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Party Membership Research: Methodological Changes and Challenges

Abstract: The decline in party membership across many democracies has raised significant concerns within numerous political parties. In response, established parties have introduced organisational innovations aimed at enhancing their appeal to potential members. At the same time, the political newcomers often reject traditional party structures in favour of movement-based models, which they perceive as a means to rejuvenate political engagement. However, despite their reluctance to offer conventional memberships, these new political movements actively engage individuals. This article reviews the research methods employed in the study of party membership. Utilising, to some degree, a database created from articles published in “Party Politics”, we examine whether changes in the subject matter and the status of party membership within organisations are reflected in the adaptation of established research methods and techniques. We evaluate whether new methods and techniques provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation or if they merely represent superficial innovations or attractive ‘sprinkles’ that do not substantially contribute to generating new knowledge.

Keywords: party members, party organisation, research methods, “Party Politics”

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Introduction

Research on party organisation has a long-standing tradition in political science and has recently regained a new momentum in the party literature (Borz, Janda, 2020, p. 3). Although scholars of political parties are increasingly moving away from a purely deterministic approach in which party organisation is seen mainly as an effect of environmental conditions, there remains a strong emphasis on their adaptability to systemic, social, and technological changes. It is not only party organisations that are changing, but also the ways and methods of studying them. While books and articles analysing single cases or comparing political parties in a limited number of countries continue to be published, there is a noticeable shift in research on party organisations towards large comparative studies and ‘big data’ projects and from qualitative to quantitative research.

What seems constant are the aspects of party organisation that are being explored, such as leadership (Cross, Pilet, 2015; Radecki, Gherghina, 2015; Hartliński, Kubát, 2020), intra-party democracy (Scarrow, 2005; Cross, Katz, 2013; Rahat, Shapira, 2017; Ignazi, 2020), organisational complexity (Tavits, 2012; Sobolewska-Myślik, Kosowska-Gąstoł, Borowiec, 2016; Jacuński et al., 2021), party’s decision-making processes, including candidate selection (Rahat, Hazan, 2001; Rahat, 2009; Pilet, Cross, 2014; Pacześniak, 2023), party membership (Scarrow, Gezgor, 2010; van Haute, Gauja, 2015, Winclawska, Pacześniak, 2018; Winclawska et al., 2021; Achury et al., 2020), intra-party conflicts (Greene, Haber, 2016; Ibenskas, 2020), internal regulations and party rules (Poguntke, Scarrow, Webb, 2016; Gauja, 2017; Scarrow, Webb, Poguntke, 2017; 2022).

The last decades of the 20th century were the time when significant projects on party organisations’ research in comparative perspective were launched. The first major endeavour was initiated by Kenneth Janda (1980), who developed a comprehensive database on political party organisations. The second was undertaken by Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair (1992; 1994; 1995), who, in collaboration with some country scholars, collected extensive and diverse data on 79 Western political parties from 12 countries covering the period from 1960 to 1990. The project was then carried on and developed by the next generation of party scholars: Susan E. Scarrow, Paul D. Webb, and Thomas Poguntke in the form of the Political Parties Database (2017). It has been steadily expanded to include new data from an increasing number of political parties and countries. These projects and the data they provided have significantly contributed to the development of the comparative party organisations’ research.

In 1995, the international journal dedicated exclusively to the study of political parties, “Party Politics”, began to be published. Symbolically for our analysis, Katz and Mair (1995) wrote the opening article of the first issue, where they discussed changing models of party organisation and party democracy, introducing the cartel party thesis. “Party Politics” as a forum for the analysis of parties,

their historical development, structure, policy programmes, ideology, electoral and campaign strategies, and their role within the various national and international political systems, remains central to the debates, both reflecting and stimulating the high-quality research of those working in this field. As P. Whiteley wrote on the website of the journal, “it has built a solid reputation over the years of being a key source for some of the best research in this area”. Also, quantitatively, in terms of the bibliometric measures, the journal’s position is high. According to the Web of Science, the “Party Politics” Impact Factor for 2022 was 2,7, and it ranks, by Journal Impact Factor in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), as 58th title out of 187 classified. It means that it is in the second quartile (Q2) and 69th percentile (Web of Science, 2024). The journal’s position was the primary reason for us to choose it to analyse how research on party organisation has evolved over the last almost three decades.

