



PARTY MEMBER RECRUITMENT AND THE REPRESENTATIVENESS OF PARTY MEMBERSHIP

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Party member recruitment and the representativeness of party membership

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Party membership figures are in decline. However, parties are still recruiting party members. Are there any differences in the social and political characteristics of old and new party members? If there is a difference, are new party members more or less representative for party voters than old members? The substantive point of the paper is to assess whether the representativeness of party membership changes over time. The methodological point of the paper is to show whether party member surveys are of added value when compared to citizen surveys when assessing the character of party membership and changes thereof.

1. Introduction

Even though the number of party members is in decline (Mair & van Biezen 2001), parties still recruit members. What is the impact of the decreasing membership figures on party member representativeness? If there is an impact, are newer members more representative for party voters than older members?¹

Party membership is important because political parties are central actors in representative democracies. They make up one among several channels of participation but they are unique since they have an almost monopoly on getting candidates elected to parliaments at the various levels of government. However, party membership is not only relevant as a channel of participation. Party organizations create a unique linkage between the electorate and the elected (Lawson 1980; Bille 1997). Party members may, to different degrees in different parties, influence, for example, manifestos and the selection of party leadership and candidates for electoral office. There is a general tendency towards increasing influence decentralized to individual party members (Katz & Mair 1995; Bille 2001).

The relevance of party members' characteristics and representativeness when compared to the electorate rests on the normative premise that congruence is desirable. Three arguments supports this. First, the conflict of interest argument based on the assumption that preferences and interests may vary between social groups. Second, the complementary experience or resource argument based on the assumption that social groups have different resources due to variation in experiences and life perspectives (Hernes 1987: 23; Oskarson & Wängnerud 1995). Third, the justice or legitimacy argument based on the normative premise that political bodies are not legitimate if the composition of the represented is not reflected in the composition of the representatives (Phillips 1995). Together, these arguments sustains the relevance of analyzing whether party membership is becoming more or less representative for their electorates.

On the basis of Eurobarometer studies (1989-91) and the European Social Surveys (2002-5) Scarrow & Gezgor (2010) analyzes, whether party members in the decade prior to the turn of the century have become more representative compared to the population at large in a number of west European countries. Their comparison of the total party membership (not distinguishing between different parties) with the population provides interesting and relevant results returned to below. However, it is hard to interpret the reasons for the changes in the aggregate social characteristics on the basis of population surveys. On the one hand it could be argued, that changes in party member characteristics are

¹ 'Old' and 'new' refer in this article to the number of years, the member has been enrolled (more/less than 10 years), while younger and older are used when focusing on age.

due to a difference between old and new members. On the other hand, the characteristics of the old party members may also change over time and hence contribute to changes in the aggregate party member characteristics. The most obvious change among old party members is that they age. Hence it is no surprise that a general West European tendency is that the share of party members above 60 years increases, and that the difference between party members and the population increases (Scarrow & Gezgor 2010: 8). This of course does not mean that parties are attracting a larger number of older members but that the existing members become older. This is supported by the results for newer established democracies (Spain, Portugal and Greece), where members are not older than the population (Scarrow & Gezgor 2010: 8-9).

But when party members are becoming older, some of their other social characteristics changes as well. Scarrow & Gezgor (2010: 11) shows that West European party members are becoming more representative for the population in regard to income. However, this is not necessarily due to new party members being more representative than older party members. The declining income among party members might as well be due to older party members increasingly retiring and hence having a smaller income. Similarly, Scarrow & Gezgor show that West European party members have become more representative in regard to union membership since the degree of unionization has decreased among party members (2010: 10). However, this may be due to both a lower rate of unionization among new party members and a tendency for older party members to leave the unions as they retire.²

Another problem with assessing the difference in social characteristics among new and old party members on the basis of population surveys at two different times is that the party membership at time t_1 is not unrelated to the party membership at time t_0 . Political parties recruit party members even when membership figures are in decline. They simply lose more than they recruit. And they lose both old members and new members. The loss varies among parties, partly depending on party size and party age but also the political climate, political events and party leader performance has an impact. However, only a portion of party members change; a substantial share of party members hangs around for a longer period (see table 1 below). This implies that the difference between old and new members might be larger than comparisons between all members at time t_0 and all members at time t_1 indicates.

