

CONSERVATIVE PARTY MEMBERS: SPEAKING OF MEMBERSHIP



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INTRODUCTION

In seven months British voters are due to go to the polls and political parties are gearing up for the contest. However for all three of the main contenders, a key campaign resource is diminishing—the party membership. This general trend is most noticeable in the Conservatives, the party that during the past 130 years has consistently attracted more members than its rivals, displaying a recurrent knack of galvanising popular support that has earned it the reputation of being a ‘ruthless, relentless election-winning machine’.¹ The party’s ability to draw on an extensive supply of voluntary workers has been a vital element in securing power and dominating British politics during the twentieth century.

To what extent is the fate of the Conservative party bound to its ability to muster a large volunteer army? By talking to current members about their experiences of serving in the party ranks, this paper seeks to understand some of the changing patterns in Conservative membership and any consequent impact on the Conservatives’ place in the British political system.

In 1902 Ostrogorski published his classic study of how the machinery of British parties developed in response to wider democratic participation.² The first manifestation of Conservative popular support, examined by Pugh, came at the end of the nineteenth

¹ M. Garnett and P. Lynch, ‘Introduction’, in M. Garnett and P. Lynch eds., *The Conservatives in Crisis: The Tories after 1997* (Manchester, 2003), p. 1.

² M. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties, Vol. I.* (London, 1902).

century with the formation of the Primrose League.³ Before then the notion of appealing to the masses was irrelevant as elections were decided by a small proportion of the population. As more individuals were given the vote by the Second Reform Act of 1867, so the parties needed more people to build support amongst those whose voting preferences were yet to be expressed.

The Conservatives encouraged the formation of local affiliated associations and clubs that would take on the task of registering voters and identifying Conservative supporters,⁴ but their poor performance led to the establishment of the Primrose League in 1883. The League soon outstripped other constituency organisations in terms of membership. Couched in the unthreatening environment of community social events, supporting Conservatism through the Primrose League became a routine part of life for up to one million men and women by 1891.⁵

However the Conservatives' traditional support base was challenged by the advent of universal suffrage in the 1920s and the rise of the Labour party. Separate works by McCrillis and Jarvis have studied how the party sought to appeal to newly enfranchised women and members of the working class,⁶ while the party's capacity to win electoral support from the working class has been explored by McKenzie and Silver.⁷ After WWII

³ M. Pugh, *The Tories and the People* (Oxford, 1985).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵ M. Pugh, 'Popular Conservatism in Britain: Continuity and Change, 1880–1987', *The Journal of British Studies*, 27 (1988), p. 259.

⁶ N. McCrillis, *The British Conservative Party in the Age of Universal Suffrage: Popular Conservatism, 1918–1929* (Columbus, 1998); D. Jarvis, 'British Conservatism and Class Politics in the 1920s', *English Historical Review*, 111 (1996), pp. 59–84.

⁷ R. McKenzie and A. Silver, *Angels in Marble: Working Class Conservatives in Urban England* (London, 1968).

the party turned its effort to cultivating youth support, striking gold with the popularity of the Young Conservatives (YCs) which boosted party membership to its pinnacle of around 2.8 million in the 1950s. As with the earlier Primrose League and women's organisation, YC involvement centred on a mixture of apolitical, social activities, cementing the party's reputation for offering members a soft landing into the political sphere.

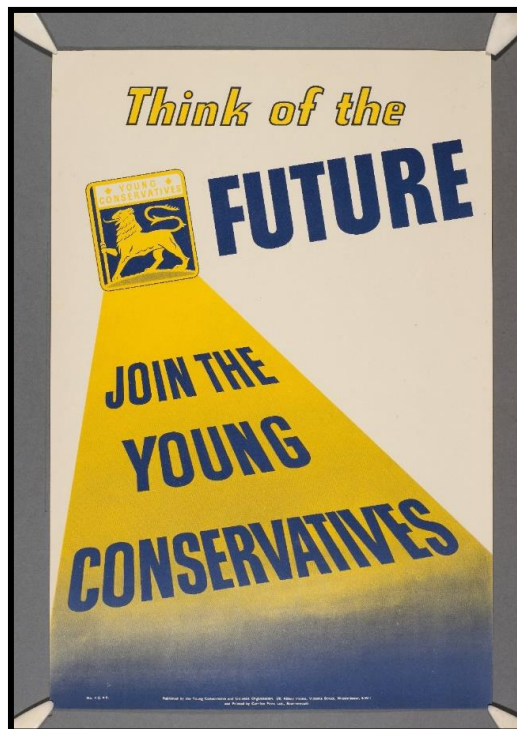


Figure 1: Young Conservatives recruitment poster, 1960.

Yet since the brilliant hey-day of the 1950s and 1960s, Conservative appeal to the masses has become somewhat lacklustre and activist support is waning. There has been a steady decline in membership of local Conservative associations, with average membership being more than halved between 1992 and 2001.⁸ This trend of declining

⁸ J. Fisher, D. Denver and G. Hands, 'Party Membership and Campaign Activity in Britain: The Impact of Electoral Performance', *Party Politics*, 12 (2006), p. 507.

participation has prompted much research by political scientists,⁹ including studies by McKenzie and Scarrow that have focused on the organisation of the Conservative party.¹⁰ More recent surveys into what makes the Conservative grassroots tick include those conducted by Whiteley et al., Webb and Childs and Webb and Bale,¹¹ while historical works have considered not only party policies but party structure and organisational change in the twentieth century.¹²

Studying the recent history of the voluntary party is constrained by what is available in the archives. Material in the Conservative Party Archive is restricted by a thirty-year rule so that only documents from before 1984 are accessible. Associations' varying attitudes to preserving or sharing their own records mean that holdings in local archives are patchy, and permission from the relevant association is usually needed to view them. A request for examples of recent campaigning literature from CCHQ was denied. This leaves press articles and blogposts as providing the most productive body of available literature.

⁹ For example: R. Katz and P. Mair (eds.), *How Parties Organize: Change and Adaptation in Party Organizations in Western Democracies* (London, 1994); S. Scarrow, 'Parties without Members? Party Organization in a Changing Electoral Environment', in R. Dalton and M. Wattenberg eds., *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford, 2000); I. van Biezen, P. Mair and T. Poguntke, 'Going, Going, . . . Gone? The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe?', *European Journal of Political Research*, 51 (2012), pp. 24-56.

¹⁰ R. McKenzie, *British Political Parties* (London, 1967); S. Scarrow, *Parties and Their Members: Organizing for Victory in Britain and Germany* (Oxford, 1996).

¹¹ P. Whiteley, P. Seyd and J. Richardson, *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership* (Oxford, 1994); S. Childs and P. Webb, *Sex, Gender and the Conservative Party: From Iron Lady to Kitten Heels*. (Basingstoke, 2011); P. Webb and T. Bale, 'Why Do Tories Defect to UKIP? Conservative Party Members and the Temptations of the Populist Radical Right', *Political Studies* (2014). <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291467-9248/earlyview>> [accessed 11 September 2014].

¹² A. Seldon and S. Ball eds., *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party since 1900* (Oxford, 1994); T. Bale, *The Conservative Party: From Thatcher to Cameron* (Cambridge, 2011) and *The Conservatives Since 1945: The Drivers of Party Change* (Oxford, 2012).

Political scientists conduct large-scale surveys that are not practical for the lone researcher. Rather, contemporary political historians depend on one-to-one interviews with key personnel to flesh out their research. Ostrogorski himself relied on questioning party workers to gather the information he needed:

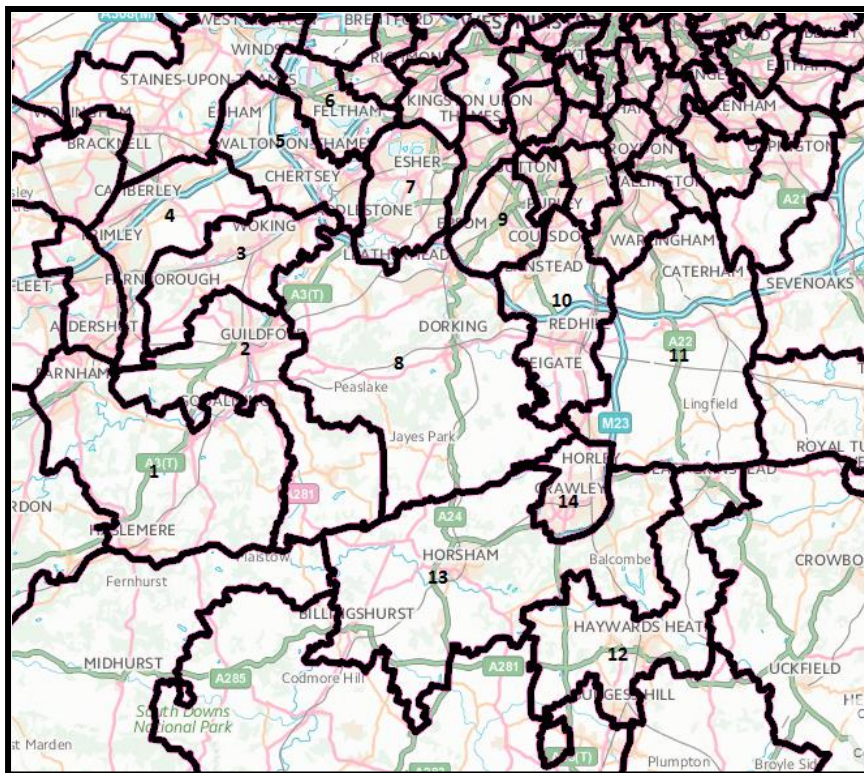
I have had to engage in a long and minute enquiry, carried out in England itself, and based to a great extent on personal testimony and on direct observation of political life in general and of the working of party organization in particular.¹³

This project explores the potential of using the more fluid format of oral history interviews to probe a source that is readily available, the memories of Conservative members. By recording individuals' stories, I have created an archive of personal testimonies (to be lodged at the British Library Sound Archive) that provides future researchers with original material on what it means to belong to the Conservative party. Speaking as active players in the political process, members' reflections can confirm existing analyses and provide evidence that is not documented in print. In particular, I was interested in what the spoken accounts might reveal about changes in the way members contribute to party matters, the party's attitude to its membership and political participation in general.

¹³ Ostrogorski, *Political Parties*, lv.

INTRODUCTION

For this study I interviewed 21 members from seven Conservative associations in Surrey and West Sussex. The interviewees were drawn from this area on the basis of accessibility. I initially contacted 14 constituency associations with varying levels of response from the officers and members; a number of associations declined to participate. The most receptive were the associations in South West Surrey, Esher & Walton and Haywards Heath, so that six of the interviewees came from South West Surrey, four from Esher and Walton and four from Haywards Heath. Three came from Guildford, two from Spelthorne, one from Reigate and one from East Surrey.



1. South West Surrey
2. Guildford
3. Woking
4. North West Surrey
5. Runcimed and Weybridge
6. Spelthorne
7. Esher and Walton
8. Mole Valley
9. Epsom and Ewell
10. Reigate
11. East Surrey
12. Mid Sussex
13. Horsham
14. Crawley

Figure 2: Map of constituencies contacted in Surrey and West Sussex.