This article begins with several observations based on a quantitative content analysis of the party organisation topic in “Party Politics”. Secondly, we concentrate on selected methods of studying party membership, both quantitative and qualitative, that party scholars may find instructive or inspiring for their research. We also offer a practical discussion on the analysed methods’ promises, challenges, and pitfalls. The article concludes with a section where we address the links between classical and newer membership research methods and techniques, evaluating their effectiveness in generating knowledge.

Research design and data set

We decided to study the content of all volumes of “Party Politics” from 1995 to 2023. During this time, 162 issues were published, encompassing 1365 research articles. Out of them, we selected articles devoted to internal party organisations. To identify such articles, we used the method of thematic text analysis and distinguished nine categories. The first was party organisation, which covered just over half of the articles. Then we had eight more specific categories such as: (1) party members; (2) intra-party democracy; (3) party change/transition; (4) candidate selection; (5) party leader/leadership; (6) party activists; (7) party regulation/constitution/statutes; (8) party elites (see Fig. 1). The analysis does not include issues that are related to external aspects of party organisation, such as their relations with voters.

Many of these categories were interwoven within individual articles. For instance, articles focusing on party constitutions facilitated the analysis of the official story of party organisation, including the position of party leadership, members, local structures, intra-party democracy, and so on. Similarly, articles devoted to intra-party democracy frequently analysed issues such as the leader’s position or candidate selection processes within the party or party membership.

So, what is important to underline is that single articles often explored multiple distinguished categories. In total, we qualified 262 texts for analysis, which represented 19% of all published articles in this period. They were selected on the basis of keywords and abstracts. This means that the dataset includes articles in which the categories we identified were used by the authors as keywords. Additionally, if the keywords provided by the authors did not include these categories, but it was evident from the abstract that they were also the subject of analysis, the article was included in our dataset.



Fig. 1. Statistical coverage of the content of articles in the party organisation category

The percentage points do not amount to 100% because one article could include more than one distinguished category.

Source: authors' calculations based on "Party Politics".

Geographically, the overwhelming majority of articles referred to European countries, with a higher concentration on Western Europe compared to Central and Eastern Europe. Additionally, articles frequently referenced other countries classified as Western democracies, developed democracies, or democratic nations, as named by the authors of the articles, such as the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Israel. Only 29 articles (11%) were devoted to any of the distinguished organisational categories in other regions of the world, such as in Africa, Asia, or South America.

Most articles (61%) analysed a single country; in almost 15%, two to five countries were under scrutiny, and in nearly 24%, more than five countries were analysed. From the first decade to the last, the percentage of articles analysing more than five countries almost doubled, from 17,2% in 1995–2004 to 33,3% in 2015–2023. Nonetheless, the majority of the articles were still devoted to a single

country. In the first decade, it was 71,7% of such articles; in the second, 55,1%, and the third, 52,6%.

Qualitative methods of analysis were used in the majority of the articles devoted to widely defined party organisation research (56%), and 44% utilised quantitative methods as their primary research approach. However, the proportion of methods used in researching party organisation has changed over time. While in the first decade of the journal's history, the dominance of the qualitative methods was evident, in the second, it persisted, though with a less pronounced disparity. By the third decade, however, quantitative methods had become significantly more prevalent than qualitative methods (Fig. 2)³.

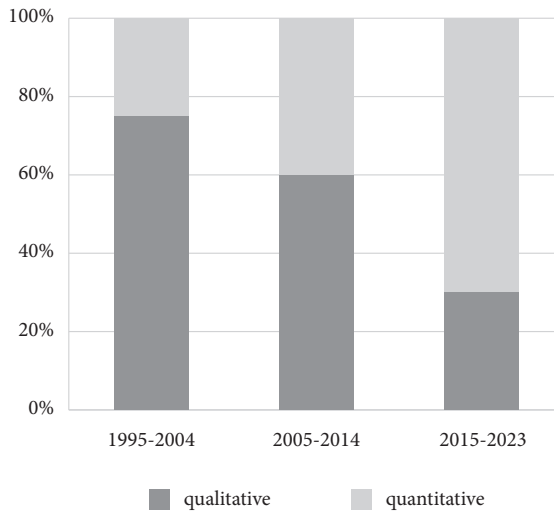


Fig. 2. Proportion of qualitative and quantitative methods used in the party organisation articles in successive decades

Source: authors' calculations based on "Party Politics".

