individualization of society that weakens the solidaristic ties supporting voluntary activity and undermines networks of community engagement (Bellah et al., 1985; Etzioni, 1995). At a more practical level, it can be seen as an easy, repeatable form of participation which might satisfy the desires of some individuals to get involved in politics at much lower cost than standard forms of participation, such as volunteering for a political party. Either way, consumer participation might undermine party activity. Similar points can be made about Internet participation. The latter involves only a limited number of individuals at the present time, as the data in the Appendix make clear, but it still has the potential to attract away volunteers from traditional forms of participation.

The ISSP survey included indicators of donating money to political organizations and of consumer participation. In the event, 37 percent of respondents in the pooled data had donated money to a political organization at some point in the past, 26 percent had boycotted products for political reasons and just under 5 percent had joined an Internet political forum. Not surprisingly, there were large variations across countries in these forms of participation, and so average scores for these measures were constructed for each country and used as covariates in the multi-level model.

Alongside the 'state capture' and 'rival participation' measures, other predictors were included in the aggregate-level models to act as controls. The first was the least squares index of proportionality developed by Gallagher, which measures the gap between the vote-shares and seat-shares obtained by political parties in national elections⁸ (Gallagher and Mitchell, 2005). This is included because electoral distortion is likely to reduce the incentives for parties to campaign. Single-member plurality electoral systems, for example, tend to produce high levels of distortion and, as a consequence, parties concentrate their campaigning efforts in marginal districts, because campaigning in safe districts will bring few electoral benefits. In contrast, in proportional electoral systems with less distortion, parties have an incentive to campaign everywhere, since every vote counts. If electoral distortion reduces the incentives to campaign, it also reduces the incentives to recruit and retain activists. By implication, party involvement will be lower in countries where electoral distortion is high.

Another control variable is the number of effective parties in the political system. This is measured by the number of parties that achieved at least 5 percent of the vote in the most recent legislative elections. A proliferation of effective parties arguably might stimulate party membership, but it also might have the opposite effect, as the political space becomes very crowded with organizations competing for the available vote. It is also the case that in systems with many parties the influence of any one of them over the political process will be reduced. This in turn reduces the incentives to join a party in order to influence public policy-making. In this situation, high levels of party competition are likely to act as a disincentive to party involvement. Finally, as Figure 1 shows, the United States is very much an outlier, for reasons discussed earlier. Party membership is clearly an example of 'American exceptionalism' (Lipset, 1996), and so a dummy variable representing the United States is included as an additional control variable.

The alternative models are tested using a multi-level modelling strategy (Raudenbusch and Bryk, 2002; Snijders and Bosker, 1999). The approach taken is to estimate a random intercepts model of party activism by including aggregate covariates in the best composite

Table 3. The multi-level random intercept models of party involvement

	Activists	Members	Ex-members
Aggregate-level predictors			
Consumer participation	-0.010	0.008	-0.006
Internet participation	0.097	0.111	0.060
Donating money	-0.001	-0.003	-0.006
Party regulation index	-0.079	-0.097*	-0.051
Kaufmann government regulation index	-1.039***	-0.830**	-0.520**
Effective no. of parties	-0.284**	-0.307**	-0.001
Gallagher disproportionality index	-0.524*	-0.689**	-0.148
USA dummy variable	1.689*	1.408	-0.051
R-squared		0.40	
Individual-level predictors			
Highest educational attainment	-0.11***	-0.02	0.08***
Subjective social status	0.05***	0.00	0.01
Hours worked in the average week	0.00	0.002**	0.003***
Efficacy scale	0.07***	0.02***	0.02**
Voluntary organizational activity	0.42***	0.24***	0.21***
Religiosity	0.07***	0.04***	-0.01
Interest in politics	1.05***	0.46***	0.31***
Discuss politics	0.46***	0.25***	0.28***
Media consumption of politics	0.07***	0.04***	0.06***
Civic norms	0.35***	0.20***	0.03***
Age	0.07***	0.03***	0.09***
Age squared	-0.001***	-0.0001**	-0.0005***
Male	0.47***	0.23***	0.31***

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$

model from Table 2. The random intercepts model defines β_{0j} , the intercept of the individual-level model, as the dependent variable in a second aggregate-level equation.⁹

Table 3 incorporates the aggregate covariates within the individual-level model of party involvement. The aggregate model appears first in the table with the individual-level model below. The individual-level model includes a total of 12 variables, incorporating the measures in the combined civic voluntarism and cognitive engagement models. All of the variables in the 'civic engagement' composite model have the same signs as their counterparts in Table 2, with two exceptions. Educational attainment appears to act as a deterrent to activism, though not to membership and exiting, and also the media consumption indicator has a positive impact in all equations. The latter suggests that the negative media effects in Table 2 were the product of the specification which failed to take into account the additional resource and motivational variables of the civic voluntarism model.

