Article

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The expanding party universe: Patterns of partisan engagement in Australia and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Although membership is declining, parties continue to perform roles central to democratic governance in modern societies. Given this seeming paradox, we suggest that partisan identification, in complementing studies of formal membership, is a promising way of assessing the strength of parties' democratic linkage. Using data from an original survey of voters in Australia and the United Kingdom, we analyse the participatory and demographic profiles of party supporters. We show that there are significant differences between supporters and those not committed to any party, as well as between supporters based on the strength of their party identification, substantiating the idea that parties can be conceptualized as a series of concentric circles of increasing engagement but declining representativeness. Stronger supporters are more likely to engage with parties online, volunteer and donate, but are older, more likely to be male and less likely to be foreign-born. Our findings have important implications for democratic practice as parties seek to expand and rejuvenate their networks of affiliates.

Keywords

Australia, participation, representation, supporters, United Kingdom

In recent years, party organization research has shifted from a primary concern with the characteristics, activities and attitudes of party members to analysing a broader category of party supporters.[1] If parties are vehicles for democratic linkage, providing both representative and participatory opportunities to link citizens and the state (Lawson, 1988: 14), this shift makes intuitive sense as levels of formal membership decline, yet parties continue to play significant roles in representative democracy and governance. The shift also reflects ongoing organizational adaptations undertaken by parties to extend participation in what might have once been considered internal decision-making processes, such as leadership selections, to the public at large (Cross et al., 2016; Gauja, 2017; Scarrow, 2015).

This article moves beyond the notion of formal party membership to analyse the demographic profiles and partisan activities of party supporters (i.e. those who identify with a party) in two democracies: Australia and the United Kingdom. We argue that the strength of a person's party identification is an appropriate analytical lens through which to evaluate the participatory and representative link between parties and the polity, complementing conventional approaches that focus on formal membership. Building on Duverger's (1964) metaphor of political parties as concentric circles, we expect that as party support increases, citizens become more engaged in partisan activities beyond the act of simply voting – for example, through social media interaction, donating and volunteering.

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Our analysis is based on an original survey fielded to a representative sample of voters in Australia and the United Kingdom. We show that there are significant differences between party supporters and those not committed to any particular party, both in demographics and their level of engagement (party membership, membership of other groups, political participation, party activism and future party activism). By demonstrating that partisan engagement extends beyond the boundaries of formal membership, and beyond the act of voting, our findings have important implications for parties seeking to rejuvenate their base in the context of membership decline.

The article proceeds in five sections. We begin by locating our research within recent studies of partisan supporters, which have built on a rich collection of party membership surveys. We then outline our theoretical framework, research design and data. Developing the idea that political parties provide a link between state and society, which involves both representative and participatory dimensions, we analyse the demographic and participatory profiles of party supporters. We conclude by discussing some of the broader implications of our research findings for studies of party organization and the health of party democracy.

Understanding partisan activity: From members to supporters

The study of party members has been a central element of party democracy scholarship. Members are important because they provide legitimacy and resources to their party, determine policy priorities, aid the process of political recruitment and create a representative link to the electorate (Scarrow, 2015: 102). While studies of party membership have provided important insights into why, and how, citizens engage with parties, they sit within a normative conception of democracy that sees membership-based parties as central to the operation of representative politics (Allern and Pedersen, 2007: 70; van Haute, 2011: 14–16; Whiteley et al., 1994: 7). As almost all of this research relies on self-reported data from political parties as to who 'counts' as a party member (Ponce and Scarrow, 2016: 680), interest in membership has been concerned primarily with the traits and activities of those individuals who appear on parties' membership lists, with limited consideration of the significance of relying on this formal status and the scale of participatory activity that it captures.

Scholars have, however, started to acknowledge more fluid conceptions of party membership and shifting participatory trends. For example, Ponce and Scarrow (2016) argue the benefits of using 'subjective' measures of membership (i.e. self-reported partisan behaviour from surveys such as the European Social Survey and the International Social Survey Program) rather than 'objective' figures provided by political parties in establishing a comparative agenda for party membership studies that can be used in countries without mass membership traditions, and as suitable for analysing the impact of new forms of party affiliation. In recent years, political parties have undertaken organizational reforms and created participatory opportunities that challenge the very notion of formal party membership, prompting the recognition that forms of partisan affiliation beyond formal membership matter (Gauja, 2015; Scarrow, 2015). Parties, for example, have encouraged the participation of non-members in policy development, as well as leadership and candidate selection through primaries (see e.g. Cross et al., 2016; Sandri et al., 2015). In Australia, the Labor and National parties have experimented with 'community pre-selections', an open candidate selection model copied from the UK Conservatives (Gauja, 2017). They have created multiple modes of affiliation, many of which aim to harness online channels for participation and communication (Kosiara-Pedersen et al., 2017; Scarrow, 2015: 135–145). UK Labour, for instance, established a network of registered supporters and allowed for policy participation through online consultative forums (Gauja, 2017). In some instances, parties have even set thresholds for membership so low that a distinctive category of party member becomes meaningless (Bolleyer et al., 2015). In light of these developments, an exclusive focus on formal party members may not reveal a complete picture of partisan activity in contemporary society (Fisher et al., 2014: 77; Webb et al., 2017: 64).

Several studies have extended the analysis of partisan activities beyond party members to supporters. The primary intellectual interest here has been comparing these two groups. Studies have found that supporters are an important source of labour during election campaigns, although members are more likely to engage in campaign activities (Fisher et al., 2014; Webb et al., 2017) and, overall, are more politically active (Hooghe and Kölln, 2020). Party members differ from supporters in some of their demographic characteristics: They are more likely to be better educated, male and radical (Faucher and Boy, 181–182; Webb et al., 2017: 67), with less variation seen between inactive members and party supporters (Gauja and Jackson, 2016).