The use of qualitative or quantitative methods of analysis correlates with the distinguished researched category. While the quantitative methods were more frequently employed in studies focusing on party activists and party members,

³ In some articles, the authors utilised both qualitative and quantitative methods of research. To simplify the analysis in each of such cases, after analysing the article, we chose the major method used by the author and qualified the article according to the main method used by the author. This is why the articles are divided only into two categories, but in the text, we refer from time to time to the mix method approach.

the qualitative methods were predominantly used when the main interest of the researchers was party elites, leadership, organisation, or party change (Fig. 3).

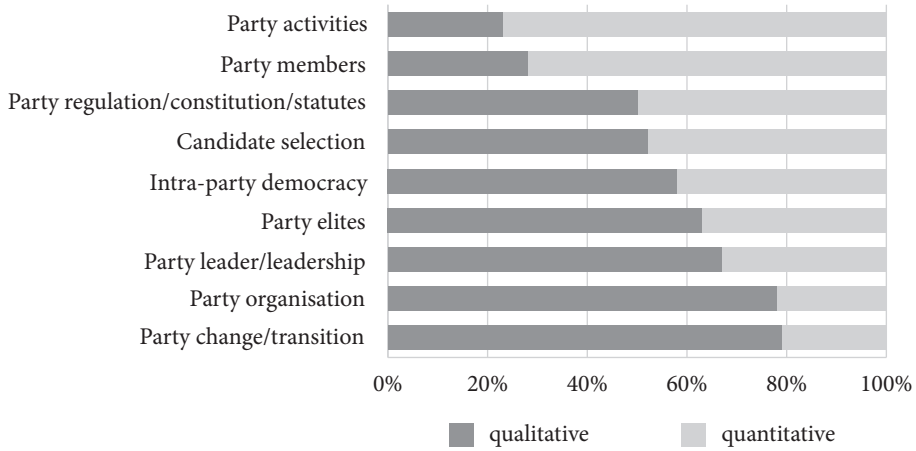


Fig. 3. Proportion of qualitative and quantitative methods used in the party organisation articles divided into researched categories

Source: authors' calculations based on "Party Politics".

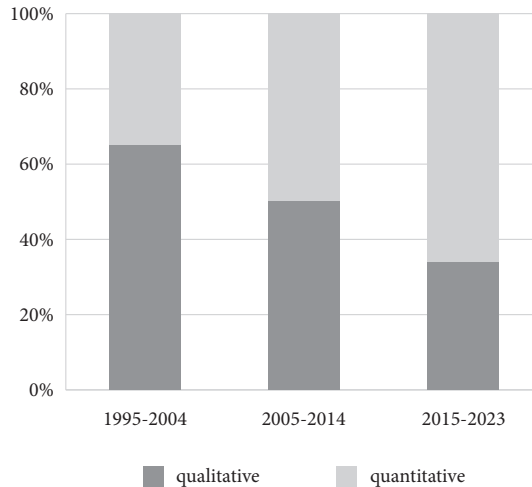


Fig. 4. Proportion of qualitative and quantitative methods used in the articles on party membership in successive decades

Source: authors' calculations based on "Party Politics".

There were 84 articles devoted to party membership, which is 6,1% of all the articles published in “Party Politics” between 1995 and 2023 and 32,1% of all articles about party organisation. The majority of them (72%) used quantitative or mixed research methods, and only 28% used qualitative ones. Moreover, the proportion of quantitative research over time has increased significantly.

The next section of the article discusses the methods used in party membership research, starting with qualitative methods used more frequently in the past and moving on to quantitative and mixed methods. We illustrate their use with examples of articles primarily published in “Party Politics”; although we are not rigorous, we sometimes refer to other journals or books.

