Party Membership Matters

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Introduction

The study of party membership in the UK is well-established. Since the 1990s, there has been a great deal of academic research on parties and their members. Seyd and Whiteley pioneered the modern party membership survey, with their examination of Labour party members, and since the publication of *Labour's Grassroots* in 1992, a series of other studies have expanded our knowledge of party members and what 'makes them tick' (Seyd and Whiteley 1992, 2002 2004; Whitelely *et al.* 1994, 2006; Rüdig *et al.* 1991, 1996; Gallagher and Marsh 2002; Bennie 2004, Childs and Webb 2012; Mitchell *et al.* 2012). The central message to emerge from the literature is that while membership is in long-term decline, and while parties have been subject to significant organisational change over the last half century (becoming more professionalized), members remain crucial to the functioning of modern parties.

However, in an era of technological change and professionalization of parties, it is debatable whether modern party organisations need members. Traditionally, political scientists have argued that members perform important functions within parties, from financial support and policy input to on-the-ground election campaigning. However, is this still the case at a time of declining participation in parties? This paper aims to explore the changing role of party membership, addressing whether the very meaning of party membership is being redefined.

The incontestable decline in the number of party members

The so-called 'golden age' of party membership, when British parties claimed to attract millions of members, is often cited in discussions of membership decline, but inaccuracy in the early reporting of membership numbers exaggerates the historical ability of parties to act as vehicles of 'mass participation' (Webb 1996; McGuiness 2012). It is very clear, however, that since the 1950s and 1960s, rapid societal change and changes in party organisation mean that party membership has entered a new era, in Britain and elsewhere (Katz 2013) (table 1). In total, the three main parties attract less than 350,000 members.

Table 1 – party membership figures since 2008 (000s)

Party	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Conservative	250,000	-	177,000	150,000	100,000
Labour	166,247	156,205	193,961	193,300	187,537
Lib Dem	59,810	58,768	65,038	48,934	42,501
SNP	15,097	15,644	16,232	20,139	24,732
UKIP	14,630	16,252	15,535	17,184	20,409
Green*	8,551	10,702	13,998	14,134	13,890
BNP	9,801	12,632	10,256	7,651	4,872

*Figures for Green party of England and Wales *and* the Scottish Green Party.
Sources: Annual party statements of accounts, Electoral Commission (electoralcommission.org.uk) except for Conservative figures which are estimates derived from media coverage and McGuiness 2012 .

Small parties like the SNP and UKIP have had some successes attracting members in recent years, but the numbers involved are small, certainly as compared with campaigning groups like WWF, Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace (although these groups have also experienced decline in support) (table 2). The National Trust states on its website: 'We beat Cameron, Clegg and Miliband: With 4 million members, we are proud to have about six times more members than all the main political parties put together' (www.nationaltrust.org.uk). In fact, this amounts to 12 times more members than the three main parties.

Table 2: Membership of campaigning groups 2012/13 (000s)

	Members/Supporters
National Trust	4,000
RSPB	1,000
WWF	572
Woodland Trust	180
Greenpeace	130
Ramblers Association	113
Friends of the Earth	100

Sources: Group websites and annual reports

As a proportion of the electorate, approximately 1% of Brits belong to a party (McGuiness 2012: 2; van Biezen et al. 2012: 28). Moreover, very few would even consider joining, according to the latest Audit of Political Engagement (Hansard Society 2013: 38) (Table 3).

Table 3 – Willingness to engage with a political party (%)

	Has done in last 12 months*	Would be prepared to do**
Voted in an election	27	42
Donated money/paid membership fee to charity, campaigning organisation	20	17
Created or signed an e-petition	9	25
Created or signed a paper petition	8	35
Contacted a local councillor/MP/MSP/WAM	8	41
Boycotted products for political, ethical or environmental reasons	6	14
Taken part in a public consultation	4	14
Contributed to discussion or campaign online or on social media	3	8
Taken an active part in a campaign	2	14
Contacted the media	2	16
Taken part in a demonstration, picket or march	1	10
Donated money/paid membership fee to political party	*1*	*5*
Attended political meetings	2	10
None of above	50	22

* Q: In the last 12 months have you done any of the following to influence decisions, laws or policies?
**Q: Which of the following would you be prepared to do if you felt strongly enough about an issue?
Source: Audit of Political Engagement 10: The 2013 Report (Hansard Society 2013: 38).