The covariates in Table 3 explain 40 percent of the variance in the aggregate model. The evidence suggests that government regulation inhibits both individual-level activism and party membership, and it operates through both the party regulation and the Kaufmann regulation indices. The probability of an individual participating in a political

Table 4. Best aggregate-level random intercept and slope models of party involvement

<i>Aggregate-level predictors</i>	<i>Activists</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Ex-members</i>
Intercept effects			
Party regulation index	-0.034	-0.028	-0.006
Kaufmann government regulation index	-1.454***	-0.978***	-0.806***
Effective no. of parties	-0.213*	-0.272**	0.048
Gallagher disproportionality index	-0.455*	-0.748***	-0.093
USA dummy variable	1.915**	1.629*	0.305
Slope interactions with age			
Party regulation index	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001
Kaufmann government regulation index	0.008*	0.007*	0.003

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$

party is reduced in countries with high levels of regulation, independently of variables in the civic engagement model. The party regulation index discourages party membership, but it appears to have no influence on activism and exiting. In contrast, the Kaufmann regulation index has a negative impact on all three categories of party involvement, suggesting that it acts as a barrier to both the recruitment, but also to the loss, of members.

The estimates in Table 3 show that there is little support for the rival participation hypothesis, since none of the variables associated with it, namely, consumer participation, Internet participation and donating money, have significant impacts on party involvement. At the same time, the proportionality index, the effective number of parties and the United States dummy variable are all important factors. The former two measures have significant negative impacts on party activism and membership, though not on exiting. Thus, an electoral system which produces significant distortions and a political system with many competitor parties both inhibit the recruitment of activists and members, although they do not influence the retention of existing members. Finally the United States dummy variable has a positive impact on activism and is very close to being a significant predictor of membership as well,¹⁰ showing that the United States is indeed exceptional in this case.

Since the data are cross-sectional, it is difficult to draw direct inferences about long-term trends in party membership and activism from the findings. However, the data can provide indirect evidence, which throws important light on such trends. We know from the individual-level models that age is an important predictor of party involvement. If younger citizens are refusing to join political parties, in part, because of their closeness to the state, then we would observe cross-level interactions between age and the regulation measures. Thus, in countries with extensive regulation, young people would be even less likely to join political parties than is true elsewhere. This possibility is tested in Table 4, which includes the statistically significant aggregate covariates from Table 3 in interaction with the intercept coefficient, and also cross-level interactions between the regulation measures and the age variable. In Table 4, the party regulation measure is no longer a significant predictor of membership, and it has no influence on age. However, there is a significant cross-level interaction between the Kaufmann regulation index and

age. These results imply that the age effect associated with party involvement gets stronger in high-regulation countries compared with low-regulation countries. In the former, young people are even less likely to join parties or become active in them compared with the latter. Again this age–regulation interaction has no impact on exiting; regulation acts as a barrier to recruitment, but it appears not to influence membership retention.

In addition, the effective number of parties measure, the proportionality index and the United States dummy variable all continue to be significant predictors of the intercept in the individual-level model in Table 4. These findings suggest that there are cohort effects at work which may help to explain the long-run decline in party membership. The results are consistent with the idea that younger cohorts of citizens are avoiding party involvement, particularly in countries where parties are becoming ‘public utilities’, and this is helping to drive the decline in grassroots parties.