This paper argues that whether new party members have social characteristics that differ from older party members, and hence whether party membership becomes more or less representative for the population or electorate, may more directly be analyzed on the basis of party member surveys. With data on individual parties' newer and older party members we may progress one step further towards an understanding of the characteristics of old and new party members and hence of the changes over time in party member characteristics. Furthermore, party member surveys may allow for causal analysis linking declining party membership figures and the individualization of party member rights with the party member characteristics; however, this is beyond the purpose of the present paper.

The paper is structured as follows: First, hypotheses on the characteristics of old and new party members are discussed and presented. The second part discusses data and method. The analysis is presented in the third part, and the fourth part concludes.

2. Hypotheses

The results of Scarrow & Gezgor (2010) form the basis of the hypotheses tested in this paper since this indicates to what extent party member surveys contribute to an elaboration on the results based on population surveys. The social characteristics analyzed here are age, gender, education, union membership and income.³ In regard to opinions, party members' self placement and placement of party on the traditional economic dimension is applied.

Early retirement, elderly-burden, 'grey gold' and retirement age have been high on the political agenda for many years, and hence it is relevant to look into the representation of the young and old. The analysis looks into the share of people above 60 years among old and new party members and among party voters in 2001. In Europe in general, the 60-89 year olds are markedly overrepresented among party members compared with the population at large (except in the new democracies of Spain, Portugal and Greece), and in Denmark the overrepresentation of the older party members has increased from 1990 to 2000 (Scarrow & Gezgor 2010: 8). The larger overrepresentation is due to older members aging and staying within the party. Hence the hypothesis is that there are more members above 60 among older than newer members (H1), and that newer members are more representative for party voters than older members (H2). Besides the analyses of the share of members above 60 years among members and voters, the average age of new and old members are compared. The expectation is that new members are on average younger than old members (H3).

Party membership has traditionally been male dominated (Heidar & Raaum 1995; Sundberg 1995; Widfeldt 1995; Whiteley et al. 1994; Seyd & Whiteley 2002). Men are, across West Europe, overrepresented within party member

² Important for this argument is whether unions organize pensioners as well as those in the working force, something that needs elaboration.

³ Religious observance is left out since the Danish party member survey does not include data on this. Furthermore, this is, in a Danish context, a less relevant factor.

organizations; however, in half the countries the tendency is that the male dominance is in decline (Scarrow & Gezgor 2010: 9). Denmark belongs to the half where the male dominance increases in the period 1990-2000 whereby the hypothesis here is that the share of female party members is larger among old members than among new members (H4), and that old members therefore are more representative of party voters than new members (H5).

Education is a well-known resource in regard to political participation (Milbrath 1965: 53-4; Norris & Lovenduski 1995: 113; Verba et al. 1995: 338) and hence also party membership. However, Scarrow & Gezgor (2010) show that there is no general picture of whether party members have a longer education than the population. In the Danish case the average years of education for members and the population is about the same both in 1990 and 2000 (Scarrow & Gezgor 2010: 10). The hypothesis is thus that there's no difference between old and new members in regard to whether they have a high school degree or not (H6),⁴ and that old and new members are equally representative of party voters (H7).

Union membership has traditionally been tight knit with party membership, and this not only to the left on the traditional economic left-right scale. Scarrow & Gezgor shows that the overrepresentation of union members among party members has decreased in 1990-2000 in West Europe except in Denmark and Italy (2010: 11). The overrepresentation in Italy is still marked. There is no overrepresentation in Denmark but the share of union members increases from 1990 to 2000 both among members and the population.⁵ Following this result, it is expected that new members have a higher union membership degree than the old members (H 8), and that new members are more representative for party voters than old members (H 9).