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Contains National Statistics data © Crown copyright and database right 2014.

INTRODUCTION

The interviews were conducted over a period of five weeks from 14 May 2014 to 19 June 2014. The intention was to use the question schedule listed in Appendix I as a guideline rather than a rigid format, as not every question was applicable to every interviewee. Nine took place in interviewees' homes, nine in association offices, two in public libraries and one in a Conservative club. The final sample was dependent purely on who responded to the invitation but it still provided a relatively good mix of ages and gender, with 12 men and nine women, two of whom were aged 80-90, eight aged 60-80, five aged 40-60 and six aged 20-40. However there were no interviewees from an ethnic-minority background, and the geography dictated that all lived in safe Conservative seats, constituencies with strong local economies and high employment rates where a large proportion of residents are high-income earners. In terms of roles within the party, the interviewees included former or current association officers, agents, councillors, members of the women's section, leaflet deliverers and a constituency administrator.

The first two chapters consider how people come to join the party and the roles they undertake as members. The third chapter looks at where members fit into the party structure while the fourth discusses the impact of falling party membership on the wider political system.

CHAPTER 1: JOINING THE PARTY

When discussing membership of West European political parties, Scarrow points out that 'viewing mid-century parties as the organizational norm may unduly stack the deck in favour of finding a decline.'¹ However, even allowing for exaggerations in the Conservatives' mid-century peak of 2.8 million, the only possible direction membership has taken to arrive at the current estimates of 130,000-170,000 has been downwards.²

There are two forces that would contribute to this trend: supply and demand. To what extent have attitudes towards recruitment changed among prospective members and the party?

'The party shall consist of its members'³

Membership of the party is 'open to all who share its objects and values and who undertake to be bound by this Constitution'.⁴ When someone joins the party, either centrally or via their constituency association, they are then attached to the local unit, usually as a member of one of the ward branches which fall under the association's umbrella. The thousands of people who belong to this nationwide network constitute the voluntary party, one of three distinct bodies that make up the party. The other two are the

¹ S. Scarrow, 'Parties without Members? Party Organization in a Changing Electoral Environment', in R. Dalton and M. Wattenberg eds., *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford, 2000), p. 90.

² F. McGuinness, 'Membership of UK Political Parties', *House of Commons Library* (London, 2012), p. 2. <<http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05125>> [accessed 11 September 2014].

³ The Conservative Party, *The Constitution of the Conservative Party* (1998), p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

parliamentary party, from whose ranks the leadership is drawn, and the professional staff at Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ).

Parties which cultivate large memberships usually expect a certain proportion of their recruits to provide useful services such as donating or raising funds and helping with campaigning, while the more active among them constitute a pool of potential candidates for public office. In return parties offer members certain incentives or privileges, such as opportunities for socialising, openings into education or public office and a role in party decision-making.⁵

Why join?

A key factor that has traditionally encouraged people to join a political party has been identification with the party that is most closely aligned to their class, religious or geographical background. In the past these social cleavages have helped to divide the electorate relatively cleanly, providing a basis for tribal loyalty and voting preferences that owes more to where or how someone was brought up rather than to informed choice.⁶

Why am I Conservative? Well I was brought up one—I wouldn't dare be anything else, my mother would shoot me!⁷

⁵ Scarrow, 'Parties without Members?', p. 84.

⁶ S. Driver, *Understanding British Party Politics* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 13.

⁷ Interview with Ginny Heard, Track 2, 0:20:52.

There are certain things that are just engrained in you.⁸

Dalton and Wattenberg describe these partisan ties as 'a key element in explaining how the average person manages the complexities of politics and makes reasonable political choices.'⁹ Strong affiliations encouraged people not just to vote for a party but also to enrol as members. However over the course of the twentieth century immigration combined with improvements in education and welfare have created a society where those traditional divisions are no longer so marked. The loosening of those partisan ties that helped voters make a decision on polling day, usually the same decision as they had made on previous polling days, has resulted in an electoral environment of dealignment, characterised by an increasing number of floating voters. As a 2001 election leaflet issued by Reigate MP Crispin Blunt pointed out: 'Like consumers, voters are much less easily impressed these days.'¹⁰

The old tribalism around politics has gone. [...] Politics was much more tribal and frankly much more exciting, so I think people joined parties and got involved with them because actually, whichever side you were on, it was much more appealing.¹¹

Even when joining is a conscious choice rather than an inherited behaviour, it does not necessarily mean those individuals are bent on radical activism. Expectations of getting involved with the party can vary from those who see it as the first step on a path towards

⁸ Interview with Ian Nelson, Track 2, 0:34:41.

⁹ R. Dalton and M. Wattenberg, 'Partisan Change and the Democratic Process,' in R. Dalton and M. Wattenberg eds., *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford, 2000), p. 262.

¹⁰ General Election and Surrey County Council Elections: Campaign Leaflets, Surrey History Centre. 4559/3/6/2/2.

¹¹ Interview with Andrew French, Track 1, 0:36:51 and Track 1 0:37:25.

gaining public office to those who are merely prepared to deliver leaflets or simply buy the odd raffle ticket.¹²

I wanted to pursue a career in politics. As I say, at that time I wanted to be world dictator.¹³

I didn't get involved with the Conservatives or join in order to be an activist or to promote myself in any political way. [...] In fact I quite enjoy some things I go along to just to be a member and not be on the committee or treasurer or chairman.¹⁴

In 1984, Esher constituency association advertised the benefits of membership as being correctly entered on the electoral register and receiving invitations to functions,¹⁵ but membership also offers people the chance to influence electoral outcomes.

We pay our annual membership and as a result of that comes the benefits of membership and part of that is being able to have your say. [...] That's one of the reasons I joined the Conservative party because I felt strongly about the damage that socialism was doing to our country and the need to fight that and the only

¹² Whiteley et al., *True Blues*, pp. 72-5.

¹³ Interview with John Caton, Track 1, 0:18:13.

¹⁴ Nelson, Track 2, 0:11:03 and Track 2, 0:12:00.

¹⁵ Political Organisations in Surrey: Election Campaign Material and Publications, Surrey History Centre. 7308/File2.

effective way to do so is to fight it in an organised way with fellows of a similar view.¹⁶

It wasn't socialising that I was looking for, I was looking for the economics, the politics of the thing.¹⁷

I was keen to do something about it [Europe] and I thought that the action really would be in the Conservative party so that's what got me involved.¹⁸

When teenagers joined the YCs in the 1950s the social side was the main attraction.

They were at one point the only game in town. That was where you met the opposite sex so you went along there, you had functions and you got sucked in.¹⁹

However the growth of the leisure industry and a more affluent population means that few young people today would consider joining a political party purely for social reasons.

Nevertheless in smaller communities belonging to the party is an accepted facet of local life.

People like to belong to something reasonably small which they feel they play a part in. [...] People, certainly in a village, would feel that they're participating in

¹⁶ Interview with Andrew Landriani, Track 2, 0:10:50.

¹⁷ Interview with Christopher Higson, Track 2, 0:29:02.

¹⁸ Interview with Ken Worthy, Track 1, 0:17:35.

¹⁹ Worthy, Track 2, 0:08:52.

political activities because it's the village every bit as much as they would because it was the party.²⁰

This social side of the Conservatives, while it may no longer be attractive in itself, still functions as one of the preferred ways of drawing potential members in.

Attracting new recruits

Recruiting members has traditionally fallen to the local associations, and while people with strong partisan ties or political leanings may join of their own accord, many others need to be persuaded. Inviting them to a social event is a way for existing members to gently introduce them to the party.

Hopefully one will persuade people to come to events that one is organising and then if they enjoy those and they meet other people and you look after them properly at those, you may be able to persuade them to come, but I think probably it's a very soft sell.²¹

Very often friendship is how we win people. [...] They're people who kind of don't mind being around you to being people who don't mind being associates to being people who don't mind being members.²²

²⁰ Interview with Richard Bourne, Track 1, 0:16:31 and Track 1, 0:16:55.

²¹ Bourne, Track 1, 0:36:31.

²² Interview with Simon Parnall, Track 2, 0:01:09 and Track 2, 0:02:14.

Perhaps this hands-off style has cost the party some members, with a number of interviewees commenting on a basic failure to simply ask people whether they would consider joining.

In my experience the single biggest reason that people aren't members of the party is because no-one's ever asked them.²³

I've always said that joining the party's like Narnia. It's like finding the door at the back of the wardrobe and you've got to go past all these coats and all these old musty smells and things that have been there for ever and then you walk in and this massive new world comes and actually when you're inside you feel like you've always belonged and you love it and enjoy it but the reality is that we're not very good at making it open for people to come through.²⁴

Another approach is to follow up door-to-door canvassing by contacting those residents who appear interested.

The only way to get membership is to go and knock on people's doors. People aren't prepared to do that and people don't want you to knock on their door. It's very difficult.²⁵

²³ Interview with Jonathan Ash Edwards, Track 1, 0:49:19.

²⁴ Interview with Mims Davies, Track 1, 0:11:16.

²⁵ Interview with Anonymous 4, Track 2, 0:05:31.

Ken Worthy makes an important point about how recruitment can suffer if members are deflated by electoral defeats or lack confidence in the leadership.

You don't read a poster or a leaflet and think 'Gosh, yes, this is right'. You talk to your mates down at the pub and if you know people who are enthusiastic about a party, you listen.²⁶

During the 1980s the party prioritised recruitment, supplementing local efforts with centrally-led strategies to stimulate enrolment, but this now means that associations no longer feel responsible for maintaining membership levels.²⁷ However membership figures can give a false impression about the levels of support the Conservatives can muster. Volunteers are still willing to deliver leaflets and perform other routine tasks but fewer are prepared to convert that support into membership.²⁸

People don't want to join because they know they get bombarded by Central Office.²⁹

I think there's a great reluctance for a lot of people to want to sort of stick their heads above the parapet as being a member anyway.³⁰

²⁶ Worthy, Track 1, 0:31:07.

²⁷ Interview with Anonymous 3, Track 1, 0:30:52; P. Tether, 'Recruiting Conservative Party Members: A Changing Role for Central Office', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 44 (1991), p. 29.

²⁸ L. Bennie, 'Party Membership Matters'. Paper presented at the annual conference of EPOP (Elections, Public Opinion and Parties), (Lancaster, 2013), p. 5.

²⁹ Anonymous 3, Track 1, 0:30:30.

³⁰ Bourne, Track 1, 0:15:11.

Political participation can be pitched at many levels, but one member is frustrated when support only goes so far.

