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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Corbyn's labour party: managing the membership surge

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Abstract

All British parties, with the one exception of the Conservative Party, have experienced membership surges in recent years, thus contradicting the assertion of many party scholars that membership is in terminal decline. The ebbs and flows of Labour's membership since the 1980s are examined here before considering both the benefits and costs to the party of the recent spectacular surge associated with Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. The conclusion is that parties are not prisoners of broad societal trends; they have the ability to influence the ebbs and flows. To better understand and explain the membership trends requires a combination of quantitative and qualitative studies; something which is difficult in contemporary academic scholarship.

Keywords Political parties · Labour party · Party membership · Cost/benefit analysis

> It appears that party membership is continuing to decline in Britain…so the trends first identified in the 1990s are continuing. (Whiteley 2009)

> …membership has now reached such a low ebb that it may no longer constitute a relevant indicator of party organisational capacity. (Van Biezen et al. 2012)

> …a sustained revival of grassroots membership levels does not appear likely to occur…we believe that the era of mass Labour membership is over. (Pemberton and Wickham-Jones 2013)

> The days of mass membership parties have almost certainly gone for ever… grassroots organisations have withered in many places. It seems unlikely they will ever recover. (Pattie and Johnston 2014)

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Table 1 Party membership figures 2013–2018 (rounded to nearest thousand)

	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013
Labour	552,000	564,000	544,000	388,000		
Conservatives	124,000				149,800	134,000
Liberal democrats	101,000	57,000	78,000	61,000	44,000	43,000
SNP	118,000		119,000	115,000	26,000	
Green (E & W)	41,000	43,000	46,000	67,000	30,900	13,800
UKIP	21,000	39,000	34,000	42,000		32,000
PC	8000	8000		8000		

Sources

(a) L. Audickas, N. Dempsey, R. Keen (2018) Membership of UK Political Parties, House of Commons Briefing Paper, SN05125

(b) A Membership Strategy for the Green Party of England and Wales, Internal Party Document, 2018

(c) http://www.conservative-home. com/parliament/2018/07/is-the-conservative-party's-membership-growing?

> Party membership is undoubtedly a minority sport in the United Kingdom, and there is no evidence to suggest that numbers are likely to recover. (L. Bennie, 'Party Membership in Britain', in van Haute and Gauja 2015, pp. 173–174)

Introduction

As can be seen from the quotations above, the consensus among many party scholars has been to predict the decline, even the demise, of party membership. Yet, in recent years in Britain, the Labour, Liberal Democrat, Scottish National, Green and UKIP parties have all recorded significant membership increases. Only the Conservative Party appears not to have cashed in on this membership surge[1] (see Table 1). So, the predictive certainties of these scholars, made over the past 10 years, have turned out to be incorrect as far as British parties are concerned. The data on which these predictions were based have been used to underpin two arguments. Firstly, that membership decline is inevitable—as indicated in the quotations above—and, secondly, that the necessity and value of members to parties is of little consequence. Some party scholars have argued that political communication has become highly professionalised and therefore parties' need of amateurs (i.e. party members) has lessened (Panebianco 1998). Furthermore, these member sceptics argue that there are the political, administrative and financial costs of a party membership. Firstly, party leaders need to be more attuned to the electoral preferences of their target

[1] The steady decline in Conservative Party membership deserves a study in its own right. A significant explanatory factor is the increase in the powers of the Party Leader and the Conservative Central HQ and the reduction in the powers of Conservative constituency associations and individual members since 1998.

voters rather than their more ideologically inclined members. Secondly, members' beliefs and opinions can be difficult to manage and a divided party can be an electoral handicap. And, thirdly, the day-to-day management of a membership—recruitment, renewal and resignation—can be time consuming and costly. A party's limited resources can be better spent on other matters than membership management. For these reasons, the inexorable decline in party membership, as party scholars see it, is not something that parties should be too concerned about, particularly since parties are being funded increasingly by the state (Katz and Mair 1995).

In this article, I want to question, firstly, whether membership decline is inevitable in twenty-first century democracies and, secondly, whether the costs to a party of members outweigh any benefits and therefore little effort should be put into membership recruitment. I argue that members can bring considerable benefits to a party. I will concentrate upon the spectacular growth of Labour Party membership in recent years on the grounds that this surge in such a short space of time most clearly demonstrates both benefits and costs.

Fluctuations in Labour's membership

If one examines Labour's individual membership since 1980, when the party's recording procedures became more accurate, there have been significant fluctuations in the figures. In the post-war years, membership was treated with relative indifference by the party leadership. One party scholar summarised the party's attitude in the post-war decades in the following manner: 'of all the mass membership parties, the British Labour Party (was) perhaps the one where membership recruitment (was) taken least seriously' (Ware 1987, p. 146). The reasons for this indifference were firstly, that the party could rely upon the affiliated trade unions for funds; secondly, the prevailing view in the leadership echelons was that the members were generally unrepresentative militants; and, thirdly, that the party leadership was sustained in its indifference by an academic consensus that member-led constituency campaigning was of only marginal significance in determining general election outcomes. Only the strict legal limits on constituency campaign expenditure in general elections necessitated local party activists but their overall electoral impact was thought to be negligible (see, for example, Butler and King 1966, p. 191; Butler and Kavanagh 1974, p. 248).