Like education income is also a relevant resource in regard to political participation and hence also party membership. Scarrow & Gezgor show that party members in West Europe in general have a higher income than the population but that this difference declines in 1990-2000, and furthermore that it is only significant in some countries around 2000 (2010: 11-2). In the Danish case, party members had a significant higher income than the population around 1990 but no significant difference is found in 2000. Based on these results the hypotheses are that the share of party members with low level income is larger among new members than among old members (H10), and that new members are more representative for party voters than old party members (H11).⁶

The analysis of party members' opinion representativeness focuses on their self-placement and placement of their party on the traditional left-right scale. This scale is often applied in analyses of general political attitude, it is well-established and aggregates opinions, and it may in general travel across time and place.

Scarrow & Gezgor (2010: 13-5) shows, first of all, that even though party members are more extreme than the electorate, the differences are only significant in half the cases. Hence, May's 'Law' (1973) is, again, only partially supported. Secondly, they show that there is no general tendency towards neither more or less extreme party members over time. This leads to the hypotheses that old and new party members do not differ in their self-placement on the left-right scale (H12).⁷

Compared to Scarrow & Gezgor, this analysis is expanded with an analysis of the difference between party members' self-placement and placement of their party. The hypothesis is that the distance between party members' own and party placement is larger for old party members than for new party members (H15). The latter enroll partly because they feel that they are close to party policies whereas the former may have allowed for a certain drift away from the party over time; however, we don't expect the experienced distance between party member and party to be large as this will probably lead these member to exit.

3. Data and method

On the basis of party member surveys conducted in 2000/1 among Danish party members⁸ it is possible to elaborate on the interesting and relevant results at the West European level based on population surveys (cf. Scarrow & Gezgor 2010). The party member surveys allow for comparisons between newer and older members, and they allow for comparisons of the various parties.

⁴ Scarrow & Gezgor (2010) analyses average year of education but in a Danish context high school degree or not has shown to be a good indicator across surveys.

⁵ This indicates a problem with data since the rate of unionization according to unions is in decline (LO 2010: 84).

⁶ Scarrow & Gezgor (2010) analyses incomes and disperse them on a 12-point scale to normalize within each national context and then calculate average. Since I at present analyze within one national context this is not done here. Focus is here on the lowest incomes since this is the social aspect focused upon by Scarrow & Gezgor (2010).

⁷ This also leads to the hypotheses that there is only a small tendency towards old and new party members being more extreme than voters (H13), and that new and old party members are equally representative for party voters (H14). However, these analyses have not been conducted yet.

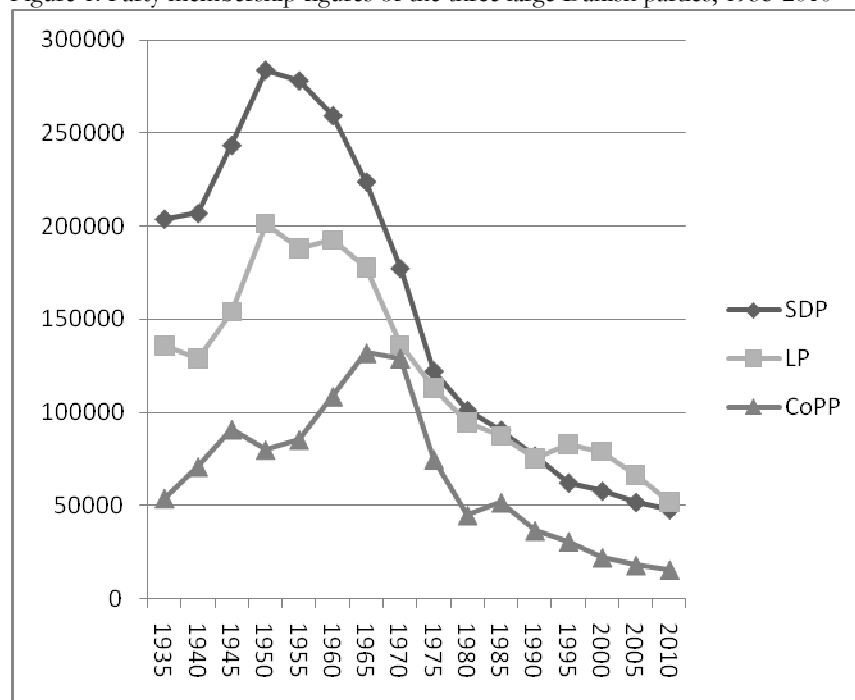
⁸ This analysis is to be expanded with other countries; however, focus is at present at the Danish case.