If you actually want a Conservative government then one of the things you can do is join the party which would help put a bit of money into the pot to help campaign. [...] Obviously going and voting is a very important thing to do, but if that's all you do then you're only helping in a small way.³¹

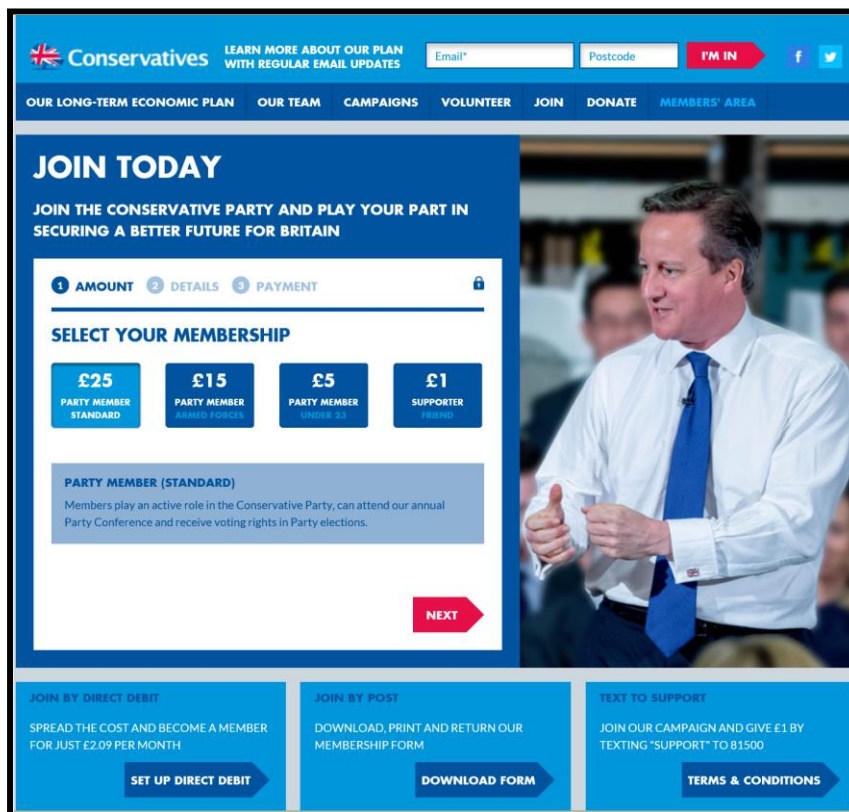


Figure 3: Joining page from the Conservative Party website.

CCHQ pursues a centrally run recruitment strategy that recognises these varying degrees of support since they are acutely aware of the party's inability to maintain a stable membership. Signing up new members is not as easy as in the past.

³¹ Interview with Anonymous 2, Track 1, 0:30:33 and Track 1, 0:30:59.

Obstacles to recruitment

Perhaps the biggest stumbling block in any attempts to breathe life into recruitment is the attitude of what is now an ageing membership. Prospective members have not always been embraced if they do not conform to an association's idea of who should belong to their party.

There was a view that a) I wasn't old school, b) I wasn't a brother in the craft, c) I wasn't someone from a well-heeled background or well-known family. Those things tended to matter in those days. [...] I won't say personal recommendation doesn't matter anymore, it does, but certainly people are much more able to be judged on their effort and their ability than was the case in my time.³²

Lots of my fellow councillors and Tories, they often looked down their noses at me because I don't speak with the right accent, I didn't go to the right schools and that sort of thing.³³

In the same vein, the majority of branches prefer to stick to what they know by running the same events year in, year out.

³² Landriani, Track 1, 0:24:16.

³³ Interview with Andrew Lynch, Track 1, 0:12:51.

Our events are orientated towards our membership which is over 60s [...] and they're nice events. [...] None of my friends would be interested in going to any of those at all.³⁴

Things haven't changed: 30 years later we're still discussing whether we have lasagne or shepherd's pie at our suppers, we'll have a quiz night, our coffee mornings, race nights. That sort of side of it hasn't changed at all. [...] I wouldn't say membership as a whole has changed or what they do. They're quite set.³⁵



Figures 4 and 5: Leaflets advertising association events.

³⁴ Interview with Jessica Parry, Track 2, 0:38:18.

³⁵ Heard, Track 1, 0:06:38 and Track 1, 0:41:47.

When all that they organise socially is a quiz night which you know can be a bit dire [...] it's not the greatest way to attract newer, younger people.³⁶

Even events run by a university society can be just as irrelevant to younger supporters.

Old fashioned ways of doing it, it just felt a bit like a kind of old boys club. [...] It was very white, middle class, private school boys who, you know, were sitting there in their tweed with their 'Port and Policy'. [...] For me personally, that was just 100 per cent not what I think the Conservative party should be about or is about.³⁷

Attracting younger members from this starting point is not easy and Conservative Future (CF), the current youth wing of the party, is a shadow of its predecessor. Associations struggle to sustain viable CF wings with the ebb and flow of younger members going to university, and it is even more challenging in more rural areas.

It's very, very difficult in geographically far-spread constituencies that perhaps don't have a clear geographic centre to bring those groups of people together and certainly it was easier in one of the more urban seats than others.³⁸

Another frequently mentioned explanation for membership decline is the shifting inclination for people to support single issues rather than a particular party.

³⁶ Nelson, Track 2, 0:20:45.

³⁷ Interview with Anonymous, Track 1, 0:34:53.

³⁸ Ash Edwards, Track 1, 0:17:40.

The idea of joining a political party and getting what you want done by compromise and organisation is less prevalent than it used to be.³⁹

How do you get those people, who are politically engaged and politically interested, but don't feel being a member of a political party is the way in which to go about that?⁴⁰

However there is still a distinct band of people who are prepared to make the sustained effort associated with belonging to a political party.⁴¹ They have ulterior motives as they need the party's help in running for local election.

The lure of public office

Commitment to a particular issue and a subsequent desire to enter local government has become one of the main reasons for newcomers to show interest in joining the party.

The ones that came to our 'Could I be a Conservative Councillor?' this year were all people that our councillors had met through issues. [...] None of them were actual Conservative members when they came along, which was lovely.⁴²

³⁹ Worthy, Track 2, 0:08:34.

⁴⁰ Ash Edwards, Track 1, 0:48:18.

⁴¹ Worthy, Track 2, 0:31:21.

⁴² Heard, Track 1, 0:37:09.

The only people who are interested to be members, I think, are people who've put themselves forward as councillors.⁴³

Jonathan Ash Edwards, 27, who served on the CF executive and is now chairman of Mid Sussex District Council, believes involving younger people in local government rather than just using them as foot soldiers is the way the party can build up its youth wing.

Getting younger people standing for local elections and getting them in as councillors, it sort of builds them into the organisation in quite a tangible and lasting way.⁴⁴

While some interviewees report seeing signs of increasing interest in membership from the middle-aged bracket, it is not enough to reverse losses through members dying or leaving.⁴⁵

Many complain about the lack of regeneration in membership, with one describing recruitment as 'woeful'.⁴⁶ According to one agent, it is attracting new members of any age that is the real problem.⁴⁷

It's nothing to do with the politics, I don't think, I think it's to do with the general trend because you're finding it in everything, in the church, you're finding it in the WI, any sort of social events. They don't seem to be able to get the members, the workers.⁴⁸

⁴³ Anonymous 4, Track 2, 0:20:24.

⁴⁴ Ash Edwards, Track 1, 0:20:29.

⁴⁵ Anonymous 3, Track 1, 0:37:26.

⁴⁶ Higson, Track 2, 0:42:39.

⁴⁷ Interview with Edward Norman, Track 1, 0:28:47.

⁴⁸ Interview with Joyce Stoker, Track 1, 0:33:46.

I think we're a victim of people not wanting to join things anymore.⁴⁹

These personal views articulate some of the issues that contribute to changing levels of party membership. The big debates that sustained traditional party loyalties have died down so that fewer people are prepared to offer the party unconditional support,⁵⁰ yet in their place come those with a more prosaic outlook who see membership as a means to an end. Centralised efforts to stimulate membership enrolment have been described as counter-productive but some associations can rely on enough volunteers to carry out routine tasks.⁵¹ The traditional recruitment strategies of an ageing membership are only relevant to those of a similar demographic, and consequently, as the loyal gradually die off, the party's inability to appeal to fresh faces is becoming even more apparent.

For those that have joined, the next chapter examines the functions that members have traditionally performed for the party.

⁴⁹ Davies, Track 1, 0:11:53.

⁵⁰ P. Mair, 'Introduction' in P. Mair ed., *The West European Party System*, (Oxford, 1990), p. 8.

⁵¹ Interview with Elizabeth Cable, Track 1, 0:17:09.

CHAPTER 2: BELONGING

Once signed up, members enter the world of the constituency associations, local units which Scarrow describes as providing ‘social and political identities for enrolled supporters and legitimacy and electoral loyalty for leaders.’¹ Ball outlines what new members will discover on joining an association: ‘Common aims, interests and outlook can be taken for granted; theoretical debate is regarded as an unproductive distraction and approval is reserved for practical activity.’²

As set down in the party constitution, associations are expected to ‘sustain and promote the objects and values of the Party’, but their real function—the practical activity—is to organise effective campaigns that return Conservative candidates to public office, many of whom have already served the association as members. Associations also need to raise sufficient money to cover their campaign costs and their annual contribution to central party funds.³

For the Conservative party, the willing cohorts of unpaid volunteers have traditionally undertaken these tasks, however their significance in all these areas is being compromised as numbers decline.

¹ S. Scarrow, ‘Parties without Members?: Party Organization in a Changing Electoral Environment’, in R. Dalton and M. Wattenberg eds., *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford, 2003), p. 82.

² S. Ball, ‘The National and Regional Party Structure’, in A. Seldon and S. Ball eds., *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party since 1900* (Oxford, 1994), p. 171.

³ The Conservative Party, *The Constitution of the Conservative Party* (1998), p. 29.

Foot soldiers in the local campaign

Members' involvement in party activities can vary widely. The least active will pay their dues and possibly display a poster or attend an event. There are those that are then happy to deliver leaflets and help at fundraising events. The more active will canvass, attend meetings and conferences, with the most committed stepping forwards as candidates in elections.⁴

One of members' key contributions is in implementing a basic electioneering tool, the canvass. Before the extension of the franchise during the second half of the nineteenth century, the purpose of canvassing was to court voters' support, but it gradually became the means by which parties attempted to ensure that all eligible voters were registered. With the enactment of manhood suffrage in 1918, local government took charge of electoral registers, but parties continued to see the canvass as a useful device for mobilising voters and promoting recognition of the party candidate.⁵

In 1969 association officers in Esher distributed guidelines on 'Fighting and Winning Elections': 'Everything therefore depends on knowing our supporters and impressing on them the vital importance of going to the poll. This information can only be obtained by a thorough canvass.'⁶ Canvassing continues to be seen as a fundamental tool in the campaign.

⁴ P. Whiteley, P. Seyd, and J. Richardson, *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership* (Oxford, 1994), p. 103.

⁵ S. Scarrow, *Parties and their Members: Organizing for Victory in Britain and Germany* (Oxford, 1996), p. 105.

⁶ Esher and Walton Conservative Association Records, Surrey History Centre. 7681/1/1.

The main focus of the campaign though is knowing where they are and getting them to come out and vote.⁷

In the run up to an election, groups of volunteers ask residents about their voting intentions so that when polling day comes, tellers can keep track of who has voted. Members are then needed in the evening to go ‘knocking up’ to remind supporters to vote and if necessary to offer help in getting them to the polling station.