These studies highlight the importance of recalibrating our approach to party organization away from one based on rigid membership boundaries towards achieving a more dynamic picture of parties comprised of various sites of affiliation. Although this approach is certainly not new – Duverger (1964) and Key (1958) distinguished between different categories of party followers more than half a century ago – it has particular resonance today given the pervasive downward trend in 'formal' party membership (see e.g. Poguntke et al., 2016: 667; van Haute et al., 2017) and the organizational permeability noted above (Bolleyer, 2009; Katz and Mair, 2009). This decline is often

characterized as reflecting membership organizations in crisis, rather than prompting a re-examination of the concepts of membership and partisan engagement – and whether the theoretical and empirical indicators that we rely on are still suitable.

Theoretical framework and research design

Looking beyond party membership and understanding the socio-demographic characteristics and participatory activities of supporters gives us a complementary view of the 'health' of partisan engagement and party politics today. We conceptualize the party organization broadly – as a series of concentric circles that carry different 'types' of affiliates who differ in their partisan activities and the strength of their commitment to the party (Duverger, 1964). Duverger distinguished between militants, members, supporters and electors in his concentric circles model, but also acknowledged the fluidity of these categories, suggesting that while a party supporter can be distinguished from a member by virtue of the fact that she 'remains outside the organisation and the community it forms', as soon as that difference is examined more closely 'it blurs and at times disappears' (1964: 62). And as Susan Scarrow warns, the consequences of adopting too rigid distinctions 'obscures some of the most interesting aspects of party life: the movement between, and overlap among, these circles' (2015: 28; see also Lisi and Cancela, 2019: 391).

To avoid perpetuating the formal boundaries of party organization in our analysis, we adopt the metaphor of parties as concentric circles but use the notion of party identification (rather than militants, members, etc.) to identify different 'types' of party adherents, which we term supporters. Supporters are identified by the following questions. First, respondents were asked, 'generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as . . . ', with a number of different party names available to choose from. Second, those who selected a party were asked: 'and would you call yourself a very strong, fairly strong, fairly weak or very weak supporter of that party?' Based on the common formulation and responses, we are left with two types of supporter: 'strong supporters' and 'regular supporters', as well as a third category: the 'non-committed'.

As a tool for identifying types of supporters, party identification is advantageous as it transcends traditional organizational boundaries and is independent of membership altogether. It is a measure used widely in national election studies and surveys of participation, enhancing the comparative potential of the research design. Furthermore, previous research has shown a link between the strength of partisanship and campaign mobilization, particularly voting (see e.g. Dalton, 2000: 21; Dalton et al., 2000: 54–59), suggesting it might also be relevant to understanding a broader range of partisan activities, particularly those traditionally thought to be within the purview of formal members.

To investigate the model of concentric circles of affiliation that transcend party boundaries, we analyse whether there are any discernible differences between party supporters and the non-committed, and whether there are differences between regular and strong supporters. As our aim is to move away from pre-assumed categories of affiliation, we are not concerned with examining the differences between members and supporters.

We compare the *socio-demographic characteristics* of our three groups because they tell us something of the representative capacities of political parties. One of the most consistent findings of party membership studies is that party members do not reflect the broader population: They are disproportionately male, middle-aged, middle-class and better educated. This disconnection has largely been attributed to the effect of resources and specific individual characteristics (sex, age, education, income, etc.) on affiliation and levels of party activity (see van Haute and Gauja, 2015: 7). We therefore expect the demographic characteristics of strong party supporters to differ from regular supporters and the non-committed. Strong party supporters should be older, more likely to be male, born in Australia/the United Kingdom, better educated and of a higher socio-economic standing. However, a more representative body of party supporters has positive implications for the capacity of parties to function as policy conduits and play an ambassadorial role in the community.

Our motivation for studying the *political engagement* of party supporters and the non-committed relates to the participatory element of party linkage. Here we aim to take the debate on participation further than just party members – to evaluate the types of participatory profiles observed beyond the formal boundaries of the party organization. We study five dimensions of engagement: party membership, other group membership, political participation, party activism and future party activism. We expect overall levels of political activism and party activism to be higher among strong supporters, when compared to regular supporters and the non-committed. There are three reasons for this.

First, strong identification with a political party adds psychological and social network incentives to other, pre-existing incentives for political engagement (e.g. political dissatisfaction) (Finkel and Opp, 1991). For instance, a strong identifier will want to adhere to the norms and behaviours in their peer-group and will likely be more receptive to party elites' call to action than non-committed individuals. Second, previous research has shown that ideological congruence between members and parties is positively related to degrees of activism (Lisi and Cancela, 2019; Polk and Kölln, 2017; van Haute and Carty, 2012). Insofar as strength of party identification taps into a similar (albeit perceived) connection between parties and their adherents,