The Danish party member mail delivered survey was conducted in 2000/1. The questionnaires were sent out in cooperation with the parties but party members were secured anonymity in two ways: the researchers were unable to identify the respondents since questionnaires were sent out by the parties, and the parties were unable to see the responses sent directly to the researchers. In the three largest parties, 1,000 questionnaires were sent out, in the other six parties 800 were sent out. The response rates are impressive for this kind of surveys: Between 60 and 80 pct. for each party and 68 pct. among all the party members.⁹

All parties represented in Parliament at the time of the survey are included in the party member survey. However, of the nine parties two are so new that they do not have old party members. First, the Unity List – the Red-Green Alliance was created in 1989 as a merger of three leftwing parties (Left Socialists, Communist Party and Socialist Workers Party). Second, the Danish People’s Party was created in 1995 by four parliamentarians that split from the Progress Party. These two parties are not included in this analysis. Parties included in the analysis are, in order of the traditional, economic left-right scale: Socialist People’s Party (SPP), Social Democrats (SD), Social Liberals (SL), Centre Democrats (CD), Christian’s Peoples’ Party (later Christian Democrats) (ChPP), Liberals (LP) and the Conservative People’s Party (CoPP).

The development in party membership figures since 1935 (or since their creation) is shown in figures 1 and 2. They show that only one of the nine parties had more party members in 2000 than in 1990. The other eight had experienced a decline within this period. However, the decline is not continuous. Both the Centre Democrats and Social Liberals experienced an increase in the period 1995-2000. The Liberals is the only party with more members in 2000 than in 1990. They experienced a drastic increase in membership figures following the resignation of the Conservative led Conservative-Liberal government in 1993, however, this intake stopped in the latter half of the 1990s.

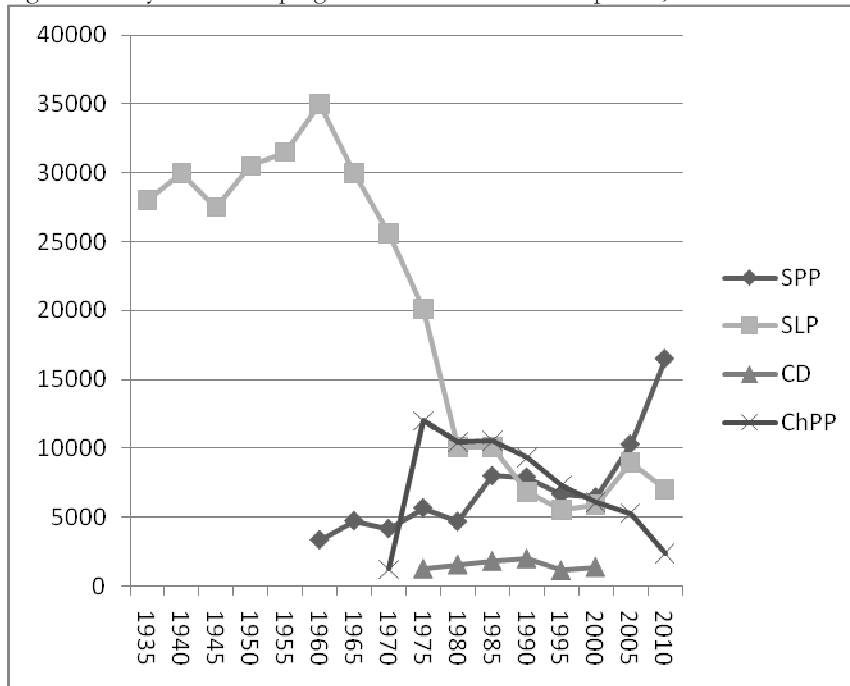
Figure 1. Party membership figures of the three large Danish parties, 1935-2010



Note: Data until 2000 is made available by Lars Bille, the rest is collected from the parties by the author.