For three decades in post-war Britain, the relative indifference of Labour's leadership regarding members contributed to their numbers declining.[2] Only from the 1980s onwards were attempts made, firstly by Neil Kinnock and then by Tony Blair, to expand the membership. Incentives were offered to potential members by shifting marginally the balance of power within the party from the affiliated to the individual membership by giving individual members greater powers in the election of

[2] Notwithstanding the fact that the Labour Party's published membership figures until 1980 are flawed due to the way in which they were compiled, they nevertheless record a drop from 1 million in 1952 to 660,000 in 1979.

the party leadership, in the selection of MPs, and in the election of the National Executive Committee. Furthermore, the party organisation was restructured and more resources and efforts were devoted to membership recruitment. However, Kinnock achieved only marginal success in his efforts to recruit new members. It was only during the first years of Blair's leadership, while the party was still in opposition (1994–1997), that a significant rise in membership occurred. But from 1997 onwards, during the Blair/Brown governments, membership dropped year by year until by the end of the party's period in government (2009) it had the lowest membership ever recorded. New Labour—its leadership, its policies and its way of managing the party—had both alienated a very significant number of its existing members and did not attract new adherents.

This steady decline in individual membership was arrested after the party's loss of the 2010 general election and the election of a new party leader. Ed Miliband made attempts to galvanise the membership, the most significant of which was the proposal to allow registered supporters subscribing to the aims and values of the party to vote in leadership elections. This reform raised the question of why any individual would bother to join and pay a membership fee when s/he could pay a much reduced sum of money and become a supporter with the right to participate in choosing the party leader.

Following Miliband's resignation as Leader after the party election defeat at the 2015 General Election, a new system of OMOV+ for electing the party leader was adopted. Prior to this reform, the Labour leader had been elected by a tripartite electoral college consisting of Labour MPs and MEPs, affiliated members and individual members. The new system (OMOV+) was one in which the leader would be elected by a one-member one-vote system in which all individual party members, all affiliated party supporters (namely trade union levy payers) and all affiliated registered supporters would cast a vote. It was this new electoral system which provided for the very first time in the party's history the opportunity for individual members to have the crucial and determining say in who would be the party leader, and which resulted in Jeremy Corbyn's election as party leader. Once Corbyn's candidature in the leadership election was confirmed in May 2015 a rapid rise in party membership occurred. Between May and August 2015, membership increased by 94,000. In addition, 115,000 supporters registered with the party. By the time of the leadership election in September, 550,000 ballot papers were issued to party members, party supporters and affiliated supporters.[3] And this dramatic surge in membership was sustained in 2016 and 2017 by a second leadership election and by a General Election. And so by 2018 Labour, having sunk to its lowest membership figure ever in 2009, could now claim to be the largest membership party in Europe.[4]

As such, over these four decades the party experienced a constant ebb and flow in its membership. The publication of annual membership figures makes it somewhat

[3] 245,520 individual party members (83.5% of the total number of individual party members) and 105,598 registered supporters (93.0% of the total registered supporters) cast a vote. 49.6% of individual members and 83.8% of registered supporters voted for Corbyn.

[4] A claim made by the Conservative Party in the 1950s.

Table 2 Benefits and costs of an expanding membership

Benefits	Costs
Financial	Electoral
Electoral	Administrative
Voters	
Campaigners	
Representational	Managerial
Personal	
Outreach	
Factional	Factional

difficult to point to particular factors or events, which might have influenced these ebbs and flows. One would require monthly or even weekly figures for such an exercise.[5] However, by examining the annual figures the following generalisations would appear to be plausible. General elections normally prompted a surge; in five of the eight general election years in this period, membership grew—1987, 2001 and 2005 being the only exceptions. A new party leader might produce a growth—for example Blair between 1994 and 1997 and Corbyn post-2015—but on the other hand, Foot, Kinnock, Smith, Brown and Miliband made little impact on the numbers. Internal party organisational reforms such as the adoption in 1992 of one person/one vote procedures to select parliamentary candidates had no impact on numbers. Neither do specific party policy commitments on such topics as nuclear disarmament, the European Union, or the minimum wage have an impact on the numbers. Rather the policies of incumbent Conservative governments were more likely to prompt growth.[6] Overall, therefore, an examination of membership trends over four decades suggests that a combination of factors, some internal to the party and some external, determine the ebbs and flows, but that it was Blair and Corbyn and the politics that they articulated which appear to be the most important trigger stimulating membership growth.

I now propose to examine in greater detail Labour's recent rapid membership surge and the benefits and costs accruing to the party. This benefits/costs framework is based upon Susan Scarrow's (1996) analysis in which she identifies eight benefits:

legitimacy—credibility in the community;
electoral—the existence of a group of loyal voters;
outreach—the presence of community ambassadors;
financial—subscriptions and donations;
campaigning—doorstep activists;
linkage—channels of communication;
innovation—the source of new ideas;

[5] Power and Dommett (2018) analyse the weekly membership figures of the England and Wales Green Party in 2017.

[6] A study of members in 1989 concluded that the strongest factor in explaining an individual's decision to join the party was 'to get rid of Thatcher and the Conservatives' (Seyd and Whiteley 1992, p. 74).

Table 3 Central labour party income 2012–2017 (percentage of total)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Individual membership	16.7	17.1	15.1	18.6	28.9	30.0
Trade union affiliations	24.1	24.1	15.9	12.5	12.8	11.1
Donations	15.6	15.4	27.3	37.6	29.4	32.7
Other (eg Government grants, commercial income, fund raising)	43.6	43.4	41.7	31.3	28.9	26.2

Source Electoral Commission (2012–2018)

personnel—a reservoir of talent.