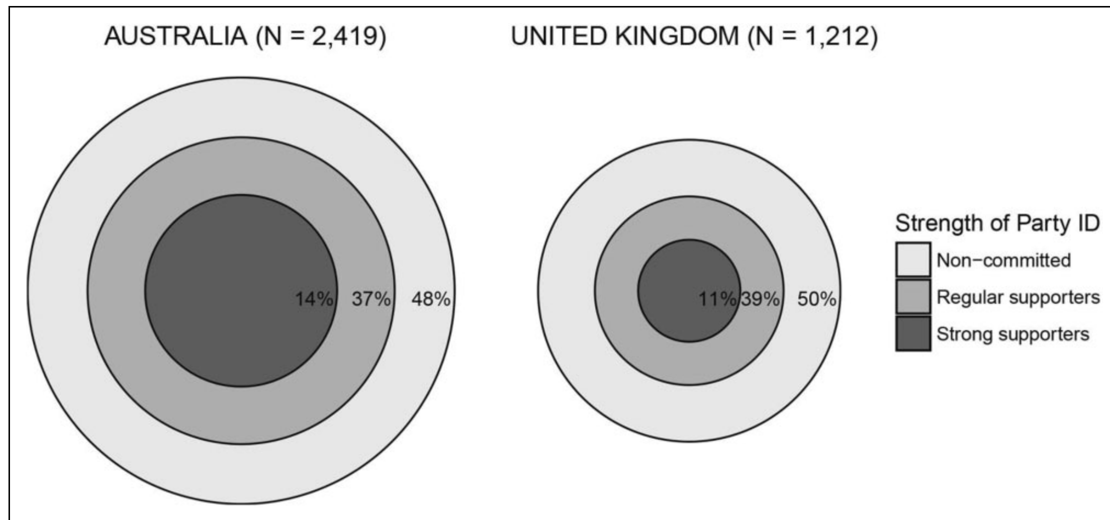

Figure 1. Distribution of party supporters and non-committed in Australia and the United Kingdom.
Note: N = 3,631. Circles drawn to scale, with area of each band = N of respective group.

we would expect our findings to run in the same direction. Third, if the demographic profile of party supporters is indeed of one of older, more educated and more resourceful citizens, then the standard expectation of the resource mobilization thesis would lead us to believe that these citizens show higher levels of political engagement across the board (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). In sum, we should therefore expect levels of political engagement – engagement with parties, and general engagement – to increase with the strength of party identification.

Of course, a host of contextual factors simultaneously drive variation in the strength of party identification as well as variation in political engagement at the aggregate level. For instance, majoritarian electoral systems and their tendency towards two-party systems may increase the overall strength of party identification (Bowler et al., 1994), highly institutionalized party systems may provide the basis for overall stronger party identification (Dalton and Weldon, 2007) and so forth. Differences in the demographic and participatory profiles of party supporters could easily be artefacts of those contextual factors in the specific case. At the very least, we expect that any differences between individuals of differing levels of party identification would remain stable across political systems with very similar macro-institutional settings. We therefore, include two such cases in our analysis. Australia and the United Kingdom are similar in terms of the electoral system, the degree of party system institutionalization or party de-alignment, comparable long-term rates of formal membership decline, as well as a large number of other institutional variables, including minimal legal restrictions on the participatory opportunities available to non-members. Including both countries in the study thus allows us to hold these aggregate intervening factors constant and focus on the individual-level differences between party supporters and non-committed citizens. We should expect to see little variation between Australia and the United Kingdom, and if that is indeed the case, our argument is strengthened.

Data

Our analysis of party engagement is based on responses to an online survey of a representative sample of eligible voters in Australia and the United Kingdom, fielded in February 2016. Respondents were drawn from a large panel recruited by international market research firm IPSOS, and their responses were anonymized.[2] The questionnaires asked respondents their opinion about their party identification, strength of political party support, political engagement (partisan and non-partisan), and their socio-demographic profile (see the Online Appendix). While surveys have been widely used to ascertain the partisan engagement and characteristics of party members, few studies have examined these questions among individuals outside the formal party organization (van Haute, 2011: 8–10). The survey is therefore novel in its orientation, drawing on findings from other literatures in the fields of political participation, communication and social movement studies that incorporate broader notions of participation and engagement and reflect, for example, technological advances and evolving forms of political citizenship (Faucher, 2015).

The sample contained 3,631 valid responses: 2,419 from Australia and 1,212 from the United Kingdom (see Figure 1). Of those, 49% have been classified as 'non-committed' (expressing fairly weak or very weak support for any political party, were uncertain or explicitly professed that they support 'no party').[3] A further 39% expressed

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of party supporters and non-committed voters in Australia and the United Kingdom.