⁹ The party member survey is financed by the 'Power Investigation' as well as the Departments of Political Science at the Universities of Aarhus and Copenhagen. It was led by Lars Bille and Jørgen Elklit with the participation of Roger Buch, Bernhard Hansen, Hans Jørgen Nielsen and Karina Pedersen (see Pedersen et al. 2004; Bille & Elklit 2003; Pedersen 2003; Hansen 2002).

Figure 2. Party membership figures of the minor Danish parties, 1935-2010



Note: Data until 2000 is made available by Lars Bille, the rest is collected from the parties by the author.

Table 1 shows when party members in the party member survey have enrolled in their party. On the basis of Scarrow & Gezgor's comparison of party membership around 1990 and 2000, old party members are defined as those enrolled prior to 1990, whereas new party members are those enrolled within the period 1990-2000.¹⁰ Except in CD, old members make up more than half the members (60 pct. among all, weighted according to party membership figures in 2000). Even though the three large old parties have larger shares of old members the difference between these and the newer parties is not big. It is thus both very old, oldish and newer (from 1973!) parties that have large shares of party members with membership cards more than ten years old.

Table 1. Year of enrollment, pct. of present party members (2000)

	SF	S	RV	CD	KrF	V	KF	All
-1969	5	25	21	-	-	27	31	24
1970-1979	19	21	18	18	38	13	16	17
1980-1989	33	21	18	20	26	18	23	19
Total	57	67	57	38	64	58	70	60
N	311	415	343	190	333	340	418	2,350
1990-1996	23	19	20	24	24	27	15	22
1997-1998	11	8	17	23	9	11	9	11
1999-2000	9	6	6	15	3	4	6	7
Total	43	33	43	62	36	42	30	40
N	229	203	261	296	185	245	176	1,596

Note: These N's are those that apply for the analyses below and will not be repeated. 'All' is weighted according to party membership figures (except N).

The implicit normative argument in much party (member) research (cf. Allern & Pedersen 2007) is that party members should be representative for the population or electorate, and population surveys are good at enabling the former,

¹⁰ Note that the party member survey only includes members that are still a member in 2000.

whereas traditional electoral research might contribute to the latter. However, the argument might be transferred from the macro to the meso level, namely that a party's members are to be representative for that party's voters.¹¹ In the present analysis Danish party members are compared to party voters at the general election in 2001, since this is the general elections closest to the party member survey.¹²

4. Analysis

To what extent have new party members different characteristics than older party members? The analyses below compares newer and older party members with party voters to see whether the representativeness of party membership increases or decreases in regard to age, gender, education, union membership, income and left-right self-placement.

Age

In a European perspective the 60-89 year olds are markedly overrepresented among party members when compared to the population except in the newer democracies Greece, Spain and Portugal (Scarrow & Gezgor 2010: 8). Table 2 below shows, first, support for the hypothesis that there are more party members above 60 years among the older members than among the newer members (H1), because party members age and a substantial share of party members remain party members for a long time. It is marked in all Danish parties that older party members are older than newer party members. However, it is important to note that older party members (above 60) are also found among newer party members: From 7 pct. in the Socialist People's Party to 22 pct. in the Christian Democrats.

Secondly, table 2 shows that the share of party members above 60 years is lower among newer members than among parties' electorates; however, they are still more representative for the party electorate than older members (H2).

Table 2 shows, thirdly, that newer members are on average younger than older members (H3), and that in all parties except the Socialist People's Party, older party members are more than ten years older than newer party members. The average age for newer party members are in all parties in the forties, hence showing that parties are far from recruiting only young members.