These findings suggest declining levels of political involvement, but the Audit develops the idea of 'standby' or 'latent' citizen involvement – while the majority of people do not engage directly with the political system, a significantly large group (40%) might be persuaded to do so if they felt strongly about an issue (Hansard Society 2013: 74). Nevertheless, this potential for participation does not appear to extend to party membership.

A trend masked by the headline figures on party membership is the profound reluctance of young people to consider joining parties. Young people (specifically 18-24 year olds) as a group are becoming less and less engaged with politics (Hansard Society 2013: 21). Gezgor and Scarrow (2010: 830) point to an ageing constituency of party members across Europe with Britain a pronounced example. Scarrow and Gezgor (2010: 830) report that in the 1990s, 29% of party members in Britain were aged 60 or over, compared with 24% of voters; by the 2000s, these figures had risen to 56% and 27% respectively. Moreover the general ageing of party members and the gap between party members and population is most apparent in Britain, as compared with eleven other European countries. The available survey evidence on the characteristics of party members confirms this image. Young party members are a rare breed (Cross and Young 2008; Bruter and Harrison 2009; Bennie and Russell 2012).

Table 4: Age of party members

	Con		Scot Green		Lab		Lib Dem		SNP
	1992	2009	1990	2002	1990	1997	1993	1999	2008
up to 25	1	9	15	4	5	4	4	2	3
26-35	4	9	30	18	17	13	8	5	6
36-45	11	9	31	28	26	20	16	11	12
46-55	17	13	13	26	17	24	21	23	17
56-65	23	28	5	13	16	16	19	22	26
66+	45	33	6	12	19	23	33	36	36
Mean	62	55	39	47	50	51	56	59	59
N	2423	1690	498	258	5007	5642	1634	2794	6740

Source: Party membership surveys

It appears that direct involvement in political parties is 'beyond the pale' for nearly all British citizens, and this is a theme recurring in media accounts of party membership in the UK. Recent coverage has emphasised the unremitting decline in numbers of people joining a party, suggesting that 'the end may be nigh' (Coman 2013). It seems that the act of joining a party is now passé, 'old hat'. Due to the minority status of party members, they are increasingly being referred to as 'oddballs' and 'eccentrics'. Rüdig (2011) recently asked if party members should be regarded as 'irrelevant weirdos'.

International comparisons reveal that these events are not exceptional to the UK (Whiteley 2011). van Biezen et al. (2012: 27) point to a general decline in party penetration across the developed world, reporting a decline in the percentage of members relative to the electorate (M/E). However, Britain fares poorly in these international comparisons. van Biezen et al. (2012: 28) report an average M/E across 27 countries of 4.7 in 2008, with the UK figure at

1.2. Of all 27 countries in this study, only Latvia and Poland display lower rates of membership (van Biezen et al. 2012: 45). Thus, party penetration is falling across Europe and elsewhere, but Britain looks to have been especially badly hit by the decline in political engagement.

Do parties really need members? The rise of the party supporter

The traditional literature on parties takes a clear position on the benefits accrued by parties when they successfully recruit members. Members are viewed as an important resource for parties, and, generally, party membership is seen as a way of enhancing participation and democracy. Some key roles are highlighted in the literature.

a) *Electoral support/legitimacy*: Members provide loyal, core electoral support. In the most basic sense, members can be relied upon to vote for their party, but members also spread the party message and in so doing potentially attract electoral support. Seyd and Whiteley and others (Seyd and Whiteley 1992, 2002, 2004; Whitelely *et al.* 1994, 2006; Scarrow 1996), have argued that members are valuable to parties because they provide this loyal support-base, and they act as 'ambassadors', or opinion leaders, in the community. Ultimately, parties gain legitimacy from members.

b) *Financial and campaigning support*: Members provide a reliable and regular supply of funds in the form of membership fees, and they regularly donate extra funds, often in response to parties' fund-raising activities. Members actively campaign on behalf of their parties at election times, and many studies have suggested a significant relationship between the existence of party workers on the ground and electoral performance of parties, although it has also been noted that strong central party organisation of election campaigns combined with advances in technology can to some extent compensate for a decline in traditional campaigning (Fisher and Denver 2008, 2009). The ideal model for parties, however, is large numbers of party workers mobilising support at elections.

c) *Organisational support/maintenance of party infrastructure:* Party members potentially shape policy; although this varies by party, members contribute ideas and directly or indirectly influence policy. Relative to other countries, party members in the UK are not as involved in shaping party policy, but they certainly influence the agenda in a number of ways. They can be an important source of policy ideas. They also help maintain the day-to-day running of the party infrastructure and provide a supply of candidates, party officials and leaders.