Selected methods in party members' research

Although the theoretical literature on party models – the evolution from mass party to catch-all party, electoral-professional party, cartel party, and business-firm party – suggests an increasing marginalisation of members within the party organisation (Mazzoleni, Voerman, 2017), it is still widely assumed that members legitimise the existence of political parties and play several important roles, such as linkages between the party and citizens as political communicators, a solid basis of support in the ground as the most loyal voters, or regular human and financial resources (Koo, 2020). Moreover, many parties themselves, observing lowering interest in party activism, make an effort to revigorate their membership bases (Gauja, 2017). Thus, it seems natural that the socio-demographic characteristics of members, their motivation to engage in the political party, views and political opinions, congruence with the party's ideological line, formal positioning, and the actual role played in the party receive research attention. Thanks to the research that has been conducted among party members since at least the 1970s, “we know a fair bit about the social and demographic composition of party membership [...]. We also believe we know something about why people join parties and what they do for them once they've joined [...]. And we know the extent of the say afforded to those members – something that varies considerably both over time and between parties” (Bale, Webb, Poletti, 2019, p. 7).

Even if the boundaries of political parties are blurring, as some “parties invite all of their supporters, members or not, to participate in party organisational activities and candidate selection” (Katz, Mair, 2009, p. 755; see also Scarrow, 2014), formal members can be distinguished from activists or supporters by the fact that they have a formalised organisational affiliation based on obligations, such as paying a membership fee, and privileges, e.g., more rights to participate in a party's internal decision-making process (Heidar, 2006, p. 301). The methods of studying this population are these we are looking at.

The study of political parties as organisations, as well as the study of party members, uses qualitative methods, quantitative methods and combinations of both. On the one hand, as Hans Noel points out, “almost all work on parties makes use of qualitative methods in some way. We cannot get reliable measures of the bargains struck inside a smoke-filled room, but we can interview those who were there and compare their accounts. Excellent qualitative work has addressed the history of the parties, the politics surrounding key transformations, and the source of current party rules” (Noel, 2010, p. 58). Qualitative analysis also allows the exploration of less penetrated research areas and is more feasible to use when the research concentrates on the party elites. On the other hand, quantitative research has the advantage of being more rigorous, broad, replicable and better suited to comparative analysis. It is a truism to say that the purpose drives the study, so research methodology and methods stem from the adopted paradigm, stated research problem, theoretical assumptions, and the questions we seek answers to. There are researchers who prefer qualitative methods over quantitative ones and the other way around. However, there is also a group of researchers adopting a pragmatic paradigm (Creswell, 2009) and using mixed research methods to address their research problems fully. So, the box of (research) tools is at the investigator’s disposal.

Qualitative methods

Party membership, like other internal affairs of the party as an organisation, often relates to a domain outside the public eye, especially since, for a long time, in many countries, political parties were treated as somehow private organisations. Therefore, in order to get closer to what goes on behind the scenes, many studies, especially the pioneering ones, used qualitative methods. Although our statistical analyses have shown that we have been witnessing a shift towards quantitative research for some time now, there is also an awareness that qualitative methods are still more useful (and, in fact, the only ones) for investigating “the microscopic foundations of parties as political institutions, as well as the practices, processes, rituals, construction of images and communities, or the implicit meanings, skills, desires and emotions of party actors” (van Haute, Gauja, 2015, p. 201). In other words, qualitative methods are used when the researchers want to know how the respondent sees the world of party politics, understands the processes within the party or party system also in their social context, and defines the interests of the party or themselves as a party member. We selected three qualitative methods: individual interviews with party members, focus group interviews, and participant observation to look closer at. We chose them as the methods often utilised by the authors and the ones that require contact with the party members, and not merely secondary data analysis, which is easier, at least at the level of data access.