Table 2. Share (pct.) of party members above 60 years among old and new party members and the electorate, as well as the average ages of new and old party members

	Old members	New members	Difference old-new (pct. Point)	Voters	95 pct. confidence interval	Old average age	New average age	Difference in average old-new
SD	53	21	-32	31	27-35	62	48	14***
SLP	56	13	-40	25	17-35	62	42	20***
CoPP	63	20	-43	34	27-41	64	47	17***
CD	57	18	-39	18	1-37	61	45	16***
SPP	21	7	-14	15	9-21	52	43	9***
ChPP	50	22	-28	28	13-43	59	46	13***
LP	56	12	-44	27	24-31	61	43	18***
All	54	17	-37			61	46	15***

Note: All is weighted according to party membership figures. N is found in table 1. Levels of significance: *** $p < 0,001$; ** $p < 0,01$; * $p < 0,05$.

¹¹ I will argue that the differences between the present results and those of Scarrow & Gezgor (2010) are not due to the fact that they compare party membership with the population at large, whereas I compare party membership with the electorate; however, this will need to be elaborated upon.

¹² This election is analyzed in Goul Andersen & Borre 2003.

Gender

Table 3 does not support the hypotheses that the share of women is larger among old members than among new members (H4), or that old party members are more representative for party voters than new members (H5). On the other hand, table 3 shows stability since there are no significant changes in the share of men and women among party members. Women make up around one third of the party members.

Table 3. Share (pct.) of women among old and new party members and party voters.

	Old members	New members	Difference old-new (pct. point)	Voters	95 pct. confidence interval
SD	34	36	2	50	46-55
SLP	32	37	5	57	47-66
CoPP	34	27	-7	43	36-51
CD	32	35	3	64	42-86
SPP	47	44	-3	65	56-74
ChPP	38	43	5	54	38-70
LP	28	30	2	46	42-50
All	32	32	0		

Note: All is weighted according to party membership figures. N is found in table 1. Levels of significance: *** $p < 0,001$; ** $p < 0,01$; * $p < 0,05$

Education

Table 4 shows that the share of high school education is markedly larger among new party members than among old party members and hence no support for the hypothesis expecting no difference between old and new members (H6). Table 4 also shows that both old and new party members are very unrepresentative of party voters; nevertheless, old party members are more representative for party voters than new party members (H7).¹³

Table 4. Share (pct.) of old and new members and party voters with high school education

	Old members	New members	Difference old-new (pct. point)	Voters	95 pct. confidence interval
SD	25	39	14**	23	19-26
SLP	51	79	28***	62	52-71
CoPP	51	67	16**	39	32-46
CD	41	56	15**	41	19-63
SPP	62	65	3	56	47-65
ChPP	23	41	18***	36	20-52
LP	23	52	29***	28	24-31
All	30	49	19***		

Note: All is weighted according to party membership figures. N is found in table 1. Levels of significance: *** $p < 0,001$; ** $p < 0,01$; * $p < 0,05$

¹³ A control of age is appropriate here since the general level of education has increased in the 20th century.

Union membership

Table 5 shows that the union membership rate is not higher among new members than among old members; contrary to what is expected (H8). The only statistically significant difference is found in the Socialist People's Party where the share of union members is 10 pct. larger among old party members than among new. This implies that, except in the Socialist People's Party, old and new party members are equally unrepresentative compared to party voters, hence not supporting the hypothesis that new members are more representative for party voters than old members (H9). Contrary to the results of Scarrow & Gezgor (2010: 11), table 5 shows that there are marked differences in the degree of union membership among party members and the electorate, and that union members are overrepresented among party members. This applies to all parties across the political spectrum. Among party members, two out of three are also member of a union, whereas the rate among the electorate is around one out of three.