Discussion and conclusions

Party activism and membership have been declining across most of the democratic world. However, this decline has not been effectively explained in earlier research, in part because a full explanation requires long-run longitudinal data which are simply not available. The present analysis uses cross-sectional data suggesting that state regulation is playing an important part in this process. As parties get closer to the state and become more professionalized, they find it easier to ignore their volunteers, while at the same time expecting them to take on more regulatory burdens. Party leaders have little incentive to recruit and retain new members if the taxpayers pick up the costs of running the party organization. The data suggest that there is a generational dimension to these trends, with the recruitment of new age cohorts being problematic everywhere, but particularly so in high-regulation countries. Thus, the state itself may be smothering party activity.

If party organizations become denuded of volunteers, then political parties are even more likely to become wholly dependent on the state. This could have wider consequences for party systems throughout the democratic world. If the state capture of political parties promotes wider anti-party sentiment and serves to weaken party identification in electorates, then the consequences for contemporary democracy will be serious. Such a development is likely to lead to lower turnouts, more support for anti-system parties and problems of governance in general. Weak parties can produce policy gridlock and institutional sclerosis as interest groups fill the gap in the policy-making process vacated by the parties in search of rent-seeking opportunities (Olson, 1982). More generally, since parties greatly assist the process of aggregating diverse political interests and also in getting losers in the political process to accept democratic decisions, a weakening of parties is likely to make government in general more difficult.

Notes

1. In the European social survey of 2002, buying or boycotting goods for political or ethical reasons had been done by 24 percent and 17 percent of respondents, respectively, the third and fourth most popular activities after voting and signing a petition.
2. See <http://www.issp.org>.

3. See <http://worldvaluesurvey.org>.
4. The World Values Survey cannot be used to study trends in party membership directly because it lacks the necessary indicators to test the individual-level models of participation.
5. Other models of party membership and activism, such as the relative deprivation model and the general incentives model, cannot be tested with the indicators available in the survey.
6. Deleting these variables from the model reduces the Likelihood Ratio statistics by 11.66 with a gain of 9 degrees of freedom. This is not a statistically significant change ($p < 0.23$) indicating that the variables can be removed without loss of fit.
7. See <http://www.govindicators.org>.
8. The least squares index is given by $(\sum(s_i - v_i)^2)/2$, where s_i is the percentage of seats and v_i is the percentage of votes captured by party i in national elections (see Gallagher and Mitchell, 2005). Obviously, a larger gap between the seat-shares and vote-shares denotes a higher level of electoral distortion. The natural logarithm of the index was used to reduce the effects of a few outlier countries.
9. The multi-level modelling set-up can be described as follows:

Individual-Level Model

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} X_{1ij} + \beta_{2j} X_{2ij} + \dots + \beta_{kj} X_{kij} + r_{ij}$$

Y_{ij} is the activism score of individual i in country j

β_{ij} are the individual-level model coefficients

X_{kij} are the individual-level predictor variables

r_{ij} is an individual-level error term

Aggregate-Level Model

$$\beta_{ij} = \gamma_{q0} + \gamma_{q1} W_{1j} + \gamma_{q2} W_{2j} + \gamma_{q3} W_{3j} \dots + \gamma_{q4} W_{sj} + u_{qj}$$

β_{ij} is the i 'th coefficient from the j 'th country in the individual-level model

γ_{qj} are the coefficients of the aggregate-level covariates

W_{ij} are the aggregate-level covariates

u_{qj} is an aggregate-level error term

10. The US dummy variable has a t statistic of 1.3 in the membership model.

Appendix

Variables in the individual-level models (variable identifiers in the ISSP survey are given in parentheses)

Highest Level of Education (v205)

	Percentages
No formal qualifications	8.7
Lowest formal qualification	18.4
Above lowest qualification	21.4
Higher secondary completed	22.8
Above higher secondary	14.3
University degree completed	14.3

Self-Assigned Social Status (v301)

	Percentages
Lowest decile	4.0
Second decile	4.4
Third decile	10.1
Fourth decile	13.0
Fifth decile	23.4
Sixth decile	22.6
Seventh decile	12.8
Eighth decile	7.0
Ninth decile	1.4
Tenth decile	1.3

Number of hours worked in a week (v245)

Mean = 41.2, standard deviation = 14.1

Efficacy Indicators (v36, v37, v39)

Attitudinal indicator	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
People like me don't have a say about what the government does	18.4	28.3	15.7	24.5	13.1
I don't think the government cares about what people like me think	24.1	34.6	16.4	19.8	5.1
I think most people are better informed about politics and government than I am	9.8	25.6	27.2	29.3	8.1

