Recruited by Referendum: Party membership in the SNP and Scottish Greens

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Introduction

This paper has a number of objectives. First, it documents the dramatic rise in membership of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Scottish Green Party (SGP) following the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. The pace and scale of these developments is exceptional in the context of international trends in party membership. Secondly, the paper examines possible explanations for these events, including the movement dynamics of pre and post referendum politics. In doing so, the paper outlines the objectives of a new ESRC-funded study of the SNP and Scottish Greens, exploring the changing nature of membership in these parties following the referendum. A key part of the study will be a survey of SNP and SGP members in the spring of 2016 and we are keen to hear views of academic colleagues on questionnaire design, especially those working on studies of other parties’ members. The paper concludes by considering some of the implications of the membership surges for the parties and their internal organisations.

The decline of party membership

Party membership across much of the Western world has been in decline for decades (Dalton 2004, 2014; Whiteley 2011; van Biezen et al. 2012; van Biezen and Poguntke 2014; Keen 2015; van Haute and Gauja 2015). As societies have modernised, fewer people have been joining parties. And the UK has been no exception to this general rule. Some evidence even suggests that UK parties have been especially badly affected by membership decline. van Biezen et al. (2012: 27-8), in their study of party membership in 27 countries, point to a steep decline in the percentage of members relative to the electorate (M/E), with an average M/E across 27 countries of 4.7 in 2008, but a UK figure of 1.2. Only Latvia and Poland displayed lower rates of party membership in this study (van Biezen et al. 2012: 45). Figure 1 documents party membership in the UK over a sixty year period, confirming the long-term downward trajectory. By 2012, the M/E figure had fallen below 1 percent.

The dominant interpretation of membership decline is one of shrinking supply, not demand i.e. party scholars view members as beneficial to parties and assume potential recruits are simply thin on the ground (Seyd and Whiteley 1992, 2004; Webb 1996, 2007; Whiteley 2009; Scarrow 2015). Consequently (through necessity) parties have relied more heavily on party supporters, or weakly affiliated sympathisers, to perform many of the functions traditionally associated with formal members, notably party campaigning and fundraising (Fisher et al. 2014; Gauja 2015; Ponce and Scarrow 2013; Scarrow 2015). However, the assumption that party member supply is in irreversible decline has been challenged by recent events in Scotland, and to some extent elsewhere in the UK.

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Party membership resurgent: The Scottish referendum and beyond

The Scottish referendum on independence was a remarkable period in politics. As well as high levels of voter registration and an extremely healthy election turnout, levels of grassroots engagement during the campaign surprised many (Adamson and Lynch 2014). Party membership (in most parties) increased modestly during the build-up to the referendum, which is exactly what we would have expected. Party membership, despite the long-term decline, tends to receive a boost during elections, particularly in parties with good electoral prospects. This might be viewed as the natural fluctuation of party membership. However, the events that followed the referendum were rather more unexpected (by party scholars and parties alike).

In August 2014, the SGP reported a membership of 1,500, and the SNP 25,000. In the weeks and months that followed the referendum, the two pro-independence parties experienced a dramatic surge in members, appearing to buck the trend of declining membership elsewhere. A key characteristic of this major influx of members is that it occurred post-referendum, and amongst parties on the losing side. Almost as soon as the outcome was declared, both the SNP and Greens announced that new members were joining in large numbers and thereafter the figures began to snowball.

In the three to four weeks that followed the referendum, membership of the Greens quadrupled (rising to more than 6,000). Within four months (by the end of 2014), membership had reached nearly 8,000. By May 2015, the total had passed 9,000, representing an increase of over 600% on August 2014. Since this time, membership has remained in the region of 9,000.
The scale of the SNP surge appeared even more impressive, although proportionately the Green membership increase was the larger. In the three-to-four-week period following the referendum, membership of the Scottish National Party increased from 25,000 to 80,000, (with thousands of members joining per day). Peter Murrell, the party’s chief executive, took to posting membership numbers regularly (multiple times in a day) via Twitter, generating a sense of excitement and momentum. By the end of 2014, SNP membership had risen to 94,000 (multiplying, roughly, by four since before the referendum). By March 2015, the SNP reached the landmark figure of 100,000 and the 2015 general election boosted member numbers still further; 2,000 joined the SNP in the 24 hours following Sturgeon’s participation in a televised UK leaders’ debate. One year on from the referendum, membership had reached 115,000, which amounts to a 460% increase on pre-referendum figures. At over 2.0% of the Scottish electorate, the SNP’s membership made it the kind of mass-membership party not seen in the UK for decades. Today (March 2016) the total number of SNP members remains 115,000.