And the two costs she identifies are programmatic—the adoption of vote-losing policies—and administrative—recruitment, retention and organising. With regard to Labour's membership surge, I suggest a slightly modified version of the Scarrow framework which distinguishes four benefits—financial, electoral, representational and factional—and four costs—electoral, administrative, managerial and factional (Table 2).

Membership growth: the benefits

Financial

Subscription paying members generate income for a party. In Britain where state funding of parties has not been the practice, membership income has been an important aspect of party budgets. The Labour Party—always poor in comparison with the Conservative Party (Fisher 2017)—has been reliant upon the trade unions for the bulk of its finances. So, for example, over a period of 15 years from 1971 to 1986, apart from the four general election years, the trade unions' affiliated membership fees contributed over two-thirds of the party's central income (Quinn 2010, p. 13). Individual members' subscriptions played only a limited role in funding the party's national operations. But, with the Blair leadership devaluing the role of the trade unions within the party, donations from wealthy supporters became more significant. In the years between 2001 and 2008, and again excluding the 2005 general election year, donations made up 29% of the party's central income, whereas the affiliated trade union and individual members contributed 26 and 14%, respectively (Labour Party 2001–2009).

However, the growth in membership has brought the party considerable financial benefits. Table 3 reveals that the percentage of the party's total national income coming from membership subscriptions almost doubled over the pre-Corbyn/Corbyn period. Membership income increased from £9 million in 2015 to £16 million in 2017 (an increase in real terms of 72%). By 2017, the party's General Secretary was able to announce at the annual conference that the party had completely cleared its debts. The impact of this surge in income was that the Labour Party had £3.5 million immediately available when the 2017 General Election was called and able,

Table 4 Labour members' voting record in the 2017 and 2015 general elections

	2017	2015
Conservative	1.5	1.2
Labour	93.5	76.1
Liberal democrat	3.0	3.3
SNP	0.4	1.2
UKIP	0.1	1.3
Green	0.7	8.6
Other	0.8	8.4
Total	100	100

Source British Election Study 2018, Wave 14 (Labour members = 998)

therefore, to commence campaigning earlier than any of its rivals (Cowley and Kavanagh 2018, p. 151). The more long-term consequence has been an increase in the number of staff, full-time and part-time, employed by the party from 335 in 2015 to 389 in 2017.[7] And a new community organising section has been created at party headquarters with a Director and full-time staff; by January 2019, 29 field staff had been appointed throughout the country with a further 11 posts still to be filled.

It should be noted, however, that the financial benefits of this growth in membership have accrued to the party headquarters rather than to local parties. Currently, an individual pays £50 per annum to be a member (with reductions for the retired, unwaged, young, students, and trade union affiliates) and this money goes directly to the central party. Just £2.50 per member is redistributed from the centre back to local parties. Local parties have not benefitted financially to the same extent as the national party from this membership surge.[8]

Electoral

Members provide a party with a rock-solid core of voters, however small a percentage of the total party vote this might be. So, for example, the British Election Study estimated that in the 2017 general election nine in every ten Labour members loyally voted for their party (British Election Study, 2018, Wave 14) (See Table 4). That works out as 4.4% of the total Labour vote. Not a large figure but nevertheless those loyal votes could be of significance in some very marginal constituencies. However, we should add the caveat that there is no guarantee of their voting loyalty particularly in contemporary times of considerable electoral volatility. The recent growth in Labour's membership has brought in people who previously were Green, SNP, or Liberal Democrat members or voters. For example, an internal survey of 15% of

[7] See Labour Party, Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2017, p. 15.

[8] A treasurer of one city Labour Party with a current individual membership of 2,500 complained to the author that the local party is now no better off financially than in 2011 when there were 730 members. He stated that, as compared with a decade ago, this CLP now needs more local fund-raising events to pay for election campaigning.

Green Party of England and Wales members leaving the party between January 2016 and September 2017 revealed that 60% had left to join the Labour Party (Power and Dommett 2018). Other research has suggested that 15% of Labour's new joiners did not have a Labour voting record. (http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/elections/2015/09why-did-Labour-use-this-system-to-elect-its-leader?) Furthermore, there is evidence that voters in local elections are becoming more discriminating and may well cast their votes for a different party in local and national elections. It has been estimated that 18.4% of Labour voters switched to another party with their local election choice in the 2015 general and local elections (Rallings et al. 2015). So, members may be less reliable in local elections where with lower turnouts their vote is likely to be more significant.

What is of greater significance is that members provide a party with street-level campaigners. There are strict financial limits on the amount of money that parties can spend in constituencies and therefore they are reliant upon volunteers to carry out the traditional forms of electioneering (leafleting, canvassing and contacting). We noted earlier that the conventional academic wisdom in the 1950s and 1960s among psephologists was that local campaigning made little difference to the outcome of general elections, which were determined more by national swings to and from the two major parties. However, more recent research on constituency campaigning has suggested that local party campaigning plays a significant part in determining general election outcomes (Denver et al. 2004; Fisher et al. 2011; Johnston et al. 2013, Fisher et al. 2016; Cowley and Kavanagh 2018, pp. 285–321). A specific study of Labour Party members' campaigning activities in the 1997 general election concluded that '…local party activists play an important role in mobilising the vote in British general elections' (Seyd and Whiteley 2002, p. 135). So, constituency campaigning by local party members does have an impact upon electoral outcomes.

