

## PHD REVIEWS

# 'From decline to revival? An analysis of party membership fluctuations in Western Europe (1990-2014)'

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Political parties are seen as declining institutions, losing legitimacy and members. One might say that their golden age has passed. But is that so, and always and overall so? In his PhD, Vivien Sierens inquires into the main factors accounting for fluctuations in party membership levels across Western Europe from the 1990s until 2014. The author is careful with his choice of words, and that starts with his formulation of the research question. He rejects the widely used term of 'party decline' and prefers studying the 'fluctuations' in the success of parties, shedding light on their membership in particular. Why do levels of party membership fluctuate over time? The thesis opens the black box of national-level aggregated analyses and scrutinises these fluctuations at the (intra-)party level, taking contextual factors into account. The chosen measure to tap into the size of the membership is wisely the ratio between the (self-reported) number of members and the size of the electorate, which best accounts for variations in the

membership itself, without being too heavily biased by party electoral (mis)fortunes. In times of 'memberless parties', the thesis argues that having parties with members is crucial to counter populist trends and the lack of political participation, and more broadly, trust, in our modern democracies.

Vivien Sierens takes the reader by the hand all through the six chapters of the thesis: an impressive theoretical introduction, four (single or co-authored) articles and a (too?) short concluding chapter. He organises his study of party membership like a funnel, starting with large international comparative analyses and continuing with focused case-study research. Reasons for fluctuations in party membership levels are looked for sometimes outside the party (electoral success or political system, for instance) and sometimes precisely within party organisations (parties' activities, recruitment strategies and local chairs' characteristics, among others), providing a broad overview of

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determinants of fluctuating membership levels.

The review of the literature is undertaken in quite an original way. The author performs a bibliometric analysis of scientific articles and books published on party membership, allowing him to map the evolutions in the literature and to highlight the major contributions of this field of research, which really started to bloom in the 1990s. He points to a lack of literature on the meso level, the party level and to the recruitment side of party membership. To account for the declining trends in party membership figures, Vivien Sierens is searching for explanations in neighbouring literatures, namely in the fields of organisational economics and sociology. His conclusion is a plea for more specific analyses, disentangling broad party trends by looking at intra-party variations and dynamics, also over time. There is a strong coherence between the long introductory chapter and the four articles presented afterwards, as the author not only vaguely set the scene but rather already performed an empirical analysis, treating the literature as data. He also ventured into other research fields and came back with new perspectives on the much studied topic of his dissertation, and these new ideas form the core of the four articles.

The first article addresses the broadest question of the 'why?' of party membership fluctuations and proposes to look at the seldom studied party-related factors. By means of dynamic longitudinal analyses of the ratio between the size of the party membership and the electorate, it runs against the tide and shows that not all parties know a decline in their mem-

bership level. Party membership rates actually fluctuate according to party age (younger parties first gain members, then lose them until it flattens). Studying determinants of membership fluctuations in various European parties, the article shows that the age of the political system also matters: in newer systems, parties will attract more members if the number of competitor parties increases, whereas in mature systems the trend is reverse. Being electorally successful is also a trigger to boost membership levels. Hence, the bandwagon effect highlighted by Vivien Sierens: when popular on Election Day, new party members follow suit.

Turning to the second article, the attention shifts to what the political parties themselves (can) do to stimulate membership growth. The author relies on party agency literature and argues that a combination of party agency and structural factors likely affect party recruitment patterns. Based on a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) of party strategies in seven European countries, the article states that no condition is necessary or sufficient for a party to know a steady membership growth, but rather that some conditions taken together may explain the phenomenon. In particular, more intra-party democracy does not automatically lead to more members, confirming the fact that intra-party democratisation is not the panacea for members' recruitment – it would work only if fitted with the party ideology, as in Green parties. Facilitating party affiliation procedures might well be required in many cases, but reducing the financial costs of membership alone does not lead to a membership growth. Vivien Sierens

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concludes that there is no universal recipe for parties willing to attract new members.