There can be no doubt that the extent and pace of these surges were exceptional. The SNP surge attracted most attention, but it could be argued that the Scottish Greens, although a smaller party, experienced an even more dramatic upturn, with potentially more transformative consequences. In a few short months, the SNP and Greens had become parties made up predominantly of new recruits. It is also worth emphasizing that these surges were largely unforeseen.

The sudden demand for membership meant that joining online was subject to delay and there was exceptional turnout at meetings and conferences, leading to large queues. Images of members waiting to enter party meetings were transmitted by the media (traditional and new), which is an unusual occurrence, to say the least. Indeed, party membership became a news story like never before (Kennouche 2015). Nicola Sturgeon, the SNP’s new leader, embarked on a ‘tour’ of Scotland, a series of member rallies which included a Glasgow event attended by over 12,000 on 22nd November, described by observers as more of a rock concert than a political meeting. Few scholars of party membership thought they would ever see the day. Over a ten year period, membership of the SGP and SNP had increased nine-fold, a feat only matched by the Green Party of England and Wales (Table 1).

Eighteen months on from the referendum, the parties report that significant numbers (perhaps one in ten) of the new members may not be renewing their membership. However, the parties continue to attract members, meaning total numbers remain high. With important political events on the horizon – namely the Scottish parliamentary elections and the referendum on Britain’s membership of the EU – new members compensate for those who drift away. Parties, of course, experience continuous inflow and outflow of members, and it is difficult to determine what represents a ‘normal’ attrition rate. Nevertheless, it seems safe to conclude that there has not yet been a major downturn in membership numbers.
Thus party membership amongst some parties in Scotland has been energised. Other parties in Scotland did not experience this referendum membership bonus. The pro-independence SNP and SGP – on the losing side of the referendum – now have larger memberships than at any time in their modern history. SNP membership now exceeds or rivals that of UK parties (the UK Liberal Democrats have roughly half the number of SNP members). As can be seen in Table 1, membership increases have occurred in other UK parties – notably in the Labour party and the UK Green party – but the scale and rapidity of the Scottish increases is unparalleled. In this key respect the SNP and Greens give the impression of being winners rather than losers. So, how do we explain these events? Why did so many people take the route of party membership at a time when political engagement via parties appeared to be in irreversible decline?

### Theoretical ideas and research objectives

Exactly why these events occurred is not entirely clear. A number of broad, inter-related explanations exist. Our central hypothesis is that explanation lies in the nature of the ‘Yes’ campaign. It is widely accepted that the referendum generated a national movement for change and a level of grassroots engagement unique in modern campaigns. High levels of voter registration, the extension of the franchise to include 16 and 17 year olds, a high election turnout and an energetic grassroots campaign suggest an exceptional level of democratic participation. It is likely that many people new to politics were politically engaged and active for the first time. It is possible that Yes sympathisers were in some way ‘tipped over’ into party membership as a way of continuing their participation and campaign support. What is unclear is why and how group- or movement-based participation connected with more conventional behaviour like party membership. Are we observing members of a grassroots movement spontaneously turning to more conventional forms of political engagement?

The second explanation lies in the outcome of the referendum, leaving ‘unfinished business’ for the Yes side. Being on the losing side in elections tends to dent feelings of political efficacy and willingness to participate (Clarke and Acock, 1989; Craig et al., 2006). So why were these

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### Table 1: UK Party Membership 2006-2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Con</th>
<th>Lab</th>
<th>Lib Dem</th>
<th>UKIP</th>
<th>GPEW</th>
<th>SNP</th>
<th>SGP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>290,000</td>
<td>182,000</td>
<td>72,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>13,000</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>177,000</td>
<td>65,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>250,000</td>
<td>166,000</td>
<td>60,000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>156,000</td>
<td>59,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>1,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>177,000</td>
<td>194,000</td>
<td>65,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>13,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>193,000</td>
<td>49,000</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>188,000</td>
<td>43,000</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>13,000</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>1,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>134,000</td>
<td>190,000</td>
<td>43,000</td>
<td>32,000</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>193,000</td>
<td>44,000</td>
<td>41,000</td>
<td>31,000</td>
<td>92,000</td>
<td>7,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>160,000</td>
<td>371,000</td>
<td>62,000</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>61,000</td>
<td>115,000</td>
<td>9,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
losers behaving like winners? Was this a positive reaction to the momentum generated by the ‘Yes’ campaign? Was it a more negative reaction, a backlash against the defeat and its legitimacy? A related question points to the ideological motivations of Yes participants. Are these events connected to a movement against Westminster austerity economics? The continuing rise in support for the SNP (to a lesser extent the SGP), and for small/other parties throughout the UK, suggests a deep disillusionment with traditional politics. The pro-independence parties in Scotland provide a potential vehicle for protest against a ‘Westminster establishment’. Links between the post-referendum member surge and the austerity agenda of UK politics will be explored by this project.