	Non-committed (% 'yes')			Regular supporters (% 'yes')			Strong supporters (% 'yes')			Total (% 'yes')			*N*
	AUS	UK	Both	AUS	UK	Both	AUS	UK	Both	AUS	UK	Both	
Sex ($V = 0.09$)***													
Male	45	43	**45**	52	54	**53**	55	56	**55**	49	49	**49**	1,784
Female	55	57	**55**	48	46	**47**	45	44	**45**	51	51	**51**	1,847
Total (%)	100	100	**100**	100	100	**100**	100	100	**100**	100	100	**100**	3,631
Age ($V = 0.09$)***													
18–29	25	22	**24**	21	17	**19**	15	24	**18**	22	20	**21**	773
30–44	29	28	**28**	25	23	**24**	27	20	**25**	27	25	**26**	957
45–64	31	32	**31**	31	31	**31**	36	39	**37**	32	32	**32**	1,161
65+	15	18	**16**	24	29	**26**	22	17	**20**	19	22	**20**	740
Total (%)	100	100	**100**	100	100	**100**	100	100	**100**	100	100	**100**	3,631
Born in AUS/UK ($V = 0.08$)***													
Yes	63	81	**69**	70	87	**76**	74	86	**78**	67	84	**73**	2,645
No	37	19	**31**	30	13	**24**	26	14	**22**	33	16	**27**	986
Total (%)	100	100	**100**	100	100	**100**	100	100	**100**	100	100	**100**	3,631
Education ($V = 0.05$)***													
Primary schooling	(2)	(1)	**(2)**	(1)	(2)	**(2)**	(3)	(3)	**(3)**	(2)	(1)	**(2)**	(64)
Secondary schooling	34	40	**36**	32	38	**34**	29	32	**30**	32	38	**34**	1,246
University education	40	38	**39**	41	39	**41**	49	49	**49**	42	40	**41**	1,491
Other tech. or prof. qual	24	21	**23**	25	21	**24**	19	16	**18**	24	21	**23**	830
Total (%)	100	100	**100**	100	100	**100**	100	100	**100**	100	100	**100**	3,631
Employment ($V = 0.11$)***													
Full time (>30 h)	41	42	**41**	43	43	**43**	45	53	**47**	42	44	**43**	1,548
Part time (8–29 h)	15	17	**16**	16	11	**14**	19	9	**16**	16	14	**15**	554
Part time (<8 h)	(3)	(3)	**(3)**	(3)	(2)	**(2)**	(2)	(3)	**(2)**	(3)	(2)	**(3)**	99
Unemployed	4	4	**4**	3	4	**3**	3	2	**2**	4	4	**4**	134
Full-time home	9	6	**8**	5	6	**5**	5	3	**4**	7	5	**6**	227
In education	6	4	**5**	4	2	**3**	1	6	**3**	5	3	**4**	156
Retired	16	20	**17**	24	31	**26**	23	21	**22**	20	24	**21**	772
Other	6	5	**5**	2	2	**2**	2	4	**3**	4	4	**4**	141
Total (%)	100	100	**100**	100	100	**100**	100	100	**100**	100	100	**100**	3,631

Note: $N = 3{,}631$. Results weighted by age, gender, location, place of birth and employment type. Percentages within parentheses are computed on categories with few observations (<100) and should be interpreted with caution. Reporting Cramér's V and *p* value of CMH test for repeated tests of independence. CMH: Cochran–Mantel–Haenszel.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

'fairly strong' support for a political party and were classified as 'regular supporters', whereas 13% voiced 'very strong' support, and where hence classified as 'strong supporters'.[4] All analyses were weighted by age, gender, location, place of birth and employment type to correct for any differences between the sample and national distributions in terms of demographics.

The demographic characteristics of party supporters and the non-committed

The descriptive demographics of party supporters and non-committed voters in both countries are displayed in Table 1. Looking at the total for both countries taken together, and ignoring country differences, it becomes clear that the three groups differ from each other in important, statistically significant, ways.[5]

In terms of sex, our findings align with research that has identified a gender imbalance among party members when compared to supporters and the general population (Gauja and Jackson, 2016: 372; van Haute and Gauja, 2015: 194–195; Webb et al., 2017: 67). Women are slightly under-represented among regular (47%) and strong supporters (45%), when compared to the non-committed (55%) – a pattern identical in both countries. Among the larger parties, the under-representation of women supporters is most acute in the Liberal Party of Australia and the UK Conservatives. A similar trend of disproportion is also evident with respect to age, place of birth and employment. The mean age of party supporters (48) is older when compared to the non-committed (45). Almost three-quarters of all respondents (73% in total) report having been born in Australia/United Kingdom. This percentage is significantly higher among regular party supporters (76%) and strong party supporters (78%) and is a prominent among

respondents identifying with the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the UK Independence Party (with 100% and 98% born in the United Kingdom, respectively). While we see notable differences between the United Kingdom and Australia, with the latter having many more foreign-born voters, the pattern is similar in both countries. Strong supporters are most likely to be in full time employment, and retirees are more common among regular (26%) and strong (22%) supporters, when compared to the non-committed (17%). There is less variation among supporters and non-committed voters in terms of educational attainment. The only noteworthy variation was between the level of university education held by strong supporters (49%) compared to all respondents (41%).

In general, strong party supporters differ most from the non-committed, with regular party supporters taking up a position between the two extremes. On average, the typical party supporter is more likely to be male, older and to be born in the country, than the typical non-committed citizen. Confirming our initial expectation, strong party supporters are more likely to have enjoyed university education, to be retired and to work part-time than both regular supporters and the non-committed. The fact that these differences hold up to statistical tests measuring association (ignoring the stratification by country for now) suggests that distinguishing citizens based on the strength of their support to political parties is a useful analytical category. It also begs the question whether these distinct groups equally differ in terms of other characteristics – and here we turn to political engagement.

Political engagement

Our second expectation was that overall levels of political and party activism should be higher among strong supporters when compared to regular supporters and the non-committed. Table 2 presents reported group differences in organizational membership, political participation and party activism. For each subset (non-committed, regular supporters, strong supporters), the table shows the percentage of respondents who are members of a particular organization or engage in a given activity, respectively, split by country and as a total for both countries. The number in each cell is a relative proportion of respondents *within* the given subset and does not relate to the overall size of the subset itself.[6]

Party membership

The first finding is hardly surprising: Party supporters are much more likely to be members of political parties than non-committed citizens. Two-and-a-half times as many regular supporters and 10 times as many strong supporters have joined a party than non-committed individuals. These differences are robust. Still, given that only 6% of the overall population are in fact party members, joiners are the clear minority in all three groups. While the pattern of increasing membership among these three groups is the same in both Australia and the United Kingdom, there are stark differences between the two countries. Overall party membership is much higher in the United Kingdom (9% compared to 5% in Australia), reaching as high as 42% among strong party supporters, although some caution is necessary as membership here is substantially higher than other reported ‘formal’ membership figures from the Political Parties Database Project and Members and Activists of Political Parties data sets.[7] These results suggest that UK parties are much more effective in converting support into membership and correspond with recent trends (since 2014) of membership growth – particularly among the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP (Audickas et al., 2018).