While the first two articles deal with international comparative work, the third article focuses on the Belgian case and scrutinises membership fluctuations in Belgian political parties over time (1990-2004) and at the electoral district level. It demonstrates that there is inter- and intra-party variation in how membership rates fluctuate: not all parties, and not all electoral districts, have known a decline in membership levels. Liberal and Green parties have maintained and even increased their number of members, and some districts, such as Liège and Mons, did not see a sharp decline in the ratio between party members and voters. The panel regression models provide (preliminary) evidence that being successful on Election Day is also good news for the size of party membership. Vivien Sierens further highlights that local elections' years are fruitful recruitment years and calls for more research on the mobilising effect of local elections.

The fourth and last article disentangles even further the analysis of party membership fluctuations by focusing on recruitment strategies at the local level, building on results from the previous article, concluding that the local level efforts may matter. The empirical part relies on the 2018 Belgian Local Party Chair Survey and takes advantage of this data to test hypotheses suggested by the preceding chapters of the thesis. Despite major problems arising from low and uneven response rates, the article is able to evidence that membership recruitment is a challenge for local parties but not always their absolute priority. The

individual perceptions of local chairs matter for effective recruitment. Vivien Sierens posits that recruitment campaigns are successful strategies to increase the membership level, and it is specifically the case of direct recruitment tools (e.g. canvassing) and strategies targeting specific groups within the population. He also points to homophily mechanisms: local sections chaired by women tend to count more female members.

The main take-home message of the thesis is that we should be careful when stating that parties are declining when it comes to membership levels. This research nuances both the spread and the linearity of this decline. It offers as main explanation that we are witnessing intense transformations of our party systems rather than a decline of these organisations. Other forms of political participation take over, and new forms of political parties come along. It may just be the traditional form of parties that is in decline. A second key message of the thesis is that parties are not monolithic organisations. As a consequence, intra-party variations should be studied, as fluctuations may vary within parties, at the local or constituency level, depending on electoral results or of who is the local chair, for instance. Thanks to the resource-based view, Vivien Sierens is able to dissect the multiple layers of party organisations and how they manage their membership.

This is a quantitative study, but not only that. The thesis is a testament to the data management, analysis and visualisation skills of the author, who combined different data sets from international comparative data retrieved by the Members and Activists of Political Parties (MAPP) and

the Political Party Database Project (PPDB) projects with survey data on local party sections in Belgium. This empirical material also varies over time, with longitudinal analyses covering a quarter of a century to snapshots on one single election. But beyond various types of regression analyses, Vivien Sierens proves that he can master other research techniques, and notably QCA, although a more in-depth use of the method could have reinforced the findings. To be complete, the thesis would perhaps have gained more from qualitative input (for instance, interviews with local chairs) to illustrate and complement quantitative findings. The author himself demonstrates the importance of the individual agency of local party office holders, so asking them about membership recruitment and retention might be an interesting avenue for future research. The case knowledge of the author on Belgium could also have been exploited in the third article by, for instance, adding some control variables on the characteristics of the districts on which he undertakes his analysis.

Overall, this thesis offers a coherent and complete picture of why party membership levels might fluctuate. Yet it could have been pushed further in some instances. While the introduction provides a deep and fully fledged theoretical framework, the four empirical chapters sometimes lack solid theoretical bases, which would go into more detail than the general theoretical basis of the thesis. The author cites many references to models and theories, much more than to specific empirical articles. This attests to a deep knowledge of the literature on party membership, which could have been showcased more in the articles

themselves. In the same line, the discussion of the research findings is in all chapters rather limited, which could lead to some frustration for the reader who expected to learn more on the implications of these quantitative results. What does it mean for our democracies and for parties, in particular, if party age, electoral success or recruitment strategies are impactful on membership fluctuations? The overall story of the thesis could have been made stronger by allowing more space to a discussion, also beyond party membership specifically.

To conclude, Vivien Sierens has undertaken a very much needed work on the variations in party membership levels in Europe, and in Belgium in particular. He did not hesitate to contradict or nuance established truths that may not be as true as pretended, based on his comparative and case-study findings. His impressive effort is, both theoretically and empirically, a valuable contribution for all students of political parties and of democracies in general.