Individual interviews with party members

Interviews with members of political parties allow the phenomenon of membership engagement to be explored at an individual level. The interviews can range from unstructured, open interviews, in which the researcher does not interfere too much with what the respondent says, through semi-structured interviews with a set list of topics to cover, to fully structured ones when the interviewer has a strict list of questions that have to be asked to every respondent in the same sequence. An example of using narrative interviews with biographical elements is the research by Stéphanie Dechezelles (2008), who compares the mechanism of the construction of cultural frames by the young activists of Alleanza Nazionale and Lega Nord. Interviews with members of both parties made it possible to identify certain shared biographical, family and social experiences that influenced their political involvement. Another example, this time using semi-structured interviews with party members, is a study by Nino Junius and Joke Matthieu, who analysed power structures in the Agora party, which is a small, highly deliberative movement party, formally without a leader, that holds one seat in the city of Brussels parliament (Junius, Matthieu 2023).

Focus groups interview

The specificity of the method is reflected in part by each of the names used in English: focus group interview (FGI), focus group discussion (FGD), and group depth interview (GDI). Each of these terms emphasises different specific feature of the method, which is: firstly, implemented in a group (several participants); secondly, focused on a topic; thirdly, the conversation is in-depth (and not superficial); and fourthly, it is a discussion and not just answering questions (Maison, 2015, p. 62). In research with party members, a mini group, which is a variation of a focus group interview conducted with a smaller number of participants, sometimes works better. The advantage of the mini group is the possibility of going into more depth than in classical group interviews. This feature brings them closer to in-depth individual interviews while retaining the basic feature of group interviews, i.e., the possibility of interaction between participants. A small group focus group interview gives all participants the opportunity to engage more actively, which is the norm with committed party members. Focus group interviews are also a good method to introduce projective techniques as one of the tools for getting spontaneous reactions from the participants to the topic of discussion (see Caiani et al., 2024).

An example of a study that used FGIs is an article answering the question of whether it is possible to remove authoritarian powers in a parliamentary democracy when the government has weakened or dismantled democratic

mechanisms and institutions (Żuk, Paczeńskiak, 2022). The researchers were not so much interested in knowing objective facts as in analysing political reality with the meaning given to it by party members. The moderated group discussion made it possible to reflect on the atmosphere prevailing in the ranks of Polish opposition parties and members' assessment of their electoral chances in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

The method of loosely structured group discussions could be classified as a variation of focus group interviews. In order to make the discussion as natural as possible, the interventions of the moderator must be kept to a minimum. This method was used by Fabio Wolkenstein (2018) when investigating patterns of discursive practice within social democratic parties in Austria and Germany. Participants were asked to identify concrete issues of disagreement between them – issues over which they had argued in the past or issues on which they had not yet reached agreement. The aim of the exercise was to gain insights into the nature and depth of their disagreements, as well as the results of their previous discursive exchanges. Here, the researcher assumes the role of an active interpreter who seeks to make sense of the meanings evoked by the participants. All of this dovetails with the study's exploratory ambitions when the principal purpose is not hypothesis testing or causal inference but to investigate what deliberation at the party grassroots looks like in practice.

Participant observation

Deeper insights into the inner life of political parties can be gained by adopting some ethnographic methods during participant observation. It was, for example, applied in studies of over 60 party rallies in Argentina and Peru (Szwarcberg, 2014). This research has shown how such events contribute to organisational building, information circulation, grassroots mobilisation and activist socialisation.

Sometimes, researchers may be invited by parties as experts to conduct party workshops, conferences or deliberative assemblies, which on occasion allows them to directly examine and observe the unwritten rules, mechanisms and power dynamics within parties (Faucher, 2021). Some of the knowledge gained in this way (e.g., during the informal meetings following the seminars) cannot be used directly in academic publications. Still, it can support, for example, social network analysis in the party.

Another type of participant observation is a tool derived from consumer research called the mystery client method. The researcher or interviewers hired by the researcher impersonate, for example, people interested in joining a party. They go to the local branch of the party or contact it, pretending that they would like to become a party member. This makes it possible to move from analysing the formal rules for joining an organisation based on party statutes and public

declarations of party leaders on party openness to new members to the real story, i.e., seeing how it works in practice at the lowest organisational levels. An example of using the mystery client method in this context is the research by Michał Jacuński et al. (2021, pp. 243–244), in which the researchers tested the openness of the Polish political parties on the ground for new potential members.