Codes for canvassers			
Strong Conservative	C	BNP	B
Weak Conservative	P	UKIP	K
Strong Labour	S	Against	A
Labour/Conservative waiverer	T	Independent	I
Strong Liberal Democrat	L	Won't Vote	W
Liberal Democrat/Conservative waiverer	M	Won't Say	X
Green	G	Undecided	U

Table 1 Codes for canvassers.

While national general election campaigns use mass media to familiarise voters with party policies and parliamentary personalities, at the local level the strategies are less sophisticated.

We still deliver pieces of paper through people's letterboxes, we still knock on doors and stand on street corners with balloons and things on a Saturday morning.⁸

⁷ Interview with Ken Worthy, Track 1, 0:58:06.

⁸ Interview with Edward Norman, Track 2, 0:14:06.

There is a basic format to a campaign. There are various leaflets that you get that make sense. You have your basic manifesto, you have 'In Touch' newsletters which explain what's going on, what a terrific guy your bloke is and what he's done, and you have letters to pledges to say, 'It's really important to get out and vote, do you need a postal vote?'. Then you have other letters to postal voters, you know, you've got to get your message across to them miles earlier than the others, so there's a whole mosaic of things that we get together.⁹

Face-to-face contact is seen as vital in building up support for a local candidate or assessing the mood of the electorate, something that cannot easily be replaced by technology. Many voters also regard it as an integral part of the electoral process.¹⁰

If you actually go round and actually meet people so they can see who they're voting for then I think that's quite an effective weapon to use.¹¹

I was knocking on doors of traditional Labour households and they were saying, 'Oh we don't like Neil Kinnock,' or 'We don't like his wife Glenys Kinnock, so we're not sure we're going to vote Labour this time,' and yet all the opinion polls were showing Labour strongly ahead in the polls, and I thought, well actually this isn't what I'm hearing on the street. Sure enough the result of the election was that Neil Kinnock didn't win the election and I found that a quite interesting taste of

⁹ Worthy, Track 1, 0:52:18.

¹⁰ Worthy, Track 1, 0:58:57.

¹¹ Interview with Elizabeth Cable, Track 1, 0:49:31.

how important it can be to knock on doors and hear people's views because people might tell you something differently than they tell opinion pollsters.¹²

People are very critical at elections where they haven't had much literature from candidates or they haven't had people round.¹³

The perceived value of canvassing has meant that it is no longer confined to election time.

People will talk to you a lot more when you're knocking on the doorstep if there's no pending election coming because we're not just there for their vote, we're there to actually listen to what they've got to say.¹⁴

Mid Sussex Conservatives, along with many other associations, have taken note of their opponents' strategies and now actively seek to build connections with the local community.

They [the Liberal Democrats] always had to fight seats, win seats from the bottom up rather than, if you like, moulding traditional areas of support. [...] [In 2010] they were out-campaigning us. They had more presence at community events than we did, they were delivering more leaflets than we did and they were doing more politically than we were.¹⁵

¹² Interview with Ian Nelson, Track 2, 0:03:40.

¹³ Interview with Jonathan Ash Edwards, Track 1, 0:58:01.

¹⁴ Heard, Track 1, 0:54:22.

¹⁵ Ash Edwards, Track 1, 0:31:50 and Track 1, 0:36:24.

Our candidate was much more involved in the community [...] so we had a credible story to tell whereas our previous candidates had absolutely no connection with the local community at all.¹⁶

The perennial challenge of finding enough suitable candidates is one of an association's main tasks.

Standing for local election

During the 1980s, the struggle between Labour and the Conservatives to control local authorities intensified, making local elections more partisan.¹⁷ Success in winning seats and demonstrating competence in running councils is now seen as crucial in the battle for national government, so the local party aspires to find candidates of a certain calibre to fight every seat.¹⁸ However the time commitment involved in being a councillor means that it can deter those with young children or long and variable working hours; nor do many people wish to put themselves on the frontline.

I get frustrated as a councillor because the public give people in politics a really hard time and they have really, really difficult decisions to make.¹⁹

¹⁶ Worthy, Track 1, 0:48:22.

¹⁷ P. John, 'The Restructuring of Local Government in England and Wales', in R. Batley and G. Stoker eds., *Local Government in Europe: Trends and Development* (Basingstoke, 1991), p. 63.

¹⁸ Scarrow, *Parties and their Members*, p. 137.

¹⁹ Interview with Jessica Parry, Track 1, 0:17:28.

Quite a lot of people wouldn't touch it with a barge pole [...] the publicity and the criticisms.²⁰

In Touch BOROUGH ELECTION SPECIAL
ROWLEDGE & WRECCLESHAM WARD

1995 On 4th May you will have the opportunity of electing THREE Conservative Councillors who are pledged to serve your interests

Your Conservative Candidates are

DAME ELIZABETH ANSON a barrister, has lived in Rowledge for 30 years with her husband Peter. When their four children were growing up she was elected your Councillor. In the last 21 years she has worked for you locally on Waverley Council and also nationally and in Brussels on many local government issues that affect you and your environment. She likes travel and playing golf, and relaxes sewing tapestries.

HILLARY AUSTIN-WARD is married with three children and has lived in Wrecclesham for eight years. She spent six years in the NHS before founding her own organisation caring for people with learning disabilities. Hillary has wide experience of voluntary work and is a School Governor.

ANNE HOATH, a resident of Rowledge for 23 years, married to a retired Naval Officer and the mother of four. Anne Hoath was a Waverley Councillor for 16 years until 1991. A former Mayor of Waverley and Chairman of Housing and Leisure & Culture, she is committed to improving recreational facilities, both indoor and outdoor, for young adults.

STOP PRESS
Conservatives will introduce free car parking for shoppers.
We believe that the Liberal Democrat budget balance is £1 million too high.
This is your money and we will rebate your Council Tax account.

Conservatives will restore efficient and effective services and give maximum help to communities and organisations, all within the framework of tight budgetary control.

Just as in a family, we will always take care to work within our means. We are determined to be practical, constructive, supportive and financially sound.

WATCH YOUR COUNCIL TAX BILLS COME DOWN WITH THE CONSERVATIVES BACK IN CONTROL

Published by Christine Woodley, 2 Royal Parade, Tilford Road, Hindhead, Surrey GU26 6TD
Printed by Riverprint, Unit 9, Riverside Park, Farnham, Surrey GU14 7LQ

Figure 6: South West Surrey local election literature, 1995.

Nevertheless many people are genuinely motivated to make a difference and decide to put themselves forward for election.

I think it's a real privilege to stand as a councillor and have people vote for you, you know people putting trust in you, that's an incredible thing to have. As you're there slightly longer and the issues maybe become more protracted or difficult,

²⁰ Interview with Dame Elizabeth Anson, Track 1, 0:39:57.

then I really do recognise that sense of responsibility and interest in my community.²¹

However one member is sceptical about candidates' motivations, and the current structure of local government can be frustrating for those that are not on the executive.

It's become now a job and it's a status symbol and it's fighting for position and it's not doing the work that they should be doing. It's fighting amongst themselves all the time.²²

I don't think the cabinet system helps on the local level, I think it's too many members that don't feel actively involved. I find that personally very frustrating.²³

The level of influence that you have as a backbencher is very limited. When you combine that with [...] the constraints on local councils now, relative to 20 years ago, being a backbencher is actually not terribly edifying.²⁴

Jessica Parry has witnessed how council dominance can cause ructions amongst the local party.

²¹ Interview with Mims Davies, Track 1, 0:49:41.

²² Interview with Anonymous 4, Track 2, 0:10:53.

²³ Davies, Track 2, 0:24:10.

²⁴ Interview with Andrew French, Track 2, 0:11:26.

Having such a strong Conservative council is actually not necessarily a good thing because [...] you're always going to fight with somebody and if there's not enough of the opposition to fight with, it ends up happening within the party.²⁵

If serving on the council becomes less appealing, so councillors will become less willing to seek re-election. Local activism will suffer since councillors tend to make up the residual core activists as the pool of members shrinks. Equally, resounding success in local elections can diminish party activity.

As soon as there's an election, whether it's an election for a council or election for an MP, the people who are most on the streets and the most active are councillors. When we lost all our councillors in the nineties, we lost our activists.²⁶

All the officers of our association are councillors, and I think that's a really bad thing. I think it's not because the councillors are seeking to be officers but because realistically we're doing jobs that other people don't want to do.²⁷

One of the challenges when you hold as many seats as we currently do is actually your key people are already councillors and that actually has an impact on people's workload and people's time to do other things within the party.²⁸

²⁵ Parry, Track 1, 0:44:44.

²⁶ Anson, Track 1, 0:55:46.

²⁷ Interview with Simon Parnall, Track 1, 0:51:56.

²⁸ Ash Edwards, Track 2, 0:27:35.

The party therefore needs to find a balance where it remains effective in both local government and the constituency.

Constituency activities

Apart from helping with election campaigning, members' roles include serving as an officer on the association, organising fundraising events and participating in meetings of the Conservative Policy Forum (CPF). The CPF offers members the opportunity to discuss questions put to them by CCHQ. Their views are then sent back so that they can be taken into consideration during party policy formation, but some are sceptical about how well this works.

You know we discuss these issues and we come up with our ideas and so forth. I would be amazed if anybody took any notice of them.²⁹

Running all these activities fall to the association officers—the management team—which include the chairman, a deputy chairman responsible for membership and fundraising and a deputy chairman responsible for the development of policy ideas and campaigning. An association's ability to harness its available manpower and put it to use is key to its success in meeting party objectives, and employing a professional agent can make all the difference.

²⁹ Worthy, Track 2, 0:13:04.

The agent is really the lynch pin of an association. Poor agent, poor association.

Everyone will rely on the agent from councillors to branch chairmen, association officers, members and the MP.³⁰

Safe seats make it easier to get things off the ground, and an MP provides the natural channel of communication between the constituency and Westminster. In hopeless seats, it is more of a struggle.³¹

Having a Member of Parliament does open doors. We can get people to come and see him. [...] It's a lot more difficult to connect with your electorate and therefore it's harder to make a team, it's harder to get the momentum going if you haven't got the MP at the top to sort of stand side-by-side with you.³²

When an association is well-organised and successful belonging becomes a positive experience, and a good agent will make the members feel happy and valued.

I'd like to think that people are embraced when they come in and made to feel welcome. [...] It's sort of that caring thing, looking after them which I think is important, making them feel special.³³

³⁰ Interview with Andrew Landriani, Track 2, 0:19:32.

³¹ Nelson, Track 2, 0:59:50.

³² Heard, Track 1, 0:31:31 and Track 1, 0:31:03.

³³ Heard, Track 2, 0:18:24 and Track 1, 0:21:24.

However the problem for the Conservative party is that struggling associations—the ones that are in most need of an agent—cannot afford to hire one, exacerbating lack of morale.