Membership growth, however, does not necessarily translate into activism growth. There was evidence of declining party activism during the Blair surge. In 1990, 51% of Labour members devoted no time to party activities and by 1999 this figure had risen to 65%. In 1990, 10% devoted 10+ hours to party activities and by 1999 that was down to 7% (Seyd and Whiteley 2002, p. 88). A recent study of Labour members confirms that in 2017, a significant proportion (41%) did absolutely nothing for the party in 1 month (Bale et al. 2018). But, this is lower than the figures for the 1990s and the number of members engaged in some party activity in the later survey (59%) is higher. Although the numbers for the years 1999 and 2017 from these two surveys are not directly comparable they would suggest a significant increase in the number of members doing something for the party. Furthermore, even if there were a lower percentage of active members today the overall growth in numbers provides the party with a larger number of doorstep campaigners—35% of 1999 members were active making a total of 126,000, whereas by comparison 59% of 2017 members were active producing a total of 324,000. In other words, Labour has almost three times the number of activists today as compared with the first years of the Blair government. So, the party's presence on the streets and doorsteps during the 2017 General Election campaign was considerable—and far greater than the Conservative Party's presence. However, in the 2015 General Election, the Conservative Party capitalised upon its considerable financial resources and campaigning

Table 5 Social profile of membership 2017

	New member (ie joined after 2015)	Existing member
	%	%
Occupational category -C2DE	38.2	24.1
Income low (5–20 K)	33.5	20.0
Income high (40 K+)	34.0	44.5
Gender—female	49.5	38.5
Graduate	40.2	55.6
Age 36–55	37.7	22.3
Age 56 +	50.0	63.5
Average age	52	61

Source Whiteley et al. (2018)

expertise at the centre to great effect, and in the 2017 General Election, it lacked the equivalent campaigning expertise at the centre and was more reliant upon its local party activists. With an ageing and low membership it had nothing like the number of activists that Labour was able to mobilise (Cowley and Kavanagh 2018, pp. 285–321).

We should note, however, that not only party members become engaged in campaigning at election times. Recent research has pointed to the importance of non-member supporters in campaigning activities (Fisher et al. 2014; Webb et al. 2017). However, when it comes to the more intensive forms of campaigning (canvassing and leaflet deliveries), party members are more involved than supporters. This research remarks on 'the continuing centrality of the formal membership for core activities which are vital to electoral mobilization' (Webb et al. 2017).

Notwithstanding this rise in the absolute number of Labour activists, there may well be a trend among the new intake more towards identification rather than engagement in the party's traditional activities (meeting attendance or doorstep campaigning). At the click of a computer button and the swipe of a credit card individuals may join. An often-voiced complaint among local party officers is that new members are inactive. But, even if among this newer intake of members there are more identifiers who do nothing more than pay a subscription and may regard traditional doorstep campaigning with a degree of scepticism among them may well be many digital activists. Their contribution to the party as digital campaigners should not be underestimated (Gibson 2015).

Representational

Personnel

It is from the pool of members that a party's elected representatives are drawn. A larger membership expands the reservoir of talent from which the party can select. It has more people to choose from but also it might have a wider range of people to

Table 6 Contacts of members with individuals outside the party

	Yes %	No %
Do members talk about politics with people who are not party members?	86	14
Do their friends ask for their opinions on political issues?	72	28
Do work colleagues ask for their opinions about a political issue?	51	48
Do they offer their opinions to friends without them asking?	56	44
Do they offer their opinions to work colleagues without them asking?	39	61
Do their friends know that they are Labour Party members?	91	9
Do their work colleagues know that they are Labour Party members?	71	29

Seyd and Whiteley (2002, p. 81)

	%
I get involved but I don't say I'm a member	31
I get involved and I say I'm a member	60
I prefer not to get involved	7

Q: 'If you are in a social situation, or at work, and the talk turns to politics, which of the following best expresses what you usually do?'

Bale, T, Webb, P, Poletti, M 'Grassroots: Britain's Party Members: Who they Are, What They Think, and What They Do', Mile End Institute/Queen Mary, 2018

choose from. The personnel in the UK Parliament and local councils are predominantly white, male, and middle aged. And, the profile of Labour's membership in the past has been very similar. For example, in 1997, Labour members were predominantly male, middle class and middle aged (Seyd and Whiteley 2002, p. 45). However, there is evidence (Whiteley et al. 2018) that in the recent surge a rather different cohort has emerged—slightly younger, more female, fewer graduates and earning less money (see Table 5). Might this slight shift in the socio-economic profile of the membership impact upon the party's social representativeness? Only after an analysis of the cohort of parliamentary and local government candidates in future elections will we be able to draw any conclusions about the social profile of the party's future political elite. What we can note, however, is the determined effort by the party, following its Democracy Review of 2018, to reform its structures, both central and local, in such a way as to facilitate greater participation and involvement by minority groups—women and ethnic minorities in particular—in the party.

Outreach

Party members are individuals living in neighbourhoods and as such may act as community ambassadors—a term first popularised by Susan Scarrow (1996, p. 43). The role of an ambassador is two-fold. Firstly, to represent the views of the government by whom she has been appointed to the country in which she is located and, secondly, to act as the local observer transmitting the views and behaviours of the government and its people in which she is located back to her government. To what extent do members fulfil this role? There is evidence that party members belong to

a wide range of educational, cultural, community, conservation and sports groups (Seyd and Whiteley 2002, pp. 85–86). What is the evidence that they are voices in the community transmitting a party point of view in the work, office, social and family environment? Certainly, there is evidence that party members will converse with friends and colleagues about political matters and that these friends and work colleagues are aware of the members' political affiliation (Seyd and Whiteley 2002, p. 81). In their recent study of party members, Bale et al. (2018, p. 24) revealed that nine in every ten members will get involved in political discussions in social or work situations. (See Table 6) So members articulate the Labour point of view in the community and in the workplace. We can conclude therefore that party members do perform a role as personal communicators or ambassadors. The question then is how significant might this voice be? There is evidence that such voice plays an important role in the communication of political opinions from politicians to individuals (Popkin 1991; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). A two-step process of political communication occurs in which party members, and other local community activists, play an important role in reinforcing the political opinions voiced nationally and in the media down at the local and personal level. Taking away such local political communicators and the political messages from the centre would fail to be validated and a party's presence would be undermined. As Huckfeldt and Sprague note 'politics is a social activity, imbedded within structured patterns of social interaction. Political information is not only conveyed through speeches and media reports but also through a variety of informal social mechanisms…' (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995, p. 124).