Group membership

Membership in other organizations ranges from 17% in local community organizations to 9% in social justice and peace groups (e.g. Oxfam). Group membership is uniformly highest among the strong party supporters, with regular supporters taking up an intermediate position. The percentage of members in any given category increases by a magnitude of approximately 1.5–2 times from non-committed to regular supporters and by the same magnitude from regular to strong supporters. This suggests that strong supporters are on average prolific joiners, engaged in a wide spectrum of groups, while less committed party supporters are on average more selective. Differences between the countries are clearly visible, insofar as UK voters tend to join organizations at a higher rate, and which may reflect Australia’s supposedly more ‘passive’ political culture (Jaensch, 1997). Group membership is most prevalent among Green party identifiers in both Australia and the United Kingdom, particularly with respect to environmental groups and online advocacy organizations.

Political participation

A similar pattern holds when looking at different types of political participation. Across the board, it is more prevalent in the United Kingdom than in Australia. However, projected onto the different groups of party supporters, patterns of participation are very similar. The share of strong party supporters who report having engaged in different activities over the past 2 years is on average two to three times more than that of the non-committed, and still on average 1.5 times higher than among regular party supporters. For instance, whereas only 7% of non-committed citizens had partaken in protests, marches or demonstrations, 12% of regular supporters and 23% of strong supporters had done so. Again, Green party identifiers in both

Table 2. Political engagement of party supporters and non-committed in Australia and the United Kingdom.

	Non-committed (% 'yes')			Regular supporters (% 'yes')			Strong supporters (% 'yes')			All (% 'yes')				
	AUS	UK	Both	AUS	UK	Both	AUS	UK	Both	AUS	UK	Both	*N*	*V*
Party membership[a]														
Any political party	2	1	**2**	4	9	**5**	16	42	**23**	5	9	**6**	221	0.29***
Other group membership[a]														
Local community org.	12	15	**13**	16	22	**18**	24	32	**27**	15	20	**17**	613	0.12***
Trade union	10	16	**12**	14	18	**15**	21	33	**24**	13	19	**15**	539	0.11***
Environmental group	6	7	**6**	12	12	**12**	21	31	**24**	10	12	**11**	389	0.19***
Online advocacy group	6	8	**7**	10	14	**11**	20	31	**23**	10	13	**11**	387	0.17***
Cause group	6	10	**7**	10	17	**12**	17	29	**20**	9	14	**11**	392	0.15***
Social justice/peace org.	6	4	**5**	9	11	**9**	21	27	**23**	9	9	**9**	329	0.20***
Political participation[b]														
Signed petition	34	42	**37**	46	54	**49**	47	70	**54**	41	50	**44**	1,581	0.14***
Contacted politician/official	18	21	**19**	27	36	**30**	40	51	**43**	24	30	**26**	955	0.19***
Boycotted products	17	19	**18**	23	26	**24**	32	35	**33**	21	23	**22**	798	0.13***
Posted polit. comment online	13	13	**13**	21	24	**22**	34	43	**37**	19	21	**20**	714	0.20***
Worked with people	11	11	**11**	19	23	**20**	31	44	**35**	17	19	**18**	639	0.21***
Taken part in protest	8	6	**7**	12	11	**12**	20	30	**23**	11	11	**11**	406	0.16***
Party activism[b]														
Visited website	17	22	**19**	30	43	**34**	39	64	**46**	25	35	**28**	1,034	0.22***
'Friended' or 'liked'	11	10	**10**	23	23	**23**	34	57	**40**	19	20	**19**	696	0.26***
Shared message on social media	7	8	**7**	17	21	**18**	30	49	**35**	14	17	**15**	554	0.26***
Joined mailing list	6	6	**6**	14	23	**17**	31	51	**37**	13	18	**14**	525	0.29***
Done volunteer work[c]	6	4	**5**	13	12	**13**	27	42	**31**	12	12	**12**	428	0.26***
Donated money[c]	4	4	**4**	8	15	**11**	23	40	**28**	8	12	**10**	348	0.26***
Worn /displayed logo	3	4	**3**	9	13	**10**	17	49	**26**	7	12	**9**	329	0.26***
Future party activism[d]														
Answer survey on issues that matter you	47	51	**48**	64	70	**66**	68	79	**71**	56	62	**58**	2,104	0.20***
Select leader	17	19	**18**	28	39	**32**	43	61	**48**	25	32	**27**	987	0.23***
Select local candidate	16	18	**16**	25	36	**29**	40	55	**44**	23	29	**25**	900	0.22***
Receive information	10	12	**11**	22	29	**25**	40	56	**44**	19	24	**21**	745	0.28***
Post idea online	12	12	**12**	21	22	**22**	35	51	**40**	19	21	**19**	701	0.23***
Attend policy forum/meeting	9	11	**10**	15	22	**17**	34	47	**38**	15	19	**16**	598	0.25***
Register as supporter	3	4	**3**	8	9	**8**	16	17	**16**	6	8	**7**	249	0.17***
Become member of party	3	4	**3**	8	9	**8**	16	17	**16**	6	8	**7**	249	0.17***

Note: $N = 3{,}631$. Results weighted by age, gender, location, place of birth and employment type. Reporting Cramér's V and *p* value of CMH test for repeated tests of independence. CMH: Cochran–Mantel–Haenszel.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.
[a]Percentage of respondents who answered 'yes' to the question whether they were a member of a political party or other group.
[b]Percentage of respondents who answered 'yes' to the question whether they had undertaken a given activity within the past 2 years.
[c]'High intensity' form of participation.
[d]Percentage of respondents who answered 'likely' to the question whether they would undertake a given activity in the future.