Quantitative methods

Party members are relatively large populations. They constitute, depending on the country, from 1% to even 17% of national electorates (Scarrow, Webb, Poguntke, 2017, p. 33). This means that there are several hundred thousand party members in smaller countries and even more than a million in larger ones. Such populations are ideal for quantitative studies that provide reliable comparative data, both at the national and international levels. This type of comparison is becoming more feasible with the increasing availability of databases that collect and provide information on many aspects of party organisation in many countries, including data that can be used in the party members' research. For the quantitative methods, we chose to have a closer look at those which, on the one hand, are the most popular (party rules analysis and members' surveys). However, what needs to be underlined here is that with the new databases, new opportunities to conduct this research emerged. On the other hand, we chose two methods to discuss that are, so far, utilised less frequently but also bring promising results. These are experiments and social network analysis.

Institutional analysis of party rules

Often, the analysis of party members starts with an 'official story' approach, mainly reporting on formal party rules. Party statutes answer questions that are fundamental to the functioning of parties as collective political entities based on voluntary membership, such as criteria, conditions, rights and obligations of members, dues rates, probationary periods, ease of joining the party, as well as roles for members in party decisions. Statutes also regulate intra-party democracy, which affects the role of party members, and their analysis allows, for example, to distinguish between assembly-based and plebiscitary variants of IPD (Poguntke, Webb, Scarrow, 2016, p. 671). Research on the members' activity based on party regulations was conducted by Zsolt Eneydi and Lukas Linek, who focused on "the membership requirements, frequency of meetings, the activity of members, and the weight of mobilisation in party strategies" (2008, p. 460).

The most comprehensive party-rules database was created under the Party Politics Database Project by Poguntke, Scarrow, and Webb. The sample of almost 300 parties in more than 50 electoral democracies from six continents includes

parliamentary and presidential regimes, federal and unitary systems, and established and newer democracies, which vary in population and geographic sizes and use diverse electoral systems (Scarrow, Webb, Poguntke, 2022). The quantitative analysis of party statutes is preceded by a qualitative content analysis of party documents. The standard coding of variables allows not only cross-national and cross-party family analysis but also the measurement of the level of decentralisation, inclusiveness or representativeness of parties, which is a typical example of quantitative research.

Classical party membership surveys

The survey method is by far the most dominant methodological tool for studying the behaviour, attitudes and characteristics of party members. Party membership surveys have developed over time – evolving from population surveys on political participation to partial membership surveys (geographically limited or organizationally restricted surveys, e.g., to congress delegates or middle-level elites) to full membership surveys (van Haute, Gauja, 2015, pp. 12–13). By using this research tool, it is possible to find answers to questions about members' motivations to join the party (Weber, 2020; Gomez et al., 2021), to stay in the party (Gomez, Ramiro, 2019) or to leave it (Barnfield, Bale, 2022), convergence and divergence of their views with the ideological and programmatic line of the party, levels of political views radicalisation (from moderate to extreme) between different strata of party members (Norris, 1995), the nature of members commitment to the party, but also assessments of party leadership (Winclawska et al., 2021). It is also a useful method of obtaining information on party members' social profile and background. Many research projects that analysed these profiles were original party membership surveys; however, as Ruth Dassonneville and Ian McAllister demonstrated, some research on party members can be done using secondary data analyses from such datasets as the European Social Survey and World Value Survey. Authors using these databases showed that “with the exceptions of income levels and church attendance, the members of populist and non-populist parties look very much alike and hold similar political attitudes” (Dassonneville, McAllister, 2023). Additionally, combining a member-based survey with a nationally representative survey makes it possible to examine party members' representativeness with respect to party supporters regarding socio-economic status and the ideological spectrum (Koivula et al., 2020). However, the survey method does not allow for example, to fully grasp party membership as a relationship or dynamic process involving both a demand side (parties) and a supply side (members).