What of the reverse communication process, namely the transmission of voices from communities to the party leadership? The opportunities for such transmission via the party's formal procedures and institutions became increasingly limited during the years of Labour governments (1997–2010). Notwithstanding a serious attempt to improve the Labour Party's deliberative and decision-making procedures in the mid-1990s through the creation of the National Policy Forum, there is well-documented evidence of the steady reduction in party members' role in policy deliberations after 1997. A very detailed and microscopic analysis of the party during the Blair years (Minkin 2014) concluded that the annual party conference had been reduced to a stage-managed showcase for the party leadership, the National Policy Forum operated as a mechanism for leadership control and that very few, if any, of the Labour government's policies originated from this institution. In 1999, 53% of party members felt that 'the party leadership doesn't pay a lot attention to ordinary party members' (Seyd and Whiteley 2002, p. 152). It is apparent that the transmission of ideas from the grassroots to the leadership was almost completely cut off during the Blair/Brown leadership years.

By contrast, however, in the most recent study of party members, conducted since Corbyn became leader, 61% felt that they had 'a significant say on party policy' and only 18% believed that the leadership 'doesn't pay a lot of attention to members' (Bale et al. 2018, p. 32). Perhaps the transmission belt from the grassroots to the leadership has improved. Certainly, a distinct change of tone occurred after Corbyn became party leader with numerous email invitations being addressed to individual members to contribute to the party's policy-making process. (See "Appendix" for

the wording of such an invitation) However, between rhetoric and reality there can be a significant gap. Only an analysis of individual member input into the National Policy Forum and its sub-committees will be able to determine whether in fact individuals are contributing to the party's policies. But, an immediate contrast between rhetoric and reality is apparent when one examines the party leadership's stance with regard to the European Union where it resisted the membership's desire for a pro-EU policy and for that to be reflected in any second referendum on Britain's membership of the EU.

We should note, however, that even if the party's institutions and procedures have been reformed in order that members can play a more prominent role in the policy-making process there is no guarantee that they will take up these opportunities. Do members want to be involved in policy deliberations? We noted earlier that the motivation of many recent joiners may be identification rather than participation. And so, given the opportunity to participate in the party's internal elections, only a minority of members take it up. That is apart from the two elections for party leader in which over 80% of members cast a vote. On other matters, such as elections to the party's National Executive Committee, only a relatively small number of members participate. For example, to elect the constituency representatives to the National Executive Committee turn outs of 12% (January 2018) and 16% (September 2018) of the individual membership were recorded. These low figures suggest that the membership surge is largely made up of sporadic interventionists—willing to identify with the party and its leader but less willing to engage in some of the more traditional activities associated with party membership.

Factional

Members can be a significant resource to be used by party leaders in times of intra-party conflict. A large—and growing—membership may make it easier for the party leadership to manage the party and particularly its internal critics. Tony Blair used the rise in membership between 1994 and 1997 as proof to his internal party critics of the popularity of his policy initiatives. Similarly, the membership surges from 2015 onwards provided Corbyn with protection from his critics in the parliamentary party. He was able to ignore a vote of no confidence in him by the Parliamentary Labour Party in 2016 by arguing that his legitimacy derived from the members who had elected him.

Corbyn and his left-wing colleagues in the Campaign Group[9] have moved from being a small minority in the Labour Party, and very much marginalised during the New Labour years, into a powerful faction riding on the membership tsunami. The Left has used this surge to try and extend its control of the party. Firstly, by attempting to change the rules with regard to the reselection of Labour MPs. Historically,

[9] For the past 40 years, the Campaign Group has been the base for a small group of parliamentarians identified with the Left. In the extra-parliamentary party, the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy has been the most prominent of Left groups. But today, the largest Left group is Momentum which originated from Corbyn's leadership campaign (see, Klug et al. 2016).

the Left has regarded the Parliamentary Labour Party as a bastion of the Right—confirmation for this point of view being provided by the difficulty that the left-wing Campaign Group had in securing the required number of PLP nominations to allow Corbyn to stand in the 2015 leadership election[10]—which would only be changed if the membership had greater powers to select and deselect parliamentarians. The rules, established after a bitter intra-party dispute in the 1980s, laid down that a sitting Labour MP could only be deselected by her/his constituency party if a specific reselection motion to this effect was approved by the local party. What the Left was now demanding was an automatic reselection procedure. In other words, incumbent Labour MPs would have to go through a selection process prior to every general election thus giving local party members the opportunity to select an alternative (more left wing) candidate if they are so pleased. However, the Left was forced into a compromise on this issue at the party's 2018 annual conference. A significant number of trade unions were opposed to the diminution of their role as affiliated organisations in local constituency parties and, so rather than an automatic reselection process being introduced prior to a general election involving just individual members a 'trigger ballot' requiring the support of one-third of local members and affiliated organisations would be required before a reselection procedure could be proceeded with.