Feelings

An essential reason why members are prepared to donate their time, money and energy to the party is the emotional satisfaction that belonging can bring. In his study of British elections, Denver described them as fun, and being part of an organisation that effectively contests them is also fun.³⁴

We have fun which is one of the reasons for campaigning and being here because if it's not being fun people wouldn't do it, it becomes hard slog.³⁵

It's the competitive side of politics that I enjoy, not the policies so much.³⁶

I actually really enjoy it, it's awful isn't it, what a geek. I feel like I belong and I feel needed and wanted.³⁷

I've enjoyed being part and parcel of something which is important. [...] It's like everything in life, if you don't enjoy it you don't do it.³⁸

³⁴ D. Denver, C. Carman and R. Johns, *Elections and Voters in Britain*, (Basingstoke, 2003), xi.

³⁵ Heard, Track 2, 0:37:21.

³⁶ Norman, Track 1, 0:46:22.

³⁷ Davies, Track 2, 0:46:57.

³⁸ Anonymous 4, Track 2, 0:27:58 and Track 2, 0:33:37.

When that sense of camaraderie and enjoyment withers away, then the health of the association suffers.

You had people and people and people and that's where you had the comradeship and this was how you got to know people and how they felt and what was going on within the borough. You don't get that anymore.³⁹

It's changed completely. We were like one big family here. [...] That's the feeling you had in this building, it was like a second home, so to speak, but the feeling now is completely different.⁴⁰

However that sense of kinship can work against the party.

Most of the volunteers I've got here are not going to do anything for the constituency. They are Claygate people and they're interested in what happens here, they know one another and they've worked together, and they like one another. It was hard enough merging Claygate and Hinchley Wood. So it is a dilemma for the Conservative party.⁴¹

Part of the attraction of membership is the sense of contribution and cooperation that comes with belonging to an active, vibrant organisation. When membership dips below a certain threshold it becomes much more difficult for an association to sustain momentum,

³⁹ Anonymous 4, Track 1, 0:37:54.

⁴⁰ Interview with Joyce Stoker, Track 1, 0:39:22 and Track 1, 0:39:52.

⁴¹ Worthy, Track 2, 0:30:28.

so beginning what one interviewee describes as 'a spiralling decline'.⁴² If having a smaller membership compromises association activity, then the party as a whole will be affected. The following chapter looks at how members are incorporated into the workings of the party.

⁴² French, Track 1, 0:42:26.

CHAPTER 3: FITTING INTO THE PARTY STRUCTURE

The current structure of the Conservative party was established during an era of partisan identification when it was relatively easy to populate and run a national network of branches and associations, local units that were described by Duverger as ensuring a 'closer and more faithful contact between the mass of the people and their ruling elites.'¹

However using members as the mechanism to connect with and educate the electorate has gradually been superseded by the arrival and ascendancy of more immediate channels of communication such as television and the internet.² Technological developments have led to centrally coordinated electioneering strategies that bypass the grassroots, while at the same time having fewer members at its disposal may have compelled the party to find new ways of doing things.

At some point, the cost of recruiting and maintaining a large membership could outweigh the benefits. Looking at the way the party organises itself and where members are placed within that framework can show how the party views its members.

How parties are organised

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Conservative party consisted of parliamentary alliances between groups of local elites, what Duverger described as a cadre party. As voting

¹ M. Duverger, *Political Parties* (Bristol, 1954), p. 427.

² P. Webb, 'Political Parties in Britain: Secular Decline or Adaptive Resilience?', in P. Webb, D. Farrell, and I. Holliday eds., *Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford, 2002), p. 38.

rights were gradually extended, mass parties emerged that were characterised by a nationwide network of local branches and an open membership policy. For the period in the 1950s and 1960s when membership peaked, the Conservatives resembled a mass branch party, but the party's elitist hierarchy prevented it from fitting neatly into this party type.³

Kirchheimer later predicted that some parties would be prepared to forego a strong ideological stance to prioritise electoral success, and in doing so would pursue a 'catch-all' strategy designed to appeal to the maximum number of voters.⁴ Panebianco went on to identify another sort of party, the 'electoral-professional', that uses campaign professionals rather than relying on a volunteer base.⁵

The Conservatives have pursued both these strategies. To enhance the party's catch-all appeal, David Cameron, leader since 2005, has purposefully positioned the party nearer the centre-ground; this is in contrast to his predecessor Michael Howard who was criticised for pursuing right wing policies on immigration and law and order that appealed more to members rather than the electorate.

The party has also made use of advertising agencies and opinion pollsters in its national campaigns since the late 1970s.

³ Duverger, *Political Parties*, pp. 63-7; P. Webb, *The Modern British Party System* (London, 2000), pp. 191-2.

⁴ O. Kirchheimer, 'The Transformation of the Western European Party Systems', in J. LaPalombara and M. Weiner eds., *Political Parties and Political Development* (Princeton, 1966), p. 184.

⁵ A. Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organization and Power* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 266.

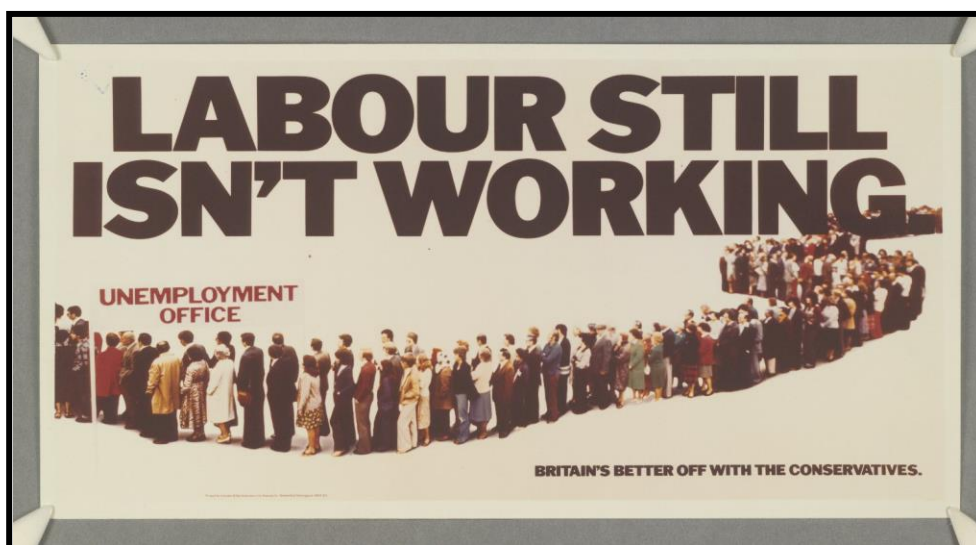


Figure 7: An iconic poster from the Saatchi & Saatchi campaign, 1978.

They have also come to rely on large donations to bankroll campaign activities; members' subscriptions only provide a fraction of the income needed to pay professional agencies. Future curbs on campaign financing may eventually force the Conservatives to consider supporting an increase in state funding to ensure they can continue to cover these costs, becoming more like what Katz and Mair describe as a 'cartel party', a party with much closer links to the state.⁶

These cases show that the party has shifted away from relying on a base of committed members. Many activists believe that the advent of social media and the public's shifting engagement with politics will bring about further changes in how the party approaches campaigning.⁷

⁶ S. Scarrow, *Parties and Their Members: Organizing for Victory in Britain and Germany* (Oxford, 1996), p. 22; R. Katz and P. Mair, 'Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party', *Party Politics*, 1 (1995), p. 5.

⁷ Interview with Simon Parnall, Track 2, 0:11:52.

The difficulty is reconciling a kind of party structure that relies on a bigger structure and relies on coordination and having to live within the demands of elections and electoral cycles versus the very instant and very responsive nature of more issue-based campaigns.⁸

When you're running an election campaign you need to be big. When you're just idling over running a few meetings you need to be small. So you need to be able to move between big and small quickly.⁹

I think the thing with social media is it's making everything much more transient than it was and so any kind of message that you're trying to get out is that much more transient.¹⁰

New models of electioneering that are faster and more agile may have little use for members, so in what ways will members continue to be needed?

Members' power

Just as there is a relationship between membership levels and campaigning efforts, so declining numbers are also affecting members' traditional sphere of influence—the selection of candidates for both local and parliamentary elections. Candidate selection is seen as one of the most consequential functions parties perform in representative

⁸ Interview with Jonathan Ash Edwards, Track 1, 0:52:23.

⁹ Parnall, Track 2, 0:14:32.

¹⁰ Interview with Andrew French, Track 1, 0:44:25.

democracies,¹¹ and members guard this privilege fervently as compensation for the demands made upon their time and wallets. So long as members retain this power, the party needs sufficient members to impart legitimacy to the process, yet the pool is shrinking. Restricting the decision-making to a small group of people casts doubt on the democratic nature of the process, so associations are being encouraged to open up the initial stages of parliamentary candidate selection to the general public. They are holding open primaries so that supporters—without having to become fully-fledged members—can participate in choosing a candidate from a shortlist with the final decision ratified by the members.¹²

If it was a marginal seat I don't think it would work because if I were running a Labour office, I would get all my people in saying, 'Get in there, vote for him because he's the worst'. I think it has to be a reasonably safe seat otherwise it can be manipulated.¹³

This is one way the party is seeking to bolster the legitimacy of who becomes its potential representatives at Westminster, but it has yet to successfully address the more visible issue that only a small proportion of its MPs are women or come from ethnic minority backgrounds.

¹¹ S. Scarrow, P. Webb and D. Farrell, 'From Social Integration to Electoral Contestation: The Changing Distribution of Power within Political Parties', in R. Dalton and M. Wattenberg eds., *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford, 2002), p. 138.

¹² D. Hannan, 'Open primaries are spreading unremarked across local Conservative Associations,' 19 October 2013. <<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/danielhannan/100242136/unremarked-primaries-are-spreading-across-local-conservative-associations/>> [accessed 15 August 2014]; Interview with Anonymous 4, Track 1, 0:55:00; Interview with John Caton, Track 3, 0:18:52.

¹³ Interview with Ken Worthy, Track 2, 0:44:27.

There's clearly a problem with parliamentary candidates where there are not enough women coming forward and I wonder if there is also a problem with the selection processes that you have to go through to get on the list, whether they're putting people off applying.¹⁴

Associations are required to draw up shortlists that include more women, yet many members, both male and female, still overwhelmingly choose men as their representatives, arguing that they are simply picking the best candidate for the job.

We've got to have the people that suit the job. It doesn't matter whether it's a man or a woman. [...] I don't like this idea that we must have more women.¹⁵

How a party selects its candidates is just one example of how it chooses to organise itself, and changes to that structure are often a reflection of external circumstances.

Renovation

Political theory explains organisational change as a reaction to changes in leadership, dominant factions and external factors rather than the implementation of a premeditated plan.¹⁶ A disastrous electoral performance is reason enough, such as the Labour victory of 1945 which drove the party chairman Lord Woolton on a relentless push to boost

¹⁴ Interview with Edward Norman, Track 2, 0:05:31.

¹⁵ Interview with Joyce Stoker, Track 1, 1:03:12 and Track 1, 1:03:41.