Another explanation may be that the behaviour of the parties and campaign groups was in some way responsible for the increase in members. Reports of increasing members create momentum, encouraging others to join. Political and social movement organisations can ‘pull’ recruits into membership, for example through online recruitment drives (McAdam et al. 1996; Della Porta and Diani 2009). The referendum featured extensive use of social media but how far the parties control these channels is questionable and party elites themselves have expressed surprise at the membership surge. Nonetheless, we will examine the interaction between the demand and supply of party membership.

Research objectives

Seyd and Whiteley pioneered the modern party membership survey in the 1990s and many others followed (Rüdig et al. 1991; Seyd and Whiteley 1992, 2002, Whiteley et al. 1994, 2006; Gallaher and Marsh 2002; Bennie 2004; Cross and Young 2004; Mitchell et al. 2012; Childs and Webb 2012). The current research team conducted an extensive study of the SNP and its members in 2008 (Mitchell et al. 2012); and the Scottish Greens were last surveyed in 2002 (Bennie 2004). These studies have illuminated important practical and theoretical aspects of party membership, including the social background and ideological stances of members, motivations for joining and becoming active, and patterns of participation within parties. The studies provide a valuable knowledge base, but the post-referendum surge appears so exceptional that it challenges many of the established understandings and suggests a new set of research priorities. At a time when party membership across the Western world is in decline, why has it become so popular in this context? The project aims to answer this and other questions, with a focus on a number of interrelated objectives:

Socio-demographic and political backgrounds of members. A key question is whether the referendum attracted new, previously underrepresented groups – notably women, younger people, and the less affluent – into party membership, potentially changing the sociological profile of party membership. Established explanatory models of political participation such as the civic voluntarism of Verba et al. (1995) emphasise socioeconomic resources as key predictors of political engagement. Past studies of UK party members conform to this model, revealing members as disproportionately well-educated and middle class in occupational profile, characteristics associated with political activism in general (Mitchell et al. 2012: 63; Bennie 2004: 190). Previously, the Greens stood out as the most highly educated, however. In 2008, a third of SNP members reported having a degree; in 2002, 74% of Scottish Greens claimed to have a degree. A prominent feature of party membership is gender imbalance: women traditionally make up approximately 40% of members in UK parties (Bennie 2015).
The 2008 SNP study suggested the party had a particular problem attracting women, constituting less than a third (32%) of all members (Johns et al. 2012). Even in the Greens, women made up only 37% of the party in 2002. Party members also appear to be ageing rapidly. In a comparative European study, this was pronounced in Britain (Scarrow and Gezgor 2010: 830). In 2008, the mean age of SNP members was 59 (Mitchell et al. 2012: 57). Even the SNP’s newest recruits were disproportionately older people. The Greens, although younger on average, also had difficulty attracting young people (Bennie and Russell 2012). The mean age of Scottish Greens in 2002 was 47.

However, established models, designed in part to explain decline in civic engagement, may struggle to capture and explain post-referendum events in Scotland. The referendum campaign is widely regarded as having qualitatively enhanced democratic participation, with an engaged electorate and energetic grassroots activity rarely seen in modern politics (Geoghegan 2015). However, it is as yet unclear how the surge in democratic activity during the campaign impacted on the socio-demographic profile of party members. The parties’ impressions are that the surge of recruitment has partly offset the traditional age and gender biases in membership. Bale et al.’s (2015) early findings, based on a different methodological approach, provide some evidence that the parties may be attracting more women and young people. They find, for example, that the mean age of SNP members is 49, and that 44% of the members are women (Bale 2015: 6). A systematic survey of the membership, planned for May 2016, can test this further and assess whether the socio-demographic profile of SNP and Green members has in fact changed. An additional dimension is the geographical spread/location of members; has the membership surge taken place across the country?