Secondly, the Left has used this membership surge to strengthen its position in the extra-parliamentary party, in particular on the National Executive Committee. Prior to the annual ballots for the nine[11] constituency representatives, the Left has agreed its list of nominees and these names have then been widely circulated throughout the party. All nine have been elected giving the Left a powerful position on Labour's ruling executive body. And one consequence of this strength on the NEC has been the appointment of a new party General Secretary—Jennie Formby—who is closely identified with the Left.[12]

To summarise the benefits of this Corbyn inspired membership surge—the Labour Party is richer, has more campaigning activists, has a larger and perhaps more socially representative reservoir from which to draw personnel for elected office, has more voices in the community, and has helped to sustain the party leadership. What are the costs of this membership surge?

[10] Corbyn only secured sufficient nominations to stand as a candidate because some of his opponents in the PLP 'leant him' their support—much to their later chagrin when Corbyn was elected leader.

[11] The number of constituency representatives on the NEC was increased from seven to nine in 2018. A change intended to strengthen the Left's position on the NEC.

[12] Formby replaced Iain McNicol who was the party's General Secretary from 2011 to 2017. McNicol was not identified as a Corbyn supporter.

Membership growth: the costs

Electoral

A party that grants its members policy-making powers may well find that its electoral-seeking efficiency is distorted since members have often been regarded as a body of people unrepresentative of a party's target voters. It has been suggested that they are more concerned with principles than practical policies, and therefore they tend to support vote-losing policies and hamper a party's ability to act as an efficient vote-seeking organisation. The 'law of curvilinear disparity' (May 1973) asserts that middle-level elites or rank-and-file activists in a political party are more radical than the party leadership on the one hand and the party voters on the other. So, according to this law, Labour members are to the left of both the party leadership and the party's voters. However, a study of Labour members in the 1990s concluded that they 'often hold opinions more strongly than the larger body of Labour voters, but they were by no means seriously at odds with Labour voters' (Seyd and Whiteley 2002, p. 169).

What of the recent surge? To what extent does the Corbyn surge damage Labour's electoral prospects? Do these new members hold opinions that are decidedly out of line with Labour voters? Using British Election Study data, we can compare Labour voters' and members' opinions in 2018. If we compare the two on a broad left/right spectrum, there is some evidence to confirm May's assertion. Asked to place themselves on a scale ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right), the mean score for Labour members was 1.38 and for Labour voters was 2.07 (British Election Study, Wave 14, 2018). However, this is a very broad and subjective measurement. By contrast, when we examine the two on a range of economic issues, we find that both groups share similar attitudes (see Table 7). The only difference is in size—a larger percentage of members than voters will hold a particular opinion but the differences between the two are only a matter of degree rather than of substance. For example, more members than Labour voters agree that 'government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off', that 'big business takes advantage of ordinary people', that 'ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth', that there is 'one law for the rich and one for the poor', and that 'management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance'. So, on traditional economic issues Labour members' and voters' attitudes do not diverge. Furthermore, a majority of both Labour members and voters believe that 'immigration is good…for Britain's economy' although again more members than Labour voters believe this to be the case. However, when we examine libertarian issues, there is less accord between the two groups. Over one half of Labour voters agree that 'schools should teach children to obey authority' while only one-third of members share this opinion. A similar distribution of opinion is revealed in response to the statement that 'people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences'. And on the death penalty there is a significant division of opinion between the two groups. Three quarters of members but only one half of Labour voters

Table 7 A comparison of labour members'/voters' attitudes

	Labour voters	Labour members
(a) 'Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off'		
Disagree	9	3
Neither	19	10
Agree	67	86
Don't know	5	1
(b) 'Big business takes advantage of ordinary people'		
Disagree	3	2
Neither	10	5
Agree	83	93
Don't know	3	1
(c) 'Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth'		
Disagree	3	2
Neither	9	3
Agree	85	94
Don't know	3	1
(d) 'There is one law for the rich and one for the poor'		
Disagree	4	2
Neither	8	4
Agree	85	93
Don't know	2	1
(e) 'Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance'		
Disagree	7	6
Neither	14	12
Agree	75	81
Don't know	4	2

Table 7 (continued)

	Labour voters	Labour members
(f) 'Schools should teach children to obey authority'		
Disagree	17	32
Neither	24	32
Agree	55	34
Don't know	3	2
(g) 'People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences'		
Disagree	13	30
Neither	28	37
Agree	54	30
Don't know	5	3
(h) 'For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence'		
Disagree	48	75
Neither	12	7
Agree	35	16
Don't know	5	2
(i)'Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards'		
Disagree	35	53
Neither	23	22
Agree	38	22
Don't know	5	3
(j) 'Do you think immigration is good or bad for Britain's economy?'		
Bad (1–3)	14	5
4	16	9

Table 7 (continued)

	Labour voters	Labour members
Good (5–7)	64	84
Don't know	6	2

Tables a–i: 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' and 'strongly agree' and 'agree' have been merged

Table j: On the 7-point scale, with 1 as bad and 7 as good, 1–3 and 5–7 have been merged

Labour members = 998; Labour voters = 8417

Source British Election Study, Wave 14, May 2018

disagree that 'for some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence'. Finally, one half of members and only one-third of Labour voters disagree with the statement that 'censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards'. We can conclude, therefore, that Labour members and voters are not at odds on fundamental economic issues. However, on the more personal and life-style issues, there is a danger of conflicting points of view between the two groups and to this extent there is a potential cost to the party.