The central claim – that parties should value members – has been widely influential in Britain. There have been acknowledgments that parties vary in all these respects – the Lib Dems and small parties have been viewed as most reliant on members financially, for example. The literature on party organisation also acknowledges that party members can in some ways cause problems for parties i.e. internal democracy in parties can restrict the ability of party elites to manoeuvre. It might also be argued that some of the benefits associated with large memberships are more accurately provided by party activists, who represent a

small percentage of party members i.e. most party members are passive. Regardless of these issues, there has been a strong consensus that parties gain from having as many members as possible. From this perspective, the demobilisation of party membership in Britain presents significant difficulties for parties, and for the functioning of democracy (Webb 2007).

Some of these claims, however, are less persuasive than they once were. Are large numbers of members still necessary to perform these functions? There are signs that party behaviour is adapting to a world in which few people will ever be persuaded to join as formal members. This involves parties turning to other groups to perform some of the roles traditionally performed by members; recognising that 'members are not the only fruit' (Fisher et al. 2013).

Electoral support/legitimacy:

Parties still view members as important symbols of electoral performance and penetration of society. Parties frequently refer to slight increases in member numbers as evidence of party success and, more broadly, having a healthy membership base (however that is defined) is regarded as an important indicator of party legitimacy. Evidence of this is provided by the parties' continued efforts to attract members. They have not given up on the traditional member, and all the main parties have quite clear recruitment strategies. As Young (2013: 65) argues, '..parties' continued efforts to attract members is indicative of a perception that members are necessary to legitimize the party in democratic competition'. Young (2013:70) refers to an 'enduring value that party elites place on members'. In the British context, this is demonstrated by recent claims by Labour politicians that Miliband's reforms are about creating 'a new mass participation party for the 21st century' (Coman 2013).

The attempts of parties to attract members has traditionally been viewed in rational-choice (cost-benefit) terms. Parties emphasise the privileges or rights attached to membership (the benefits which counter the costs). The Conservative party web pages emphasise that members enjoy a number of privileges, including voting for the leader, selecting candidates, and attending conferences (www.conservatives.com). Sometimes, parties go further by offering financial incentives to membership, in the form of 'Affinity Programmes' which offer discounts on consumer products (www.conservatives.com).

In recent decades, there has been a move towards more 'open' forms of democracy within parties in established democracies, allowing members more of a say on internal contests for leadership, candidate selection and policy matters e.g. Conservative members have only relatively recently been given a role in electing the leader, and Tony Blair introduced innovations which led to Labour members voting on internal policy matters. Young (2013: 67) notes that parties have attempted to alter 'the calculus of costs and benefits of membership' in an attempt to recruit new members. Young (2013:70) continues: 'Faced with a declining supply of members, most parties have responded by altering the balance between membership entitlements and costs in an effort to reverse declining membership numbers'. The British parties provide a good example of this strategy, reducing the cost of membership and, at face value at least, increasing the potency of membership influence.

Sometimes, this looks like trying to give membership away for free. The Labour party currently offers party membership to serving and former members of the armed forces for £1.00 per year, and following the 2010 general election and coalition between the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives, the Greens literally offered free membership to disgruntled Lib Dems.

Figure 1: Greens offer free membership to Lib Dems

However, these kinds of strategies have been largely ineffectual, with many commentators concluding that 'party membership decline has been largely exogenous to decisions concerning party organizational structures and practices: that the decline has been a by-product of social changes that neither can – nor in most cases should – be reversed. (Katz 2013: 63). So, what is a party to do?