Table 5. Share (pct.) of union membership among old and new party members and party voters

	Old members	New members	Difference old- new (pct. point)	Voters	95 pct. confidence interval
SD	84	85	1	33	29-37
SLP	76	74	-2	33	24-42
CoPP	50	56	6	40	33-48
CD	65	59	-6	37	15-58
SPP	89	79	-10**	25	17-33
ChPP	64	68	4	31	16-46
LP	53	53	0	36	32-40
All	67	65	-2		

Note: All is weighted according to party membership figures. N is found in table 1. Levels of significance: *** p<0,001; **p<0,01; *p<0,05

Income

Table 6 shows the share of new and old members and voters with a household income below 400.000 d.kr. (approx. € 50.000), which is twice the minimum wage.¹⁴ The hypothesis that the share of party members with low level income is larger among new party members than among old party members (H10) is supported by the Socialist People's Party and contradicted by the Social Democrats, Social Liberals and Liberals. In the other three parties the differences are not significant. The results are also mixed when it comes to whether new party members are more representative for party voters than old party members (H11): This is the case for the Liberals but not for the Social Democrats and Socialist People's Party, and there are no significant changes in the other four parties. In sum, support is not found for the hypotheses on income.

¹⁴ The results are the same if a household income of less than 200.000 d.kr., that is, one minimum wage, is applied in the analyses.

Table 6. Share (pct.) of old and new members and voters with annual household incomes below 400.000 d.kr.

	Old members	New members	Difference old-new (pct. point)	Voters	95 pct. confidence interval
SD	54	44	-10*	52	47-56
SLP	50	41	-9*	43	33-53
CoPP	44	39	-5	41	34-49
CD	51	51	0	33	11-55
SPP	36	61	25***	43	34-53
ChPP	64	65	1	51	34-68
LP	55	37	-18***	39	35-42
All	53	44	-9***		

Note: All is weighted according to party membership figures. N is found in table 1. Levels of significance: *** $p < 0,001$; ** $p < 0,01$; * $p < 0,05$

Political opinions

No matter whether the social characteristics of party membership is transforming, party members may have changed their political opinions. Table 7 shows, first, that five out of the seven parties (not the Conservatives and Centre Democrats) support the hypothesis that old and new party members do not differ in their self-placement on the traditional, economic left-right scale (H12). Even though this supports the results based on the population survey (cf. Scarrow & Gezgor 2010: 14), it is important to note that this analysis is most likely to over-report on agreement. Some party members are expected to ‘move along’ with their party over time and hence change their self-placement along with how they perceive their party is changing (modernizing, improving, giving in or whatever it would be called). Furthermore, as argued above, those old party members that have either themselves drifted away from the party or that find that the party has moved away from their position, have most likely left the party. Hence, in sum, the difference among party members in 1990 and 2000 might be larger than what the party member survey of 2000 indicates.

Table 7. Self-placement on left-right scale (0 = left, 10 = right) for old and new party members and voters, and difference¹⁵ in old and new members’ self-placement and party placement on left-right scale

	Old members	New members	Difference old-new (pct. point)	Old members’ difference self-party placement	New members’ difference self-party placement
SD	4,1	4,0	-0,1	-1,17***	-0,95***
SLP	4,7	4,5	-0,2	-0,19*	-0,432***
CoPP	7,4	7,0	-0,4**	0,25***	0,19
CD	6,2	5,6	-0,6***	0,71***	0,24**
SPP	2,5	2,7	0,2	-0,44***	-0,43***
ChPP	6,0	5,8	-0,2	0,38***	0,09
LP	6,8	6,8	0	-0,04	0,11
All	5,7	5,7	0	-0,04	0,11**

Note: All is weighted according to party membership figures. N is found in table 1. Levels of significance: *** $p < 0,001$; ** $p < 0,01$; * $p < 0,05$

The left-right scale is a crude measure of political opinions. Hence, a further elaboration should include other opinions as well. First, the value-dimension is now well-established among the Danish electorate (Borre 1995; Borre 2001), and even though this also includes several issues, it is a newer dimension and a recently more relevant dimension within the Danish context. It is more likely that parties and/or their members have changed their position on this dimension. Second, for a more exact analysis of whether party positions have an impact on party member recruitment, the analysis

¹⁵ The difference is self-placement minus party placement. A negative result shows that the party is assessed as more right-leaning than the self-placement of the party member, whereas a positive result shows that the party is assessed to be more left-leaning than the party member’s self-placement.

needs to be elaborated with a deliberate selection of political issues. Parties that have changed their policies on certain issues, as the Socialist People's Party on integration and Liberals on early retirement, could be chosen, and these will be 'most likely cases' so that if we do not find an impact of political opinions on party member recruitment in these cases we do not expect this to happen in any cases. However, this is beyond the scope of this present paper.