Administrative

Membership management requires investment in staff to deal with recruitment, renewals and retention. At any moment of time, there is a considerable churn in membership—at one end of the process are the applications for membership and at the other end are the non-renewals. The bath tub metaphor is an appropriate one to use when discussing party membership—namely that as the water is entering the bath so at the same time is the water exiting via the plug hole. For example, in just a four-week period (March–April 2018) while there were 1715 joiners there were 4741 whose membership had lapsed or they had resigned (www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/more-than-1700-people-joined-labour/04/04/2018). The formal position is that members are given a 6-month period to renew and only at the end of this period are they deemed to have left the party. By contrast, those who resign their membership are immediately removed. Considerable resources—time, staff, and money—have to be devoted to these administrative tasks. Since the early 1990s, the entire administrative exercise of membership recruitment, renewals and retention has been decentralised to the party's North Eastern (Newcastle) offices on the grounds that the staffing and office costs would be lower than in London. Overall, however, the day-to-day task of membership management is left to the local parties and, as a consequence, it is more of a reactive rather than a pro-active process—in other words, the party surfs the trends rather than initiating specific recruitment campaigns based on the evidence of particular triggers.

Managerial

In addition to the very specific administrative task of managing the inflow and outflow of individuals, there is the formidable task of meeting members' expectations. What exactly do they want from the party and how might these wants be satisfied? Are new internal procedures required to accommodate the membership surge? Do tensions arise between new and long-standing members and between active and inactive members? One might have expected some, if not all, of these questions to be addressed by the Democracy Review set up by the party leadership in 2017. This review—'one of the most comprehensive projects into Labour Party Democracy

ever undertaken' (Democracy Review 2018, p. 10)—was put in the hands of one person.[13] The report claims that

> The work took us the length and breadth of the country meeting members of the Party from CLPs, affiliates, women's organisations, BAME groups, disabled members and LGBT + activists at branch level and through regional and national structures to the NEC, Leader's Office and Westminster MPs. We met with MEPs in Brussels, attended the Scottish and Welsh Labour Party Conferences as well as English Regional Conferences and events. Thousands of miles were travelled, and hundreds of meetings attended.[14]

It is clear, however, that the prime purpose and objective of the whole exercise was to distance the party from the practices and procedures of New Labour. The underlying theme of the report is that the party should be transformed into a social movement. The terms 'transformational movement', 'people powered movement' and 'campaigning mass party' are used throughout the report and it recommended a 'member-led democracy' and a 'people powered policy-making process'. It recommended a greater scope for the individual member to participate in party decisions. In particular, the report was sympathetic regarding the replacement of the party's traditional delegatory structures and procedures by more individualistic procedures such as the move towards all-member meetings of constituency parties—meaning that individual members rather than delegates might participate in the local decision-making process.[15]

The Review, approved at the 2018 party conference, recommended a new structure of policy-making institutions and procedures (now in the process of being introduced[16]) in which the guiding principle is that members' engagement in the policy-making process should be increased (Democracy Review 2018, p. 76). A new, elected NEC Policy Committee, to replace the existing National Policy forum, should have 'oversight of the policy-making process' (Democracy Review 2018, p. 79). Sub-committees, made up of an equal 50% of elected constituency party and affiliated representatives (with Ministers/Shadow Ministers and their specialist advisers granted only affiliated status) would oversee detailed policy work. All policy documents emerging from these committees would be open for consultation with the membership prior to debate and final approval by the annual conference. And,

[13] Katy Clarke, ex Labour MP, and a member of Corbyn's leadership office. She was assisted by two members of the NEC. From time to time, the report uses the term 'we' and once refers to the 'Democracy team' but no details of other personnel engaged in the production of the report are provided.

[14] The report states that 11,425 submissions were received but no details have been published regarding the breakdown or tenor of these submissions.

[15] It is interesting to note how the underlying motives for internal party reform can switch according to the factional balance of power within the party. Back in the Blair/Brown New Labour period the introduction of all-member decision making at constituency level was supported by the party's modernisers as a means of limiting the powers of the more left inclined delegates. Now, it is the Left which believes that its power and influence within the party can be strengthened by moving to all-member decision making at constituency level.

[16] Some of the proposed reforms, such as the replacement of the National Policy Forum by a new NEC Policy Committee, will not be introduced until after final approval at the 2019 annual party conference.

finally, the Democracy Review states that '…only policy passed at Annual Conference would be policy incorporated into the Party Programme' (Democracy Review 2018, p. 82).

Overall, the general tenor of this review of the party's policy-making procedures is to reinforce the prevailing opinion within the leadership that New Labour had curtailed the policy-making role of the membership. The intention of the Democracy Review is to reverse the shift in power towards the parliamentary party that occurred during the Blair years and relocate it much more firmly in the extra-parliamentary section of the party. But, what has been recommended is a very traditional committee-based structure of policy making with very limited scope for individuals to make a contribution. It will take time and a very detailed micro-analysis of the party's new policy-making institutions and procedures before one can draw any definite conclusions regarding the role of members in the party.

An immediate example of the disjunction between the rhetoric of 'people powered policy making' and the reality of a dominant factional party leadership has clearly been the party's stance on Europe. The majority of members hold pro-European Union sentiments and have wanted a second referendum on Brexit (Bale et al. 2019) while Corbyn has been more sceptical of the European Union and of a second referendum. Political management has therefore been made more difficult a task as a consequence of the divergence between the leadership's and the members' views.