¹⁶ R. Harmel and K. Janda, 'An Integrated Theory of Party Goals and Party Change', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 6 (1994), p. 262.

membership and party funds.¹⁷ Similarly after defeat in 1964, efforts were made to improve the calibre of people on the prospective parliamentary candidates list while a formal system for leadership election was introduced.

Since the 1960s grassroots members have contested the party hierarchy, demanding a greater say in party matters, and Labour's landslide victory in 1997 convinced William Hague to conduct a major review of the relationships between the leadership, the management and the voluntary party. A set of proposals entitled *Fresh Future* gave members the right to vote in leadership elections and at the same time the three wings of the party were unified into a single structure with its own constitution and Board of Management.¹⁸

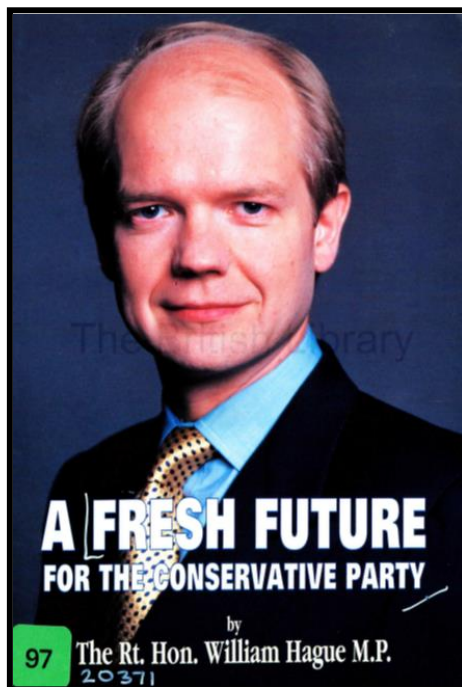


Figure 8: Front cover of *A Fresh Future*, 1997.

¹⁷ T. Bale, *Drivers of Party Change* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 17-20.

¹⁸ P. Webb, *The Modern British Party System* (London, 2000), pp. 195-8.

On the face of it, this major restructuring exercise gave the members more rights, but these were limited and the real outcome was that members were pulled closer under central control.

That upset a lot of people, the way the constitution was reorganised.¹⁹

The most obvious way in which CCHQ exerted more centralised control over the associations has been with the installation of computer systems to manage the collection of membership and electoral information. This move aimed to raise efficiency in associations that were struggling, but members no longer have routine access to all the data collected.²⁰ Recurrent technical problems have sometimes had serious consequences on associations' ability to perform basic tasks.

The national computer is not very good. It works appallingly badly and you can never know who's your membership.²¹

This is a computer system that has really caused us huge damage because it has sucked up effort, it has destroyed goodwill because information that has been put in has been lost so people think, 'What is the point of putting more information in?'²²

¹⁹ Interview with Dame Elizabeth Anson, Track 2, 0:36:50.

²⁰ Interview with Elizabeth Cable, Track 2, 0:04:28; Interview with Anonymous 3, Track 2, 0:28:23.

²¹ Anson, Track 2, 0:49:20.

²² Parnall, Track 2, 0:09:49.

Members recognise CCHQ may need to impose central constraints so that the party as a whole complies with its financial and political obligations,²³ but they are very dismissive of any perceived attempts by CCHQ to assert itself over local campaign strategy or candidate selection.

What they wanted us to do was read through these CVs and then come up to Central Office and meet with Pickles and his team and pick our list, and we said, 'Go jump in the lake, we're not doing that.' [...] We were very determined we were not going to be pushed around.²⁴

What is certain is that having fewer members affects how an association meets the costs of campaigning, running an office and employing an agent. Frustratingly, scarce campaign sources are seen to be concentrated in safe seats rather than invested in marginals,²⁵ and associations in safe opposition seats have very little assistance.²⁶

Those people should be on the front line and the front line is not sat in leafy safe seats in Sussex. It's in Brighton and in Hastings and seats we don't hold, giving structure and purpose to the organisation there.²⁷

²³ Caton, Track 1, 0:45:41.

²⁴ Worthy, Track 2, 0:46:40 and Track 2, 0:47:28.

²⁵ C. Pattie and R. Johnston, 'Still Talking, But Is Anyone Listening?: The Changing Face of Constituency Campaigning in Britain, 1997-2005', *Party Politics*, 15 (2009), p. 415.

²⁶ Caton, Track 2, 0:19:43.

²⁷ Ash Edwards, Track 2, 0:34:43.

I think probably what the party should be doing is putting somebody in the offices that haven't got MPs because they're kind of left to fend for themselves.²⁸

In an effort to improve the situation for marginals at election time, CCHQ is training campaign managers who can be employed on a less expensive and more flexible basis.

They've more decided to put in campaign managers into associations who are dedicated just to win those seats, get those MPs or candidates elected, and not so much of the all-embracing looking after the membership.²⁹

However any wholesale attempt to take central control of local campaigning does not impress associations that are functioning perfectly well and have the resources to run their branches as they wish.³⁰

I think they [CCHQ] are between a rock and a hard place because there are an awful lot of associations that are foundering. [...] The danger is always that it steps on the toes of the still stronger associations like Mole Valley that still have the ability locally to put their message out to the members. That sometimes jars with what the central party wants to do.³¹

²⁸ Interview with Ginny Heard, Track 2, 0:23:42.

²⁹ Heard, Track 1, 0:12:12.

³⁰ Interview with Andrew Landriani, Track 2, 0:00:45.

³¹ French, Track 2, 0:27:59.

Where membership is shrinking, branches are being forced to merge and associations to pool resources.³² Dwindling numbers leave members even more exposed to CCHQ interference or neglect, neither of which engenders a happy relationship.

A valued structural component?

A recurrent theme among members is to wonder how they are regarded by CCHQ or the leadership. Mims Davies believes party chairman Grant Shapps is concentrating on making activists feel valued,³³ yet many others feel patronised.

My impression that I have about the centre is that it's arrogant and it regards us as a bunch of dinosaurs and, you know, just takes us for granted. That's a very common feeling in the party.³⁴

To be honest I will be interested to see whether at any point I get any sort of letter from the party, anybody in the party, whether it's the association, the chairman, Jeremy [Hunt], David Cameron, some kind of thanks or something.³⁵

This sense of denigration was behind a row in 2013 between the grassroots and the centre when a member of Cameron's leadership team supposedly referred to activists as 'swivel-eyed loons'. Surprisingly none of the interviewees mentioned the incident, yet it exposed underlying tensions in the relationship. Keeping members happy can present the party with

³² Interview with Andrew Lynch, Track 2, 0:14:50; Anson, Track 2, 0:47:55.

³³ Interview with Mims Davies, Track 1, 0:36:28.

³⁴ Worthy, Track 2, 0:29:41.

³⁵ Interview with Jessica Parry, Track 2, 0:30:34.

a dilemma if members' views are out of line with mainstream opinion.³⁶ In supporting legislation to endorse same-sex marriage, Cameron lost substantial support among the grassroots to the extent that many left the party.

Quite a few of the absolute bed-rock supporters were very upset by that.³⁷

If he'd talked to any of his activists they'd have told him it would cause absolute chaos.³⁸



Figure 9: Modern Conservatives by Morten Mørland. Reproduced with permission.

³⁶ P. Norris, *Democratic Phoenix* (Cambridge, 2002,) p. 133.

³⁷ Interview with Richard Bourne, Track 1, 0:24:43.

³⁸ Worthy, Track 1, 0:32:19.

The majority of the party's residual members are older, more entrenched in their views, and believe that the party's future lies in maintaining its traditional structure and policies.

So as much as we say we want change and reinvigoration, talk to some of the associations and the reality is they don't really want that. They're quite happy managing in this little square box so it's very difficult for the party.³⁹

While there is a need for the party to adapt to the realities of declining membership and a more whimsical electorate, there is a reluctance to let go of what is comfortable and safe, what Harmel and Janda describe as 'the wall of resistance common to large organizations.'⁴⁰ Whatever organisational changes are made, they will affect how well the party fulfils its functions in the wider political system. Those functions are the subject of the final chapter.

³⁹ Davies, Track 1, 0:35:16.

⁴⁰ Harmel and Janda, 'An Integrated Theory', p. 261.

CHAPTER 4: THE WIDER IMPLICATIONS OF FALLING MEMBERSHIP

Parties are recognised as playing a fundamental role in representative democracies through the functions they perform. Dalton et al. describe these functions as simplifying the choices open to voters, educating citizens about policy options, mobilising citizens to participate in the political process, recruiting and training candidates for public office, articulating the interests of their supporters, aggregating diverse political interests into a coherent programme and organising the work of government.¹

While there is no doubt that membership figures are persistently falling for all the major British parties, it does not necessarily mean that the parties themselves are also in decline. Katz and Mair emphasised that it 'is necessary to differentiate notions of adaptation and change from notions of decline or failure,'² and Dalton et al. point out that the 'evidence for decline is too focused on the mass party ideal' rather than all party types.³

Parties have demonstrated an ability to adapt to changing circumstances, but Whiteley predicts that the continuing erosion of their voluntary bases will impact their relationship with civil society.⁴ Mair paints a picture of democracy being stripped down as it

¹ R. Dalton, D. Farrell and I. McAllister, *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage: How Parties Organize Democracy* (Oxford, 2011), p. 6.

² R. Katz and P. Mair, 'Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party', *Party Politics*, 1 (1995), p. 5.

³ Dalton et al., *Political Parties*, p. 14.

⁴ P. Whiteley, 'Is the party over? The decline of party activism and membership across the democratic world', *Party Politics*, 17 (2011), p. 22.

accommodates parties that are failing in ‘their capacity to engage ordinary citizens’.⁵ By having fewer members, are parties less effective in performing these functions?

Getting people to vote

Party members play a crucial role in an effective democratic process by working to maximise the number of people who take part in elections. Electoral turnout is used as one of the most common indicators of the health of a democracy;⁶ the greater the number of voters, the greater the legitimacy imparted to those they elect to govern.



Figure 10: Voting. © The Electoral Commission.

Turnout in British general elections has followed a downward trend from 84 per cent in 1950 to 65 per cent in 2010, with the lowest being 59 per cent in 2001.⁷ Low turnout can conveniently be ascribed to apathy, such as in a 1924 campaign leaflet: ‘Apathy is a much

⁵ P. Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London, 2013), p. 3 and p. 16.

⁶ P. Norris, *Democratic Phoenix* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 15.

⁷ D. Denver, C. Carman and R. Johns, *Elections and Voters in Britain*, p. 31.

more destructive and dangerous opponent than Socialism';⁸ 90 years later Andrew Lynch sees it as still being the biggest enemy.⁹

It's got worse over the years [...] where people are so not interested now. There's not a lot of difference between the three major parties, people don't feel that they're listened to in any way, shape or form and they feel, 'It doesn't matter which party we vote for, it won't affect my life'.¹⁰

However there are other demographic forces at play.