Australia and the United Kingdom are the most active in their political participation. The only form of participation where regular and strong party supporters do not differ much is petition-signing.

Partisan participation

Becoming a member is only one way to engage with political parties. Here, the survey instrument was designed to tap into a range of partisan activities that are not restricted to the membership but can be undertaken by the public at large: visiting a party website, 'friending' or 'liking' a party on social media, sharing a party message on social media, joining a mailing list, volunteering, donating and wearing or displaying a logo. These items cover both high- and low-intensity forms of participation, including both online and offline activities provided by all political parties in both democracies. Again, average engagement rates among both types of party supporters far surpass those of the non-committed citizens (and the population average). Online forms of engagement, such as visiting a party's website or 'friending' or 'liking' their social media profile, are the most frequent types of activity undertaken. Other than these activities, non-committed citizens hardly engage in any

party activism at all. Particularly rare are non-committed persons who engage in 'high-intensity' activism, for instance, volunteer work such as handing out 'how to vote' material (5%) or donating money (4%). While still being much higher than among non-committed citizens, activism rates also sharply drop off among regular supporters, from 34% who had visited a party's website, to only 10% having worn or displayed a party's logo. In contrast, activism is high across all categories among the strong supporters, with every activity having been done by at least a quarter of this group. In terms of specific parties, Green identifiers in the United Kingdom are most likely to engage in social media activity or volunteer, whereas Liberal Democrat identifiers are more likely to donate money to the party. In Australia, National Party identifiers stand out as most likely to undertake a range of partisan activities. Looking at the country totals, we again see that engagement is higher in the United Kingdom than in Australia.

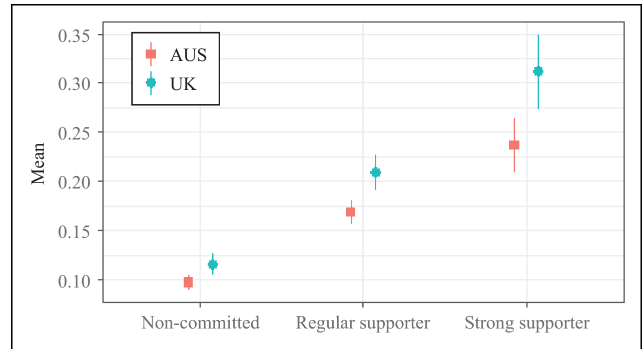

Figure 2. Mean political engagement of party supporters and non-committed in Australia and the United Kingdom.
Note: $N = 3{,}631$. Mean = mean score of additive index of 28 engagement indicators. Results weighted by age, gender, location, place of birth and employment type. Reporting 95% confidence interval.

Future party activism

Finally, when asked about whether they would likely partake in party activity in the future, the three groups differed most strongly from each other. This is particularly interesting because this battery of questions was designed to investigate respondents' attitudes to a sample of organizational reforms that are characteristic of the trends towards 'opening up' political parties in terms of affiliation options, candidate and leadership selection, as well as policy development. In all categories of future activism, regular supporters said 1.5–2 times more often than the non-committed that they were likely to engage in a given activity. And strong supporters were yet another 1.5–2 times more likely to say so. A vivid example is provided by the responses to the question about participation in personnel selection. Non-committed citizens were largely uninterested in selecting either party leaders (18%) or local candidates (16%). In contrast, 32% of regular supporters and even 48% of strong supporters said that, given the opportunity, they would likely engage in the selection of party leaders, and 29% and 44%, respectively, said they would engage in the selection of local candidates. In Australia, the most interest came from National Party supporters – a party that has experimented with open primaries for the selection of parliamentary candidates. In the United Kingdom, the greatest demand came from Liberal Democrat supporters. This is a particularly interesting finding, given the party has not traditionally involved its supporters in decision-making, but at the 2018 conference leader Vince Cable resolved to create a class of supporters enjoying a range of entitlements, including selecting the party's leader (Liberal Democrats, 2018).

These and other responses about future activism clearly show the desire of party supporters to engage in crucial organizational activities, often thought of as being reserved for the formal party membership. By contrast, party membership itself remains a relatively unpopular proposition: Only 3% of uncommitted respondents indicated they would be likely to join a party in the future, rising to 7% among regular supporters and 16% among strong supporters. We also found that there was limited enthusiasm for registering as a party supporter – suggesting that this lighter form of affiliation may not be as popular as many parties have hoped or that the concept was not fully understood by the survey respondents.

Overall engagement

In addition to looking at the frequency of individual activities and group memberships, we also calculated an additive index of all 28 engagement items in the survey, standardized to range from zero to one.[8] In this instance, a score of zero means that a respondent is not a member of any organization, nor engages in any activity, while a score of one means that the respondent has joined all possible types of organizations and engages in all possible past or future activities. The mean engagement score for non-committed citizens is 0.10, meaning that the average non-committed person engaged in about 10% of possible activities and groups. In contrast, the mean for regular supporters is 0.18, and for strong supporters, the mean is 0.25.

Figure 2 maps this engagement indicator onto group means split by strength of party identification and by country. Mean levels of political engagement are higher in regular supporters compared to politically non-committed citizens. And mean engagement of all types is yet higher within strong supporters compared to both other groups.[9] And while overall engagement levels are higher in the United Kingdom than in Australia, the observed pattern of differences between supporter groups is exactly the same in both countries.[10]

These results are robust when controlling for a range of other factors in multiple regression. We model the raw

Table 3. Explaining political engagement in Australia and the United Kingdom.