The other significant development has been the introduction of new categories of membership, with parties encouraging potential recruits to sign up as 'party supporters'. Visitors to the party websites will find that they can join as fully-fledged members or they can register to be part of a supporter group. Labour describes this category as a 'network of supporters', the Conservatives describe it as being 'a friend' of the party (requiring a £1.00 donation) and the Liberal Democrats refer to 'supporters' and 'volunteering networks'. The key point here is that supporters register with the parties and at then have the potential to perform some of the roles traditionally associated with members. If parties can point to large numbers of registered supporters, party members become less important in some respects.

Financial support: Party members have historically been viewed as an extremely important and regular source of income for party organisations. However, non-member supporters are encouraged to donate funds to party coffers and might therefore challenge this traditional function of members. In terms of party income, how important are members, really? Table 5 details the sources of party funding, as outlined in the most recent party returns to the Electoral Commission.

Table 5: Sources of party funding 2012 (£000s)

|	Cons	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	UKIP	Green	BNP
Membership	747	5,508	890	555	438	247	147
Donations	14,706	5,281	1,708	752	630	519	430
Fundraising	456	649	0	166	23	34	19
Commercial	621	3,373	0	47	51	13	21
Grants	322	6,956	818	171	-	-	-
Affiliations	-	7,965	-	-	-	-	-
Other	7,396	3,592	2,674	609	85	69	31
Total	24,248	33,024	6,024	2,300	1,228	882	647
% member fees	3.1	16.7	14.8	24.1	35.7	28.0	22.7
% donations /fundraising	62.5	18.0	28.4	40.0	53.2	62.7	69.4

Source: Electoral Commission (www.electoralcomission.org)
Note: Figures as stated by parties, with associated discrepancies and inconsistencies in reporting e.g. totals don't always add up correctly, and funding sources like conference income are not reported consistently e.g. Cons claim to take in £4.3M from conferences and this is listed above under 'other', but Labour doesn't specify conference income at all.

The data suggest that membership fees are relatively unimportant to parties, compared with other sources of funding. Donations and fundraising exceed the income derived from membership fees in every case. The Conservatives' reporting of their income suggests that the contribution of membership fees is negligible. In the case of small parties, membership fees make more of a contribution to overall income; the UKIP returns suggest more than a third of the party's income comes directly from membership fees. Labour is a special case due to income derived from affiliated members – a quarter (24%) of its income in 2012 came from affiliations. This suggests that the Labour leadership's proposal to reform the link between trade union membership and the party could damage the financial position of the party. On the other hand, if a significant number of affiliated members can be persuaded to join as individual members, this would boost income from members. This might result in a rebalancing of income streams for the party.

A difficulty with the data is the uncertain nature of the relationship between the 'membership' and 'donations' categories – members donate significant amounts above and beyond their membership subscriptions. The available data do not allow us to identify the proportion of donations coming from members. Figure 2 demonstrates this problem. The Electoral Commission reports that 43% of all party donations come from individual donors, but it is not entirely clear if these include individual party members as well as other donors.

Figure 2: All donations accepted by political parties broken down by type of donor.
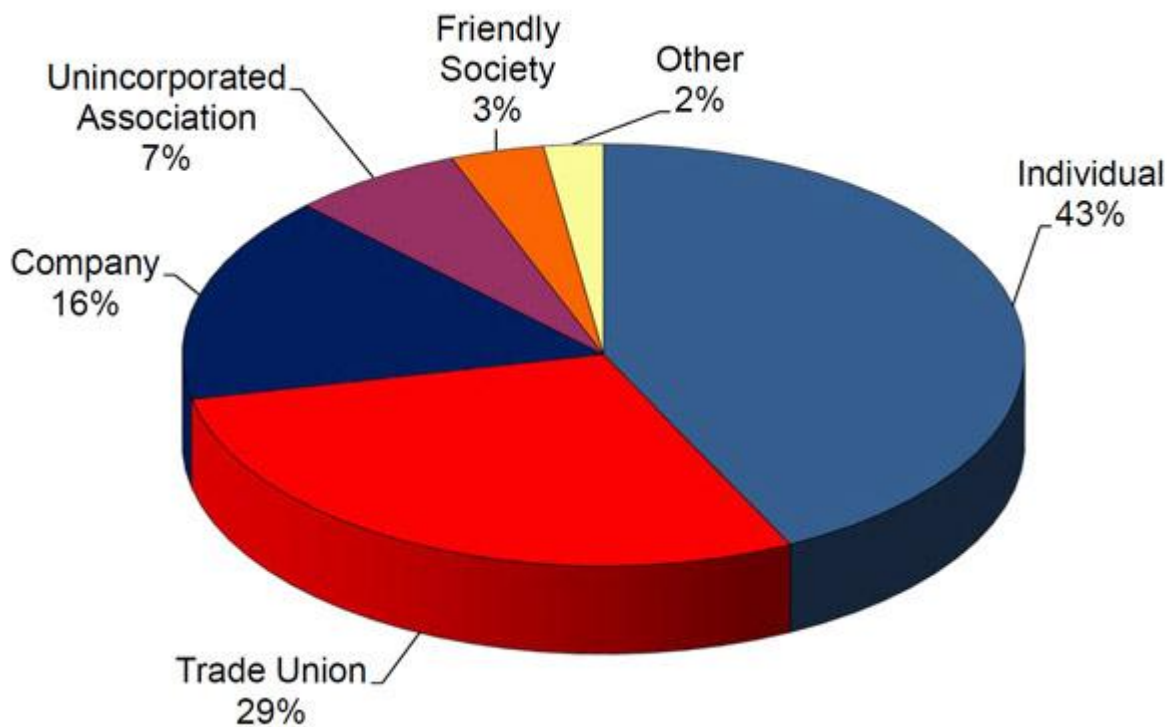
Source: Electoral Commission (www.electoralcommission.org.uk; accessed 06.09.13)