Of course the people who are voting are not youngsters, it's people of my age. [...] I think that youngsters are not voting, or they don't know what they're voting for.¹¹

There are parts of Claygate, the wealthier areas [...] they're all Conservatives and they don't vote. [...] They're just rich and complacent.¹²

Turnout is an indicator of party effort, with the whole structure of local campaigning designed to get the vote out rather than to convert.¹³ Turnout is greater in a close contest such as the recent referendum on Scottish independence. When there is a greater

⁸ *The Norwich Conservative Elector*, 1924, British Library W.P. 4435/2.

⁹ Interview with Andrew Lynch, Track 1, 0:28:55.

¹⁰ Lynch, Track 1, 0:25:41.

¹¹ Interview with Anonymous 4, Track 1, 0:34:01.

¹² Interview with Ken Worthy, Track 1, 0:54:53 and Track 1, 0:55:28.

¹³ Dalton et al., *Political Parties*, p. 59; Interview with Elizabeth Cable, Track 1, 0:23:20.

perception that each vote matters, activism increases as do the turnout figures.¹⁴ If the election appears to be a foregone conclusion, such as the anticipated Labour victory in 2001, there is less incentive for people to cast their vote, proven in the dire turnout figures.¹⁵

I think it's much easier to get people to be active when they sense they're about to overthrow somebody who's already in power. I think once you're in power people perhaps get a bit complacent or lose the urge to do it.¹⁶

When it comes to actually mobilising the vote, the internet and social media have yet to feature heavily in British elections,¹⁷ so parties and their activists are still needed to achieve this. However they are finding it more difficult to mobilise a disenchanted public and pin down floating voters.¹⁸ With more parties to choose between, voters' options are less defined than when it was a clear-cut divide between Right and Left. Citizens are disorientated in this new political landscape from which the familiar signposts of partisan affiliation have gone.

¹⁴ Norris, *Democratic Phoenix*, p. 70.

¹⁵ P. Whiteley, *Political Participation in Britain: The Decline and Revival of Civic Culture* (New York, 2012), p. 55.

¹⁶ Interview with Richard Bourne, Track 1, 0:18:42.

¹⁷ J. Aldrich, R. Gibson, M. Cantijoch and T. Konitzer, 'Getting Out the Vote in the Social Media Era: Are Digital Tools Changing the Extent, Nature and Impact of Party Contacting in Elections?'. Paper presented at a meeting of the American Political Science Association (Chicago, 2013), p. 2.

¹⁸ D. Farrell, 'Political Parties in a Changing Campaign Environment', in R. Katz and W. Crotty eds., *Handbook of Party Politics* (London, 2005), p. 122.

Up until this election [European elections, May 2014] people were much clearer [...] on how they were going to vote. [...] This time there were an awful lot of people that said possibly.¹⁹

Maybe there are fewer people who are willing to pledge a permanent allegiance with a particular party, which kind of forces the parties to have to work much harder.²⁰

As the Conservatives have moved to the centre, so UKIP has taken possession of the far-right position they vacated. Interviewees are conscious that the brash promises of the new kid on the block are tempting to Conservative supporters and members,²¹ with many casting protest votes for UKIP in the 2014 European elections.

UKIP has had the great success of picking up the dissenting vote. [...] The position that you will have after the next general election is that there will be a five-way split amongst the electorate.²²

However some Eurosceptics like Ken Worthy have realised that it is the Conservatives rather than UKIP who offer the most realistic chance of renegotiating EU membership.²³ When it

¹⁹ Cable, Track 1, 0:31:08.

²⁰ Interview with Jessica Parry, Track 2, 0:18:09.

²¹ P. Webb and T. Bale, 'Why Do Tories Defect to UKIP? Conservative Party Members and the Temptations of the Populist Radical Right', *Political Studies* (2014). <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291467-9248/earlyview>> [accessed 11 September 2014]; Interview with Mims Davies, Track 1, 0:15:57.

²² Interview with Andrew Landriani, Track 2, 0:15:01.

²³ Worthy, Track 1, 0:34:43 and Track 1, 0:17:35; Anonymous 4, Track 1, 0:33:41.

comes to 2015, interviewees are confident that most of the protest votes will return to the Conservatives.²⁴

When people say that 'We voted UKIP in the European elections and we will continue to vote UKIP', I don't think they are necessarily telling the truth because the whole point about UKIP is to scare the Tories into doing something about Europe. [...] You would naturally tell a pollster that you were going to vote for them again because that's the threat.²⁵

Unlike the main parties, UKIP and the Green Party are experiencing membership growth,²⁶ and their increasing support means that in 2015 parties will have to fight even harder to win enough votes to form a majority government.

Helping voters decide

Parties are expected to educate the voting public about the choices on offer.²⁷ An example of this requirement is given by Elizabeth Cable.

There were quite a few people that said that they didn't understand the [European] election and they wished they'd had more information about the

²⁴ Interview with Anonymous 3, Track 1, 0:48:30.

²⁵ Worthy, Track 3, 0:15:34.

²⁶ F. McGuinness, 'Membership of UK Political Parties', *House of Commons Library* (London, 2012), p. 13. <<http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05125>> [accessed 11 September 2014].

²⁷ Dalton et al., *Political parties*, p. 130.

election. I think that's something we—as a party—next time have got to be much clearer on just, actually, how do you vote?²⁸

When people do not understand an election, they do not bother to vote, demonstrated quite clearly by the 2012 elections for Police and Crime Commissioners when less than 20 per cent of the electorate voted. Not one interviewee mentioned those elections, a sign that their disinterest could have had a detrimental effect on turnout.

The choices on offer need to be clear, since people consider voting to be less relevant when there is a lack of distinction between the ideologies and policies of different parties.²⁹ This is a situation that is easily recognisable in Britain at both the local and national level.

It is very difficult for people who aren't involved in politics, like your normal voter, to disentangle what the Conservative policies are [...] and now we've got a coalition as well. [...] It's really muddied the waters so some people are even less interested.³⁰

Regardless of what party you represent, you can only set a 2 per cent increase in council tax at the most, then clearly there's no differential there in terms of what the parties are able to do. [...] To a certain extent you're voting for who's perceived to be the best administrator.³¹

²⁸ Cable, Track 1, 0:32:08.

²⁹ Denver et al., *Elections and Voters*, p. 51.

³⁰ Lynch, Track 1, 0:26:19.

³¹ Interview with Andrew French, Track 1, 0:29:32 and 0:30:28.

As party policies converge, voters are making their decisions on perceptions of a party's performance, short-term issues, and candidate personality. Many interviewees believe that voters seemed to make decisions based on the candidate rather than the party,³² and this is seen as another reason why turnout drops in the European elections.

What convinces people is actually the personality and actions of the candidate.

We have a guy now who is very, very active, does go out. He's completely changed our newsletters so they're very, very detailed in terms of what's happening locally—they ignore national politics.³³

That's why the Euro elections are so difficult because you have to vote for the party and not the person. People don't like voting for the party, they don't like it, they like to vote for the person.³⁴

A more fragmented party system appears to make voters' choices less relevant. As the general election of 2010 proved, the British party system is moving to one that is characterised by a higher number of parties taking a share of the vote and an increased likelihood of a coalition government.³⁵ In these circumstances voters' choices at the ballot box become inconsequential because they have no bearing on coalition negotiations. Similarly with more parties in the arena, the incentive to join any of them as a member is reduced since it is less likely that any one party can achieve convincing electoral success.³⁶

³² Interview with Dame Elizabeth Anson, Track 2, 0:36:05.

³³ Worthy, Track 1, 0:56:56.

³⁴ Anson, Track 2, 0:35:59.

³⁵ P. Webb, *The Modern British Party System* (London, 2000), p. 2.

³⁶ Whiteley, 'Is the party over?' p. 33.

Promoting trust in the system

Grassroots members provide a crucial link in the democratic chain, yet they inhabit what Scarrow and Webb call a 'critical gap between popular disillusionment with parties and parties' de facto political dominance.'³⁷ Many voters have lost faith in party politics with the sleaze and expenses' scandals that have blown up since the 1980s; according to the latest Democracy Index from the Economist Intelligence Unit, less than one fifth of west Europeans trust political parties.³⁸ This attitude is expressed on the doorstep in an increasing disenchantment with politicians and their work.

People are way more cynical than they used to be, and I think what I get struck by as a local councillor is the almost lack of respect, I think, for the nature of the role.³⁹

There is a feeling that politicians are all liars and they tell a lot of rubbish and they don't keep their promises and so forth, which I think is really rather sad in a democracy because what people are saying is we don't believe in the way we govern ourselves anymore.⁴⁰

Parties need to shore up voters' confidence, yet falling party membership is both a symptom of and a contributing factor to popular disaffection with party politics. At the very

³⁷ S. Scarrow and P. Webb, 'Assessing Party Organizational Change: Participation, Representation and Power', paper presented at a meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 2013, p. 4.

³⁸ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy index 2012: Democracy at a standstill* (London, 2013), p. 17.

³⁹ French, Track 2, 0:09:17.

⁴⁰ Landriani, Track 1, 0:35:49.

time that parties need to forge stronger links with the electorate, the mechanism for doing so is being pushed to breaking point with fewer activists on the doorstep. As previously outlined (see p. 30), nothing compares to face-to-face contact, and a visible presence in the community builds trust between the party and the residents.

Citizens' attitudes and beliefs about their own political system and their role in it are crucial to the effectiveness of democratic politics.⁴¹ The results of the most recent British Social Attitudes survey found that people in Britain consider it important to live in a democracy yet the current political system does not always live up to their expectations. This perceived deficit in their own democratic system may be a contributing factor to political disengagement.⁴²

Vehicles for participation

There are a number of explanations why people are drawn to political participation. There are those whose socioeconomic background has given them a leaning towards voluntary activity and a belief that they can make a difference. Another set are people who have a healthy bank of social capital, operating within a strong network of bonds built on mutual trust such as in community groups or voluntary associations. The third set are those who are naturally interested in politics. These groups have then traditionally been mobilised through agencies such as political parties, trade unions, and religious organisations.⁴³

⁴¹ Whiteley, *Political Participation*, p. 15.

⁴² A. Park, C. Bryson and J. Curtice eds., *British Social Attitudes: the 31st Report* (London, 2014), p. 14. <<http://www.bsa-31.natcen.ac.uk/read-the-report/democracy/conclusions.aspx>> [accessed 21 August 2014].

⁴³ Whiteley, 'Is the party over?', pp. 27-9.

There are units of our society to which we are bonded where we make a journey together and that journey takes us to a place which we could never have achieved by ourselves.⁴⁴

Whenever you get anyone who is, let's say, community minded or socially minded, you do tend to see the same old faces, mine included, turning up because people who like to sort of help and volunteer tend to help and volunteer on two or three things, not just one.⁴⁵

I was very lost because I'd been involved with the church in Isleworth and the church in Colnbrook wasn't really what I wanted if you know what I mean. [...] I felt I wanted an outlet and I joined the Conservative party.⁴⁶

However the way in which people participate in politics is changing as individuals have gravitated towards supporting single issues.

Whereas probably 20 or 30 years ago, or even probably less than that, people would have attempted to make change through a political party, in practice now what you'll get is the rise of single issue pressure groups.⁴⁷

Such trends in political activism have been explained as reflecting changes in society; rising standards of living and greater educational opportunities have encouraged citizens to

⁴⁴ Interview with Simon Parnall, Track 1, 0:59:17.