Factional

Earlier, we pointed to the surge in membership as a powerful factor in strengthening the position of the party leader and in this sense should be regarded as a benefit. However, it can also be a cost. Blair's use of the membership surge to impose new policies and procedures eventually led to an exit from the party of many who felt that the party's institutions and procedures had been so altered as to minimise their opportunities for voice. A similar potential cost prevails under Corbyn, namely that a significant group of members feel that the party no longer represents their points of view and therefore take the exit option.[17] Throughout its history, the Labour Party has balanced ideological, political, social, geographical and personal divisions and maintained its organisational unity—often with difficulty but only once in the past 80 years leading to a significant breakaway. Today, however, this membership surge has been exploited by Corbyn and the Left to the extent that party unity is threatened. Without some awareness and respect for past traditions and behaviour on the party of the leadership and its dominant faction, there is the danger that the membership surge could lead to a very significant cost to the party—namely its break up.

To summarise, the costs of the Corbyn membership surge are electoral, administrative, managerial and factional. At first glance, the costs might appear to be less significant than the benefits but one should not underestimate the price to be paid if the assertion of leadership control leads to political reaction and exit from the party.

[17] Various newspapers reported, on the basis of an internal leak, that Labour's membership had dropped by 12,000 in 2 months as a consequence of its stance on Europe.

Conclusions

This article began by questioning two prevailing assumptions among some party scholars—namely that party membership is destined to decline and that it is an increasingly outmoded form of identification in twenty-first century politics. Neither the former nor the latter appears to be the case among the majority of British parties in recent years. Other UK parties have made efforts similar to the Labour Party to expand their membership (see, Bennie et al. 2018; Power and Dommett 2018). The exception is the Conservative Party whose membership has declined significantly in recent decades. It would seem that this decline originates from the party reforms implemented in 1998, which drastically reduced the powers and influence of the National Union—i.e. the individual members (see Strafford 2018). Following the party's poor campaign in the 2017 general election, the Conservative Home web page contained numerous examples of local Conservative Associations lacking both members and local campaigning skills (see, Wallace 2017). The Conservative Party has been handicapped in many ways by its relatively small and socially distinctive membership.

By contrast, Labour's membership surge has brought the party some considerable benefits. However, expanding and then maintaining a membership requires a good deal of administrative and political management. Furthermore, perhaps today a different type of member is being recruited—more likely to be an identifier, a sporadic interventionist, or a digital engager rather than a traditional activist. And, finally, if this membership surge is exploited for narrow factional advantage then there could be significant costs—exit and party break up.

Today, party scholars have access to a good deal of very valuable macro data on the changing class composition, consumption patterns, leisure activities, political values and political identification of populations. However, there is the danger of their over reliance upon this macro data rather than micro observation. Survey data do not provide all of the information required to comment on party behaviour. In order to understand the internal dynamics of parties at both national and local levels, one needs to deeply 'soak and poke'. But, very little of this type of research is conducted today.[18] Examining parties at ground level, the 'soaking and poking' which is required to understand the intricacies and internal dynamics of party politics, is time consuming. Academic rankings cannot wait for such long-term research. A further restraint upon such micro research is the unwillingness of party headquarters to provide access to party scholars.[19] As a consequence, the more easily available quantitative data sets take precedence over the extensive interviews and observations.

[18] An exception to this generalisation is Garland (2016a, b).

[19] Twenty years ago, while conducting our research on Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat party members, Paul Whiteley and I enjoyed access and collaboration from the party leaderships and the headquarters' staff—and no attempts to influence our research. By contrast, in researching this paper, I experienced a blanket refusal from Labour Party headquarters' staff to respond to my repeated requests for interviews. I am grateful to the two senior members of the headquarters' staff—one an ex-member and the other still employed at party headquarters—who did agree to talk to me.

Party scholars should not underestimate the impact of political agency, namely the impact of political events such as general elections, referendums, party leadership elections, and of specific party actions and initiatives on membership numbers.[20] It is possible for parties themselves to influence the flow of membership if they are so inclined and for that reason the benefits and costs of membership need to be closely examined. If we do combine macro and micro scholarship, I would suggest that the supposed inexorable decline of party membership is flawed. Parties are not prisoners of macro societal trends. They have the ability, if the political will exists, to encourage, attract, and sign up adherents. But, they then have the task of managing and maintaining these members. Fluctuations, ebbs and surges in membership are inevitable. It may well be that Labour's recent membership tsunami will not continue. Parties are not corks bobbing powerlessly on the ocean. Winds and tides may make their task more difficult but they still have it within their powers to influence the course and nature of direction.

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Appendix

(25 February 2019)

Dear xxxx (individual name)

Play your part in writing Labour's next manifesto

Last year, we asked you for ideas on how we can build on our exciting and positive programme of hope set out in the 2017 Manifesto 'For the Many, Not the Few'. Thousands of people took the time to send us their thoughts, take part in discussions and attend events.

I want us to build on this activity in 2019, asking representatives of Labour's policy-making body, the National Policy Forum (NPF) to lead on examining further important policy areas. I am again asking our members and stakeholders for their views, passion and expertise.

This year's consultation documents cover eight key areas and running alongside will be a programme of activity to enable as many people as possible to get involved in our discussions.

Read the Consultation Documents

I encourage you to take a look at these documents, engage with our fellow members, hold discussions at your local party or affiliate group and submit ideas to the National Policy Forum, both as individuals and collectively in local meetings and events.

Together, we can deliver our vision for the many not the few.

Yours,

Jeremy Corbyn

[20] One exception to this generalisation is Power and Dommett, 2018.

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