**Connections between movement politics and conventional party politics.** We aim to explore how the surge in party membership is related to the wider social movement for change. Both nationalism and environmentalism can be conceptualised as social movements, in that they demonstrate shared identities and interorganisational networks (Rootes 2007; Diani and McAdam 2003; Brand 1978; Olzak 2007; Keating 2009). Previous work on the SNP and Scottish Greens revealed that members of these parties belonged to many different organisations and groups (Mitchell et al 2012; Bennie 2004). This suggests a strong connection between conventional party politics and movement politics. Yet others have argued that that single-issue and interest-based movement politics may be replacing party membership (Jordan and Maloney 2007; Whiteley 2011). Does this post-referendum surge reverse that trend or is the nature of party membership changing?

The project will examine involvement in the referendum and the routes to party membership. How were the members involved in the referendum campaign and in other political movements? Are they new to party politics or was the referendum’s main impact to re-energise the previously active? Another pertinent question is whether campaign groups like Women for Independence or the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) acted as a bridge to more conventional participation. Or, is the relationship more complex? Could we be observing something more like two-way traffic between groups and parties? Elite interviews with both party leaders and leaders of these campaigning groups will supplement the member surveys by examining elite interpretations of the referendum campaign, the overlap between groups and parties and opportunities for cooperative strategies since the referendum. To what extent did the leading figures and activists encourage supporters to
refocus their activity towards party membership? Or was this a more spontaneous upsurge on the part of volunteers?

**Political attitudes and identities of the members.** We aim to investigate whether the injection of members has changed the attitudinal profile of the parties. Previous studies contributed a nuanced understanding of the political attitudes and opinions of UK party members, from their placement on a traditional left-right scale to their views on specific issues. Studies of the SNP and SGP suggested a range of opinions existed within the parties (as in all parties) but that a coherent and distinct set of priorities could be associated with each. The centre of gravity in the SNP was centre/left but the Greens appeared the most radically redistributive or left on many issues, when compared to other parties (Bennie 2015). The evidence also suggested that these parties had not been subject to significant division or factionalism.

Quite how the sudden injection of large numbers of new members might be affecting this equilibrium is uncertain. Debate exists on whether the influx of members has shifted the median party member of the SNP and Greens to the left. Bale et al. (2016:6) suggest so. The new recruits may also therefore differ from longer-standing members in seeing self-determination less as an end in itself and more as a means to leftist politics, such as opposition to austerity and the removal of Trident from Scottish waters. Are Green members now more likely to prioritise constitutional politics at the expense of environmentalism? Traditionally, the party has been made up of a range of opinions on independence, but has the referendum intake strengthened the party’s position on independence? This requires investigation via detailed exploration of members’ political attitudes and visions of independence. We will also examine views on the future strategic direction of the parties. Does the new cohort of members have distinctive views on Scotland’s constitutional future? Do they demand an early referendum or are they more ‘pragmatic’? What are their views on working with others in election campaigns and in governmental coalitions?

**Motivations for joining and expectations of membership.** We will explore the factors that motivated the new members to join and how these relate to the referendum campaign and outcome. A conventional theoretical approach has been to explore the distinction between material, process and purposive or ideological incentives (Clarke and Wilson 1961; Seyd and Whiteley 2002; van Haute and Gauja 2015). According to previous studies, party members have not generally been motivated by material incentives. More were caught up in the process of being a member (implying activism), and most indicated that they joined because of a belief in the purposive values and objectives of their chosen party. For SNP members, a belief in independence overshadowed all other reasons for joining (Mitchell et al. 2012: 73). Scottish Greens also highlighted purposive motivations, typically a green vision of society (Bennie 2004: 198).

We will investigate whether reasons for joining the SNP and SGP are different in this unusual post-referendum context. Key to this is to explore self-declared reasons for joining, and to examine how these relate to political attitudes and priorities and to more participatory motivations. The distinction between political and participatory motivations might separate those who joined primarily as a means of achieving the policy end of independence from those who sought an outlet to maintain the participatory activities that flourished during the referendum. More than a year on from the major influx of members, we will ask respondents
to reflect on their initial hopes and expectations of membership. An important comparison will be between the long-established members and new recruits.

**Experiences of membership and types of activities.** This will involve an examination of modes of participation, levels of activity and whether members are satisfied with the democratic procedures and opportunities offered by the parties. Past studies explored levels of involvement and attitudes towards internal party democracy and found most UK party members to be passive, although the SNP study suggested an unusually active ethos (Mitchell et al. 2012: 88).