⁴⁵ Interview with Ian Nelson, Track 2, 0:07:21.

⁴⁶ Interview with Joyce Stoker, Track 1, 0:01:08 and Track 1, 0:01:25.

⁴⁷ French, Track 1, 0:38:32.

develop more active ways of engagement that bypass partisan politics and do not require the investment in terms of money or time that is associated with joining a party. These might be direct action, boycotting consumer products, signing an e-petition, joining a protest rally or commenting on an internet political forum.⁴⁸ The youngest interviewee chose to channel her political energies at university into running campaigns for a charity rather than joining the party,⁴⁹ while Christopher Higson believes that by adding his comments to online political discussions, he has the opportunity to influence other people's opinions.⁵⁰

In 2002 Norris wrote that 'indicators point more strongly to the evolution, transformation and reinvention of civic engagement than to its premature death.'⁵¹ However some of the most easily tracked forms of participation—electoral turnout and party membership—are still declining and there is evidence that the other forms of engagement described above are also suffering.⁵² Parties are competing with a variety of other movements to win committed supporters from what is a diminishing pool of politically engaged citizens. They have fewer people to help them fulfil their functions but in the absence of an alternative to representative democracy, parties are needed—with or without their members—to make that democracy work.

⁴⁸ Norris, *Democratic Phoenix*, p. 19.

⁴⁹ Anonymous, Track 1, 0:09:42.

⁵⁰ Interview with Christopher Higson, Track 2, 0:19:27.

⁵¹ Norris, *Democratic Phoenix*, p. 4.

⁵² Whiteley, *Political Participation*, p. 39.

CONCLUSION

By speaking to members about their experiences of belonging to the Conservative party, this study has sought to understand the mechanisms associated with falling party membership and the potential consequences for the Conservative party and the system in which it operates.

Oral history interviewing has proved to be a valuable approach to this subject, revealing details about the trend when official party literature on the subject is not available. The interviewees' comments verify that both the supply of potential members and the party's demand for them has dwindled. Descriptions of recent changes in campaigning methods, candidate selection, recruitment efforts and constituency activities point to a party that no longer works on the basis of having a large volunteer army. While activists may call for a return to the glory days, the recordings do not contain evidence to suggest that the party's vision of the future includes cultivating a more robust membership.

The interviewees recognise that social media offers the promise of yet more diversification and innovation in campaign strategies. However they assert that there is no substitute for face-to-face contact in promoting candidates and mobilising the vote, corroborating research that shows local efforts pay dividends in elections.¹ There is some evidence that associations are using supporters for tasks that in the past have fallen to paid-up members.

¹ C. Pattie and R. Johnston, 'Still Talking, But Is Anyone Listening?: The Changing Face of Constituency Campaigning in Britain, 1997-2005', *Party Politics* (2009), pp. 411–34.

CONCLUSION

The interviewees make no reference to any recent concerted party effort to rejuvenate local recruitment. Direct-marketing strategies initiated centrally have not necessarily been followed through by local associations, and a preference to continue running predictable and out-dated social events limits the local party's appeal to younger generations. There is agreement among interviewees that recruitment of new members tends to be through personal contacts. Many observe a trend that many new members only join because they are interested in public office, suggesting that constituency associations could evolve into councillors' clubs. With a greater proportion of core activists progressing to serve on the council, they have less time to spend on party affairs. Consequently associations can struggle to maintain the level of activism needed to make a difference locally.

There is no doubt how membership decline and subsequent branch closures have affected the emotional benefits of belonging. Some interviewees no longer enjoy themselves, missing the camaraderie and fun that was part of being involved with a busy association. The efficiencies gained through computerisation mean that some members no longer feel needed or valued.

They also describe how campaigning is not so straightforward now that the battle is no longer fought between Right and Left, and that the emergence of a multi-party system forces party activists to work harder for less tangible results. The interviewees offer insight into voting behaviour with the reiterated evaluation that in local and parliamentary elections most people are voting for a candidate, not the party.

CONCLUSION

The interviewees' assessments adhere to the view that falling membership has less to do with the Conservative party itself and is more due to societal trends whereby voters are less attached to any one party and increasingly disillusioned with party politics in general. Whatever the reasons, the party can no longer bask in an aura of popularity that came with having a large membership, and the current level of members has a bearing on how it may be perceived by the electorate. A party that fails to attract a committed following can be portrayed as one that lacks legitimacy. The open primaries described by the interviewees are a sign that the party recognises it needs to address the issue of legitimacy.

The testimonies gathered in this project present an insight into belonging to the Conservatives and the workings of the party, but they cannot offer a true reflection of membership as a whole. These opinions are those of a very small group within a very large organisation, and the group comes from a particular geographic area in which Conservative support can nearly always be taken for granted. What must also be taken into account are the interviewees' motivations for taking part in the project, and whether they had a particular image of the party that they wanted to put across. There is also the inevitable regret on the part of the interviewer for not posing certain questions. Perhaps more could have been asked to clarify how members feel about the party hierarchy and their rights, the presidentialisation of British politics and preparation for the general election in 2015.

Nevertheless, the recorded interviews express some of the key issues related to membership decline and its effects on the Conservatives. They highlight the Conservative party's need for people to provide face-to-face contact with the electorate, and how in the case of candidate selection and membership recruitment, those people need to be

CONCLUSION

committed members rather than peripheral supporters. They contain evidence of how membership decline affects an association's ability to campaign and they point to a current lack of central investment in member recruitment.

The findings suggest that the Conservative party recognises it needs a certain level of membership to perform specific functions within the political system, yet that it is failing to find an effective way to maintain that level as tribal allegiances disintegrate. The anticipation of a closely fought contest in 2015 may bring an upsurge in membership, but then again potential members may decide the chances of outright victory are too slim to bother. What influences people to join political parties has moved beyond the parties' control, so to rely on a stable membership is becoming a risky strategy. Formal members may fall by the wayside, but technology and peripheral supporters can be used instead for much of their work. From what members say, as the supply of members dries up, the Conservative party machine is gradually converting to run on a different kind of fuel.

APPENDIX I: QUESTION SCHEDULE

Early life

Where did you grow up?

What was your mother's occupation? Father's?

Was the family religious?

Did politics play a part in family life?

Were members of your family members of their local association?

What newspapers were read in your home?

Where did you go to school?

Personal

Is your partner involved in politics?

What newspapers do you read? TV news? Blogs?

With whom do you tend to discuss politics?

How open are you about your political allegiances and activities with friends and family?

Early political influences

How did you first become interested in politics?

Did anyone encourage you or influence you?

Were your grandparents or parents inspired by anyone in particular?

Did family influence your views?

Did you go into higher education? Were you involved in student politics?

Career background

What was your first job?

Main occupations during working life?

First political involvement

What motivated you to join? When?

Have you ever belonged to another political party?

Have you ever left the party?

Have you ever been tempted to vote for another party?

Activity as a member

What has been your main activity as a member?

Do you consider yourself an active member?

What are your memories of electioneering?

Any particular campaigns or elections?

What political issues matter to you?

How important were local issues to you in relation to national issues?

Do you think it was the party or the individual that was most important in a campaign?

Do you feel that associations are run along the best lines?

What is the most important role of the association?

How do you assess your personal contribution to electoral success?

Does activism matter in a safe seat?

Do you feel campaign efforts have a direct result on outcome?

Did you ever stand for election as a councillor?

What was the most interesting period for you as an activist?

Has the level of community participation in politics changed over the years?

In your experience, have the attitudes of local people changed towards politicians?

Has the internet changed electioneering?

Are you currently on any official bodies: school governor, health authority etc.?

Are you a member of a group within the party?

Are you a member of other national groups eg. WI, National Trust, Rotarians etc.?

Trade union member?

Did you ever feel things needed to change in the party? Did you voice that?

Should the party do more to recruit new members?

Your biggest achievement as a member?

Political culture

What roles did class, sexuality or race play in constituency politics?

What roles did women play in constituency politics?

Do women face particular challenges in the south-east or in the Conservatives?

Experience if an agent/officer

Day to day tasks as an agent or officer?

Did your role change over time?

What were the challenges?

What was relationship like with your MP?

What are your views on the selection process for candidates?

How did your office fundraise?

What is the relationship like with the local media?

What kinds of people are members of the party locally?

Has community participation in politics changed over the years?

Your biggest achievement?

Experience if a councillor

Motivation?

Ordinary day?

Did you hold ward surgeries?

Biggest challenges? Interesting period?

Did you ever stand for election as a parliamentary candidate?

Issues that you have been passionate about?

Was lack of party finances ever an issue?

Has the level of community participation in politics changed over the years?

In your experience, have local people's attitudes changed towards politicians?

Your biggest achievement in political service?

Party organisation

What do think of the party organisation?

What is the purpose of the association?

Are there aspects of the party structure that you think need to be improved?

What is your view of processes such as leadership elections, candidate elections?

Recruitment drives? Does the party offer enough incentive, do enough?

Is it becoming more difficult to find candidates for local elections?

Parliamentary party

Do you trust MPs? Do they represent constituents fairly, conveying opinions to leadership?

Government

What is your opinion of our system of government?

Ideology

Where would you put yourself on the Tory spectrum?

What are the issues that are most important to you?

Have you admiration for any particular Tory leader?

Civic participation

How do you feel about voluntary activity?

Do you feel membership and interest in political activity in this country has declined?

Do you think volunteering is on the decline?

Has Cameron's 'Big Society' had any impact?

Markers/events/people

Thatcher? Cameron?

UKIP?

Coalition? Same-sex marriage? EU referendum?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

APPENDIX II: INTERVIEWEES' ROLES

Name	Age bracket	Roles undertaken
Anonymous	20-40	Constituency intern
Anonymous 2	20-40	Constituency administrator
Anonymous 3	60-80	Association officer, councillor
Anonymous 4	60-80	Member of women's section
Dame Elizabeth Anson	80-90	Councillor
Jonathan Ash Edwards	20-40	Association officer, councillor
Richard Bourne	60-80	Association officer, branch chairman
Elizabeth Cable	60-80	Councillor
John Caton	60-80	Association officer
Mims Davies	20-40	Councillor
Andrew French	40-60	Association officer, councillor
Ginny Heard	40-60	Agent, councillor
Christopher Higson	60-80	Member
Andrew Landriani	40-60	Association officer, councillor
Andrew Lynch	40-60	Branch chairman, councillor
Ian Nelson	60-80	Member
Edward Norman	20-40	Agent
Simon Parnall	40-60	Association officer, councillor
Jessica Parry	20-40	Councillor
Joyce Stoker	80-90	Association officer, member of women's section
Ken Worthy	60-80	Association officer, branch chairman

APPENDIX III: ACCESS TO AUDIO CLIPS

Clips of the excerpts from the recorded interviews can be heard by opening Windows Media Player and playing the relevant files on the attached memory stick.

They are also available to download from this link: <http://1drv.ms/1prM0IG>.

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