Election campaigning: Campaign activities of party members are viewed by parties and academics as invaluable at election time. However, there are some indications that members are not necessarily as important as first thought. Parties have always relied on a combination of formal paid-up members and supporters during elections. The Labour party, for example, can call upon the help of trade union affiliated members who are not formal individual members of the party. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that supporters are becoming more important relative to members, and that this is not necessarily bad news for parties. Fisher et al. (2013: 6-7) provide convincing evidence of party activities being performed by 'non-members' as well as formal members. Their survey of election agents in 2010 indicated that three quarters of local parties used party supporters in the running of their election campaigns. For the Lib Dems, the figure is as high as 86%. While this research suggests that supporters are a little less likely to be involved in high-intensity campaign activities such as doorstep canvassing, they are just as likely to perform other important roles such as delivering leaflets and staffing of polling stations (Fisher et al. 2013: 9). Members appear more intensely involved (supporters participate in roughly three quarters of the activities of members) but Fisher et al. (2013: 10) confidently conclude that the contribution of supporters is 'non-trivial' and 'clearly enhanced all parties' election efforts'.

Ponce and Scarrow's (2013) recent analysis of European party members and non-members develops similar themes. In this analysis of European Social Survey data, party members appear much more likely to participate as party workers than supporters, but because they are such a small group in numerical terms the authors suggest that it may be a sensible strategy

for parties to turn to the bigger pool of supporters for help. This research suggests that British parties rely heavily on non-member sympathisers to make up their 'volunteer workforce' (Ponce and Scarrow 2013: 6). Britain stands out in this regard, along with Hungary and Spain. According to this estimate, British party members look quite inactive when compared with other nations, and party members constitute only a third of party workers (respondents were asked, in 2010, if they had worked for a party in the past year). Furthermore, while most countries do not see a discernible increase in use made of this type of supporter (between 2002 and 2010) Britain is amongst a small group of countries who have seen reliance on party supporters become more pronounced (along with Hungary, Poland, Spain and Sweden) (Ponce and Scarrow's 2013: 8). Overall, Ponce and Scarrow (2013: 10) argue that the UK demonstrates a relative increase in party sympathiser numbers as well as an increase in this group's 'relative propensity to contribute'. Ponce and Scarrow (2013: 15) conclude:

> we have shown that most parties have much greater scope for increasing the contribution of non-member sympathizers than of party members, because the percentage of sympathizers who are active is still very low compared to non-member sympathizers who are not volunteering. Moreover, targeting such groups for mobilization may be advantageous to parties, because active sympathizers seem to be demographically more similar to the general population than are party members; boosting their participation might help parties to better connect with their broader constituents. In other words, looking for grassroots support outside of the party membership is a plausible strategy, and one that has political implications that go beyond the nature of the resources that non-member supporters might provide.