Experiments

When the researchers want to learn about causation, they use the method of experiment. In social sciences, experiments are more difficult to run because of the sample sizes and the difficulties of recreating the natural environment in the laboratory. A solution to these problems can be a population-based survey-experiment or quasi-experiment. This method can be defined as an experiment administered to a representative sample in the population (Mutz, 2012). Such a sample is then randomly divided into two samples when the first (experimental group) is treated with stimuli and the second (control group) is not. This method allows to assess, for example, how different party reforms would be received by party members or how different party messages or narratives affect partisan groups (Bowler, Carreras, Merolla, 2023). It is also useful for exploring sensitive issues, such as racism, sexism or ethnic biases. A great example is research by Sigrid Van Trappen (2022), who conducted a quasi-experiment in Flemish political parties involving members who are selectors of candidates in local elections. Each participant was presented with two aspirants, one ethnic minority aspirant and one ethnic majority aspirant. Their ethnicity was cued by granting them a common Moroccan or Flemish name. The two aspirants were randomly assigned low or high socio-economic status, and their profiles were composed of the stances included in the actual election programmes of the party of the quasi-experiment participant. Participants were then asked to evaluate each one on a Likert scale, which, while controlling for variables, determined their level of prejudice (Van Trappen, 2022, pp. 1126–1127).

Social networks analysis

Social network analysis examines the connections and relationships between people or groups to understand the structure and characteristics of the network, locate significant actors, influential figures, and interaction patterns. So, it is not surprising that political science is fascinated by networks. Social network analysis in political parties enables information collection on connections between party members, which can be visualised as a network graph and then analysed using mathematical and statistical methods (see Gupta, Trivedi, Singh, 2023). Optimal results are obtained by introducing mixed methods during data collection: qualitative techniques such as in-depth interviews or ethnographies, which may be more useful to investigate individual network members' views of and actions in the network, and quantitative methods, which have clear strengths when it comes to observing macro-level constructs (Froehlich, 2023). The motivation for studying social networks is that their structure can capture essential contours of opportunities and constraints that shape social and political behaviour within a political party. For example, "sparse networks tend to be fragile, while

dense networks, that have multiple paths between groups of nodes, are less likely to fall apart over time” (Ward, Stovel, Sacks, 2011, p. 246), and this may already be a contribution to understanding the organisational sustainability of a political party.

Challenges and pitfalls of analysed methods

Research on party membership faces several challenges. The most difficult one is to reach the population under study directly. It is easier with qualitative interviews and even focus groups when the researcher, who knows just a few party members, with the snowball sampling method, can reach others to invite them to participate in the project. It is much more difficult to reach populations of party members in order to conduct a survey. In this case, access to party registers is crucial (van Haute, Gauja, 2015, p. 14), but political parties are very reluctant to grant such access to people from outside the parties. Also, parties’ overall willingness to collaborate with researchers has declined over time⁴ (Bale, 2019, p. XIV; Gauja, Kosiara-Pedersen, 2021, p. 33). What is more, from our experience of research in Polish political parties, we can conclude that most are not overly interested in acquiring knowledge about their membership bases. Moreover, they sometimes are afraid that some of the results could be unfavourable to their image, so it is better that researchers do not explore them.

It is much easier to reach the party members when the parties are open to collaboration with the researchers, as in the Scandinavian countries (Kölln, Polk, 2017). This allows researchers to use observational methods as well as freely distribute questionnaires to party members. So, in order to conduct a project, the consent of the party is auspicious. Usually, it is the party leadership that must approve the researcher’s request. Still, sometimes, the consent of all members expressed in a referendum is needed (this was the case when we conducted the research in the Together Party in Poland). With the party authorisation, the research may be conducted either during the membership meetings or party congresses, or the questionnaires may be sent online to party members by the party’s administration, as the legal regulations usually do not allow the release of members’ contact details to the researchers. Both ways of running the survey have their pros and cons. When the questionnaires are distributed in person during party meetings, the researcher has greater control over the response rate (they can encourage the party members to return the filled-in surveys). Still, at the

⁴ To overcome this obstacle, the party researchers employ different tactics: they use large online panels provided by market research companies, exclude the parties that refuse to collaborate or limit the studies to specific participants, e.g., the delegates at the annual meeting (Gauja, Kosiara-Pedersen, 2021, p. 33).

same time, they must take into account that only the more active party members attend party meetings and party congresses. When the questionnaires (or links to them) are sent to the party members by the party administration, they reach every party member, but the researcher loses control over the sample by having no supervision over the electronic survey distribution process and no possibility to encourage respondents to take part in the survey. They also have to believe the party in terms of response rate, which is always much lower when using an indirect channel than a direct one, i.e., distributing questionnaires during party events. So, the researchers need to acknowledge that their sample of party members is usually not representative of the whole population of party members.