	Dependent variable: Political engagement index (0–28)
Count component	
	Coefficient (Std.Err.)
Intercept	**2.27** (0.09)***
Strength of party ID	
Regular supporter (reference)	
Non-committed	−**0.38** (0.03)***
Strong supporter	**0.45** (0.04)***
Sex = Female	−**0.12** (0.03)***
Born in AUS/UK	0.05 (0.04)
Full-time employment	−0.02 (0.03)
Age	−**0.01** (0.00)***
University educated	0.07 (0.09)
Age × University	0.00 (0.00)+
Log (theta)	2.18
Zero component	
Intercept	−**1.21** (0.25)***
Strength of party ID	
Regular supporter (reference)	
Non-committed	**0.83** (0.10)***
Strong supporter	−0.16 (0.16)
Sex = Female	0.11 (0.09)
Born in AUS/UK	−**0.41** (0.10)***
Full-time employment	0.00 (0.09)
Age	0.00 (0.00)
University educated	0.06 (0.27)
Age × University	−**0.01** (0.01)*
AIC	19326.5
BIC	19456.7
Log likelihood	−9642.3
RMSE	6.597
Number of observations	3631
Number of groups (countries)	2
Var: Countries: Count (Intercept)	0.005
SD: Countries: Count (Intercept)	0.069
Var: Countries: Zero (Intercept)	0.029
SD: Countries: Zero (Intercept)	0.169

Note: $N = 3{,}631$. Negative binomial hurdle model with random effect for country. SD: standard deviation; RMSE: root of the mean-squared error; AIC: Akaike information criterion; BIC: Bayesian information criterion. $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{+}p < 0.1$

count of engagement activities (from 0 = none to 28 = all possible activities) as an outcome of the strength of partisan identification, sex, birth origin, employment, university education and age. As the engagement index is highly right-skewed with excess zeros, count models are best suited (Long, 1997). The negative binomial hurdle model reported in Table 3 provides the best fit.[11] The model combines a part that explains the occurrence of no engagement (zero component) with a part that explains the total count of engagement activities if the threshold is passed (count component). Negative coefficients in the zero component indicate a higher likelihood of no engagement.

The model adds considerable nuance to the analysis in three important ways. First, the demographic and socioeconomic factors shown to co-vary with the strength of partisan support also explain a portion of the variation in political engagement. Being male is associated with higher engagement, being born in Australia/UK increases the likelihood of exhibiting some engagement (as opposed to none), age reduces engagement, and being university educated increases the likelihood of engagement in old people, but not in young ones.

Second, looking at the count component, we see that the previous findings hold, even when accounting for demographic and socioeconomic attributes known to drive political engagement. Namely, when compared to the reference group of regular supporters, strong supporters are on average more engaged, and the non-committed are significantly less engaged. This supports the model of concentric circles. The coefficients are statistically significant and substantively stronger than any other model variables.

Third, looking at the zero component shows that being non-committed is by far the strongest factor explaining whether a respondent exhibits any political engagement whatsoever. On the other hand, the difference between regular and strong supporters is not significant in this regard. This suggests a threshold effect, in that partisan identification (of any strength) increases the likelihood of engagement and that strong partisan identification maximizes engagement beyond that threshold.

Conclusion

This article began with the premise that as formal levels of party membership decline, perhaps we ought to look beyond members to assess parties' links with society today. Conceptualizing parties as series of concentric circles encapsulating different strengths of affiliation and acknowledging the porous boundaries of party organization, we examined the participatory and demographic characteristics of party supporters in Australia and the United Kingdom. Utilizing original survey data, we distinguished between three groups on the basis of the strength of their party identification: strong supporters, regular supporters and the non-committed.

Our data revealed significant differences in the demographic characteristics between strong and regular supporters, as well as between these groups and the full sample. The most notable differences were seen in age, sex, employment and place of birth. Applying the idea of parties as concentric circles, those most central (i.e. with the strongest levels of party identification) are also the more unrepresentative. The implications for parties' representative capacities are mixed. The fact that demographic differences lessen as we move out from the nucleus of the party has

potentially positive implications for democracy as political parties seek to extend participatory opportunities and affiliation options beyond the traditional formal membership. However, it appears that while extending participatory opportunities beyond the membership might capture a more diverse universe of citizens, those supporters who identify more strongly with the party are also the least representative.

In terms of their participatory profiles, our expectation that engagement would be highest among strong supporters, followed by regular supporters and then the non-committed, was confirmed by the data. Here the story is perhaps more positive for parties: Even though party identification is declining over time (Dalton, 2004: 31–34, 2000), a much larger proportion of voters still identify with political parties than want to join them as formal members. And a significant percentage of those who identify as strong supporters (and to a lesser extent regular supporters) engage with parties in variety of ways. For example, they follow parties online, receive and distribute partisan information, volunteer, donate and show their affective support for their chosen party (by e.g. displaying a party logo). While many believe that, based on declining membership numbers, the participatory link between political parties and the population is broken; we are cautiously more optimistic about the future based on the engagement profiles of partisan identifiers.

Some specific findings are worth highlighting. We found, for example, that strong supporters were also most likely to be members of other organizations. If we think about group membership as a way in which supporters can act as policy conduits, joining up a range of groups in civil society, then these disproportionately high rates of membership may act to offset the relative unrepresentativeness of this group of adherents. An interesting avenue for future research might be to examine the diversity of these memberships in greater detail, to ascertain whether – for example – supporters' reach extends to organizations that might not be usually associated with particular political parties, or sympathetic to them. A similar argument could be made for the impact of other types of political engagement, such as attending protests and signing petitions, which connect the party – through its supporters – to a wider network of policy positions and political actions.