5. Conclusion

The Danish 2000/1 party member survey allows, together with the electoral study of 2001, for a comparison of old party members (enrolled prior to 1990), new party members (enrolled 1990-2000), and party electorate (2001). The results of these analyses show only partly support for the results found in analyses on the basis of population surveys (Scarrow & Gezgor 2010).

First, party members are aging, and parties attract party members across the age spectrum. This implies that party membership as such is coming of age, something also found by Scarrow & Gezgor (2010).

Second, contrary to Scarrow & Gezgor's results (2010), this paper found no change in the gender balance within the party membership. Party membership is still a male dominated channel of participation.

Also contradicting Scarrow & Gezgor (2010), this study found, thirdly, that the educational cleavage is increased since new members to a larger degree than old members and party voters have a degree from secondary school.

Fourth, contrary to the results of Scarrow & Gezgor (2010), this paper shows that the union membership rate is not higher among new members than among old members, and that union members are overrepresented among party members.

Fifth, results are mixed when it comes to the share of party members with low level income. In one party the share of low income members is larger among new members, in three parties it is larger among old members, in three parties the difference is not significant. Hence there is only a slight support for the idea presented in the introduction that the increased representativeness of party membership is due to the income decrease of old party members (due to retirement).

In sum, the results based on a party member survey and electoral study presented here to some extent support the analyses of Scarrow & Gezgor (2010); however, they also partly contradict their results. Hence, the idea presented in the introduction, that the reason for increased representativeness in 2000 is due not only to the characteristics of newly enrolled members but also due to changes among old party members, is only partly supported.

In this paper the representativeness of party members as regards political opinions is approached differently than Scarrow & Gezgor (2010) and hence cannot be compared directly. This paper shows that even though it does not apply to all parties there is a tendency towards no difference in new and old party members' self-placement on the economic left-right scale, and that old party members experience a larger distance between themselves and their party than new party members do. This indicates that enrollment requires some political closeness to the party whereas party membership in the longer run has other reasons than merely political closeness. This could, of course, be elaborated in a model also taking in the level of party activity as well as other variables available in party member surveys.

In sum, this paper shows that party member surveys may add to the knowledge based on population surveys; however, if the results are mixed it is hard to conclude firmly on whether the population or party member surveys provide the more accurate account of the state of party membership. Additional country cases would, of course, add to the power of the verdict.

Nevertheless, for now the point is that party member surveys provide data that allows for additional analyses on party membership. An obvious example relates to the relationship between the incentive structure of the parties and their party member enrollment. Scarrow & Gezgor argues that they expect change in party membership characteristics when parties' incentives changes, for example with the increased application of membership ballots and other ways of 'plebiscitary' democracy (2010: 5-6). Party member surveys may provide data allowing for a more direct analysis of the relationship between party member characteristics and party members' attitude as well as their actual use of the old and new possibilities for influence (such as participation in local annual meetings and traditional electioneering on the one hand, and membership ballots and other individualized participation options, for example online social networks, on the other hand).

The mixed results may call for a combination of population/electoral and party member research. Web-based electoral surveys would, for example, allow for an additional batch of questions to party members hence enabling both a comparison between party voters and party members in regard to social and political characteristics, and some of the now classic analyses of party membership activism, party attachment and opinions on intra-party democracy. However, this seems to be most suitable in systems with few, large parties. It is, for example, a problem in the Danish case where several small parties will be excluded from the analysis due to too few respondents. In this case a party member survey that is coordinated with electoral research and/or population surveys both in regard to timing and content seems to be the most feasible solution.

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