Participation in Voluntary Organizations (v28, v29)

Type of organization	Belong and participate	Belong but no participation	Used to belong	Never belonged
A sports, leisure or cultural group	19.6	9.0	23.2	48.1
Another type of voluntary organization	11.3	6.3	13.8	68.5

Religiosity – Attendance at Religious Services (v300)

	Percentages
Several times a week	9.1
Once a week	11.5
Two or three times a month	7.0
Once a month	6.1
Several times a year	17.9
Once a year	9.7
Less frequently	14.8
Never	23.9

Interest in Politics (v42)

	Percentages
Very interested	9.8
Quite interested	46.7
Hardly interested	34.3
Not at all interested	19.0

Discussion of Politics (v47)

	Percentages
Often	12.2
Sometimes	35.0
Rarely	31.6
Never	21.3

Media Usage for Politics (v64, v65, v66, v67)

	Every day	3–4 days a week	1–2 days a week	Fewer than 1–2 days a week	Never
Watch television	45.2	19.4	14.3	12.2	8.9
Listen to the radio	23.1	12.7	12.9	20.9	30.4
Read a newspaper	18.0	13.8	18.1	23.2	27.0
Use the Internet	3.4	2.9	4.6	13.7	75.4

Civic Norms (v4, v7, v8, v10): 'How important is it that a good citizen should ...'

	Not at all important			Very important			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Vote in elections	4.0	2.6	4.2	8.3	12.3	16.2	52.3
Keep a watch on government	3.2	3.4	5.9	13.4	18.4	18.5	37.3
Be active in social or political associations	11.3	9.7	13.2	20.1	18.5	11.9	15.2
Choose products for political or ethical reasons	12.3	7.3	9.7	17.0	19.4	16.1	18.2

Governmental Trust (v43)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Most of the time we can trust people in government	3.3	26.0	27.8	29.9	13.0

Interpersonal Trust (v46)

	Always be trusted	Usually be trusted	Usually careful	Always careful
Can people be trusted or you can't be too careful in dealing with them?	4.2	37.4	42.3	16.2

Marital Status (v202)

	Percentages
Married or living as married	56.3
Widowed	7.7
Divorced or separated	7.7
Single	28.4

Type of Community (v378)

	Percentages
A big city	34.6
Suburb	13.2
Town or small city	24.0
Country village	24.6
Farm or country home	3.6

Age (v201) Mean = 45.1, standard deviation = 17.3

Gender (v200)

	Percentages
Males	52.3
Females	47.7

Variables in the aggregate model

The party regulation index is constructed from a series of questions in the IDEA database on party regulation (<http://www.idea.int/parties/finance>). The questions are:

- Is there a system of regulation for the financing of political parties?
- Do donors have to disclose contributions made?
- Do political parties have to disclose contributions received?
- Is there a ceiling on how much a donor can contribute?
- Is there a ceiling on how much a party can raise?
- Is there a ban on foreign donations to political parties?
- Is there a ban on corporate donations to political parties?
- Is there a ban on donations from government contractors to political parties?

- Is there a ban on trade union donations to political parties?
Is there a ban on anonymous donations to political parties?
Is there a ban on in-kind donations to political parties?
Is there a ban on any other type of donation to political parties?
Is there provision for public disclosure of expenditure by political parties?
Is there a ceiling on party election expenditure?

A 'yes' answer to each question scores 1, so the party regulation measure varies from zero to 14 for each country. There are missing data in the IDEA database for four countries: the Philippines, Slovenia, South Korea and Taiwan. Accordingly, a regression model of party regulation was constructed in order to interpolate these missing values. This model contained the following variables:

- GNP per capita in 2003
The logarithm of the Gallagher Least Squares Proportionality Index
The average population size per legislative representative
Compulsory voting
The Gini coefficient of inequality
The Vanhanen Party Competition Index
The Polity regulation of participation Index

These variables were designed to capture the socio-economic, institutional and political environments in which parties operate. All the variables were statistically significant predictors of the regulation index for the remaining 32 countries and the model adjusted R-square was 0.67. The predicted values for the four countries are used to replace missing data, rounding the values to the nearest integer.

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