The implications of this research require further investigation, but we can take from this that party members alone do not perform the core function of electoral campaigning. As Fisher et al. (2013) so aptly describe, 'members are not the only fruit'.

Party organisational support: Maintenance of party infrastructure: Interesting developments in this area involve changes in the way parties select candidates and leaders. Traditionally, only fee-paying members enjoyed these rewards but recently there have been experiments with open primaries in which registered supporters rather than formal members vote to select a leader or local candidate (Young 2013). There are many international examples of this, including Italy, Mexico and Taiwan (van Biezen et al. 2012, 39-40). In Britain, it is the Conservatives who have experimented with open primaries for candidate selection e.g. in 2010, the Conservative candidate for Totnes was selected via a postal ballot of eligible voters. So, formal members are not necessarily needed to select candidates. Open primaries challenge the traditional position of party members.

The Labour party has also been involved in a wide-ranging debate about how to involve supporters in the running of the party. Labour organisational reforms have allowed supporters input in the area of policy development (Fisher 2008). Refounding Labour to Win

(Labour Party 2011) outlines the further enhancement of the position of non-member supporters, and at the 2011 annual conference the party agreed to involving supporters in future leadership elections.

In sum, supporters are performing many of the roles traditionally associated with members. Furthermore, these supporters enjoy more of the rewards or privileges which used to apply exclusively to orthodox members. This amounts to 'reducing the exclusivity of membership' (Young 2013: 67). As Fisher et al. (2013: 5) argue, these events suggest 'a challenge to the idea of membership as the principal basis of voluntary activity for parties, and a challenge to the traditional power of members'. Crucially, supporters gain traditional benefits of membership without the associated costs; these are not just the monetary costs of membership but 'being pestered for donations and activity all the time' (interview with Labour party member).

Conclusion

So, where does this leave traditional party membership? From the point of view of the political party, members are still important in fulfilling key roles. They shore-up parties by legitimising their position in society, they provide important help in election campaigns, they provide financial resources, they inject ideas into parties, and they contribute to the practical running of parties in-between elections. In all these respects, however, the more amorphous party supporter appears to be challenging the position of party members i.e. perhaps parties can gain these crucial resources from alternative sources.

Parties still benefit from members, but they are being forced to adapt to quite unfavourable conditions in which few people would consider becoming members. However, in their attempts to adapt to these conditions, they may in fact be exacerbating the problem as the benefits of membership becomes less obvious to potential recruits. If party supporters can now enjoy many of the benefits which were exclusively available to formal members, why become a member?

These developments also present problems for our conceptual understanding of membership. The very meaning of membership is becoming less clear, with old categories and conceptual distinctions breaking down. What is often lost in these debates is that most party members are not active – most can be classified as passive, having very little contact with their party. Membership is often transitory or ephemeral – it does not mean full-scale commitment for many. So, there are different types of members, and the 'supporter' may not be very different from the entirely passive member. In fact, some supporters may be more active than some members. Future research on party membership should consider the conceptual boundaries of terms like member, activist, participant, supporter, and volunteer. The study of interest groups might be informative – supporters have long been recognised in this literature (Jordan and Maloney 1997) – but even here there is confusion about different categories of participation. The linguistic and conceptual confusion is demonstrated by this extract from the WWF website:

> WWF-UK currently has approximately 572,000 supporters (including members, adopters, campaigners and other financial and non-financial types of support). (wwf.org.uk)

Other areas that require attention include the implications of the rise of the party supporter for internal party democracy and, more widely, for British democracy. For example, the relationship between members and supporters is not clear. Fisher *et al.* (2013) suggest that supporters are encouraged/ persuaded by active members – so the activities complement each other, or go 'hand-in-hand'. In some cases, however, the suggestion is one of 'replacement'. The implications are not clear, particularly as we have very little sense of the differences between party members and supporters. Are supporters more representative of the wider electorate? We know that party members are not good representations of the voting public, certainly in terms of their social characteristics. Ponce and Scarrow (2013: 14) report that non-member supporters are more likely to be women, tend to be less wealthy, and are less ideological. This suggests that party supporters may be more in-tune with voters. Fisher *et al.* (2013:5) are quite optimistic that the extensive involvement of party supporters may simply represent another stage in party evolution – that 'the negative effects associated with membership decline may be partially offset'. However, these issues require closer inspection.

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