Images of buoyant conference attendances following the referendum led some to conclude that the new members were disproportionately active but, again, this is speculation. The dramatic increase in membership inevitably means that more people will be involved in campaign activities. However, whether the new members are proportionately more participatory than the established members is at this stage uncertain. They may even be less inclined to be active, if their motivation for joining was to express a kind of passive ‘solidarity’. Direct evidence is needed to judge if this is a genuinely participative cohort who are inclined to become candidates and perform future leadership roles. The new members might also be active in different ways. Discussions with party officers suggest that many new members have different expectations of membership, different understandings of the kinds of activities members should engage with e.g. they may be more likely to campaign than attend local meetings or vote in internal elections. We can assess whether expectations of membership have been realised or frustrated and, importantly, whether the new members have re-joined.

The major influx of members took place in the four month period between September and December 2014. More than a year later, we aim to explore members’ involvement in and perceptions of the referendum, seeking to understand why so many opted to join a party. As important, however, we aim to examine the experiences of party membership, including initial expectations, forms of involvement, and whether expectations have been confirmed or confounded. Crucially, the study will compare new recruits with established members, allowing us to determine whether this is a new and different generation of members. We will study how the parties are dealing with the large numbers of members, and we can examine member and party elite reactions to unfolding political events and issues, including further constitutional change, the results of the 2016 Scottish parliamentary elections, and the run-up to the European referendum.

**Implications for parties**

Another important objective of the project is to understand the consequences of the membership increase for party organisations, making use of theories of political organisation (Kirchheimer 1966; Panebianco 1988, Carty 2004; Katz and Mair 2009; Cross and Katz 2013). Decline in member numbers is problematic for parties. Members perform important democratic functions, namely the selection of candidates and leaders, the development of policy ideas, contributions to election campaigns and fundraising. In short, members bring valuable returns to parties. For these reasons, increases in membership are widely regarded as beneficial, to the parties themselves and to democracy, enhancing the link between citizens and state. Dramatic spurts in recruitment, however, can have negative consequences
for parties. They can create practical strain. As suggested above, the initial sudden demand for SNP and SGP membership placed stress on the parties’ internal organisations. The parties struggled to accommodate demand for membership in the early weeks of the surge, most obviously in dealing with online applications and when large numbers turned out for meetings. As also suggested above, problems of frustrated expectations can occur, especially when joining follows a long period of activism. New cohorts might also have new demands in terms of policy priorities and party strategy. The UK Greens experienced many of these problems after a surge in members at the end of the 1980s (Rüdig et al. 1996).

We will examine the consequences of these developments for the parties and their internal organisations. Are the new members reshaping the experience of party membership and/or is it reshaping them? How do the parties manage this new resource? Can they meet the expectations of new members? Can they keep them as members? This may be testing, particularly if the motivation for joining was a specific political event, the referendum; however momentous, this will inevitably recede in memories and might lead to the resumption of ‘normal service’ in political participation terms. In other words, will the surge melt away and how will the parties attempt to manage this dynamic? Via member surveys and in-depth interviews with party and campaigning elites, we will address these and many other questions.

Interviews with party elites will focus on intra-party benefits and challenges, and the extent to which the parties have attempted to manage the expectations of new and established members. How have the organisational structures of the parties been transformed? We know, for example, that many new local branches have been formed, and others revived. Another early indication of adaptation has been to allow new members to stand as general election candidates. These developments also have implications for theories of political recruitment, allowing investigation of supply and demand in party candidate selection (Norris 1995; 1997). In what other ways have the parties responded to the membership surge e.g. through the use of social media? Key challenges include how to maintain the enthusiasm of new members, how to continue to satisfy older generations of members, how to retain (all types of) members, and how to continue to recruit new members. Has the surge changed approaches to managing membership?

Conclusion

Party membership appears to be changing. For some parties, long-term decline has been quite dramatically reversed by an injection of large numbers of new members. However it is as yet unclear if this was the result of a very particular set of circumstances, unlikely to be repeated. Will these events prove to be ephemeral, leading to rapid decline and a return to ‘situation normal’? Or is something different happening? Is this a new era of movement-based party membership? Another unanswered question relates to whether political participation is changing. Has this surge in membership attracted new people into politics, perhaps with different characteristics, attitudes, needs and demands? Alternatively are the parties attracting more members, but more of the same types of people? Finally, are the political parties changing? How, exactly, have the new members shaped the SNP and Scottish Greens ideologically, programmatically and strategically, and in what different ways in each party? This project hopes to provide answers to these questions.
References


Bale, T. and P. Webb (2014) ‘Not as Bad as We Feared or Even Worse Than We Imagined? Assessing and Explaining Conservative Party Members’ Views on Coalition’, *Political Studies* (Early view online 24 September 2014).