One of the most salient findings of our research, with respect to the trajectory of opening up party organizations, was the clear difference between non-committed voters, regular party supporters and strong party supporters in the likelihood that they would engage in party activities in the future. As we move from the non-committed to regular and then strong party supporters, respondents' interest in undertaking future party activities substantially increases. These trends are consistent with the engagement patterns identified above and suggest that as parties think about the future of their organizations, they could potentially draw on a core group of people who are unlikely to join as members, but would participate, for example, in open primaries and issues-based consultation. It also begs the contentious question: do parties need formal members at all?

While our analysis was limited to Australia and the United Kingdom, our research design could be extended to examine party supporters' demographic and participatory profiles in other contexts. Of particular interest would be whether the differences between adherents are as visible in democracies where the boundaries of party membership are less pronounced, for example, systems such as the United States, Canada and Italy, or in countries where party membership traditions remain comparatively strong, for example, Austria, Belgium, Norway and Italy (see Webb and Keith, 2017: 32–35). Within countries, a party-level analysis might also be performed to explore differences between traditional and organizationally innovative participatory structures.

Overall, our findings show that the stronger party identification becomes the more active supporters become in their participatory profiles. At the same time, however, the representative congruence between supporters and the broader public decreases. While this is something of a contradiction for political parties that might value both an inclusive and representative supporter base, it does suggest that there is value in looking beyond the membership for a more nuanced analysis of the participatory and representative links created and sustained by parties today.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. See, for example, Faucher and Boy (2018), Fisher et al. (2014), Gauja and Jackson (2016), Hooghe and Kölln (2020), Webb et al. (2017).
2. Recent research suggests that data obtained from online panels are comparable in quality and representativeness to data collected via other probability-based methodologies administered through traditional means, for instance, via

telephone or in-person (Ansolabehere and Schaffner, 2014; Stephenson and Crete, 2011).

3. Note that ‘non-committed’ includes a broader range of respondents than those with no party identification. The percentage of respondents who indicated that they did not identify with any political party was 17% (Australia) and 16% (the United Kingdom). This is broadly comparable to results from the 2016 Australian Election Study (19%) and the 2017 British Social Attitudes Survey (12%).
4. A quota set in the sampling procedure required half of the respondents to be ‘non-committed’ and the other half to be ‘supporters’ (whether strong or not). While this quota was imposed to ensure a large enough sample size to analyse subgroups, the actual distribution of ‘party supporters’ versus ‘non-committed’ respondents was unknown. Therefore, to ensure our weighted survey sample reflected the distribution of these two discrete groups in the community, had no quotas been applied, data from the screening questions from those who completed the survey as well as those who were screened out due to the quota being full were used to understand the incidence of ‘party supporters’ versus ‘non-committed’ respondents. This analysis showed that the distribution was only skewed slightly towards ‘party supporters’ at 52%.
5. The table reports Cramér’s V, a measure of the strength of association between two nominal variables (0 = none, 1 = complete association), and the p value of Cochran–Mantel–Haenszel (CMH) tests for repeated tests of independence. The CMH tests take into account the stratification of our data by country. The significant results suggest that the null hypothesis that demographic characteristics per group are independent from each other, given the country, can be rejected – that is, party support is significantly related to differences in demographics, but not countries.
6. For instance, 221 of all 3,631 respondents (or 6%) report being members of a political party. Out of these party members, 34 (or 15%) are non-committed, 73 (33%) regular supporters, and 114 (52%) strong supporters (not reported in Table 2). This means that 2% of all non-committed individuals, 5% of all regular supporters, and 23% of all strong supporters are party members (reported in Table 2). CMH tests were conducted to ascertain the significance of group differences, controlling for the stratification by country. Cramér’s V serves as an indicator of the strength of association. As it turns out, all group differences are highly statistically significant, with the association measure ranging between 0.12 and 0.29.
7. The Political Parties Database Project reports party membership (as a percentage of the electorate) in the United Kingdom at 0.98% and Australia at 1.67% (Poguntke et al., 2016: 668).
8. This additive procedure is supported by an exploratory factor analysis, in which the reported Eigenvalue of factors drops from 13.3 to 2.2 from the first to second factor. Factor scores of this first underlying dimension of engagement correlate very highly with the additive engagement index ($r = 0.97$, $p < 0.001$) and, additionally, the additive scale of 28 items shows a very high Cronbach’s α of 0.91.
9. Specifically, mean engagement of strong party supporters in both Australia (M = 0.23, standard deviation (SD) = 0.26) and the United Kingdom (M = 0.31, SD = 0.23) is significantly higher than mean engagement of regular supporters (M = 0.17, SD = 0.18 and M = 0.21, SD = 0.20, respectively). And this in turn is significantly higher than the mean engagement of non-committed citizens (M = 0.10, SD = 0. 14; and M = 0.12, SD = 0.14, respectively). A significant main effect of being a party supporter on levels of political engagement is confirmed in two-way factorial analysis of variance, $F(2,3412) = 140.32, p < 0.001, \omega^2 = 0.08$ (‘medium sized effect’ according to Kirk, 1996: 750).
10. The main effect of country on the level of engagement is smaller than that of party identification, $F(1,3412) = 26.82$, $p < 0.001$, $\omega^2 = 0.01$.
11. Online Appendix report a number of alternative models. Hurdle-NB is found to have the best fit judged by log likelihood, Akaike information criterion, dispersion statistic (theta) and the root mean square error.

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