More representative data on party members can be obtained from global research projects, such as the World Value Survey or the European Social Study. However, there the numbers of party members in the population samples are low, and the questions asked are fixed, so the party members' researcher must limit their research questions to what there is in the database. In one of his latest studies on party members Tim Bale and his collaborators reached the British party members through a large online panel provided by a commercial research company (Bale, Webb, Poletii, 2019, p. XIV). Thanks to this method, they could also reach those who resigned from the party membership. So, it is not the research method that is a novelty in Bale's project, but the possibility to reach both the respondents who are party members and those who decided to leave the party, which is even more valuable because it gives us new knowledge about why members are opting out.

Both qualitative and quantitative comparative cross-country research projects that aim to "identify patterns between parties and systems" (Gauja, Kosiara-Pedersen, 2021, p. 34) require survey instruments to be designed in such a way that the results obtained can be comparable. Translations from different languages, national contexts, ways of formulating survey questions and often the need to negotiate survey instruments with the parties themselves are just some of the difficulties in such projects (Gauja, Kosiara-Pedersen, 2021, p. 34). To overcome these difficulties, international teams of researchers usually deal with such challenges by employing different modes of consultations on translations of the questions in the questionnaires and negotiating the national contexts of the research to be addressed in a research tool.

Finally, also the consent on how to measure the variables can be challenging to reach. For example, if we take the variable of members' engagement in the party work usually, it is measured by the questions of "how many hours does the member devote to party work" in a specific period and "what activities do they engage in" (e.g., liking party posts, actively creating content along with the party line, participating in party events, engaging in election campaigns, standing for election from party lists, etc.). What in one party can be considered an average level of engagement (e.g., four hours of party work per week in the inter-election

period), in another one, it might be regarded as a high or very high level of engagement. Because it is not only the context (i.e., how other party members engage) that matters but also the party organisational model adopted. Member engagement in a party with a participatory and deliberative culture needs to be assessed differently than in a centralised party that does not provide members with many opportunities to engage beyond the electoral campaign period.

Conclusion

Our analysis of articles published in one of the world's foremost academic journals on political parties indicates that it is not so much the research methods themselves as the data sources that have changed over the last almost three decades. There has been a notable shift from case studies to large-scale comparative research. The emergence of new extensive databases means that researchers do not always have to collect data themselves to carry out a research project; instead, they can pose new research questions to the existing data. This makes knowledge accumulation more efficient and the expenditure of large amounts of money more rational.

An analysis of recent articles published in "Party Politics" (but not only there) suggests that mixing datasets will be a trend over the next few years. This approach will not only broaden the knowledge of membership but also move beyond the mere description and allow the development of multi-level explanatory models.

Although science transcends national borders, some regional trends are apparent. While experiments have been of enduring interest to researchers in the United States for years, they are used less frequently in Europe, making them seem like a relative novelty. The development of AI technology and tools will likely accelerate research using social network analysis, although it will not necessarily be used more often in membership research.

However, we do not believe that even with the growing popularity of large quantitative research projects, qualitative methods will become a thing of the past. Since the goal of political science is also to understand the behaviour of individuals and how people perceive and interpret the world around them, qualitative research has both a golden past and a bright future.

Finally, there is one more remark to make when answering our question of whether new methods and tools enable researchers to comprehend the phenomenon under analysis better or whether it is rather a kind of attractive variety, the "sprinkle" that does not necessarily generate new knowledge. Undoubtedly, the paramount role of science is to advance knowledge. But even if the use of new tools (new to a particular researcher, not always objectively new because they

have only just been invented) does not result in ground-breaking discoveries, it can enhance our knowledge and – which is also essential – bring joy and satisfaction to the research process. Although we do not usually acknowledge this in our work as researchers or consider enjoyment as a secondary issue, in our opinion, it is worth trying new things to learn more, broaden our horizons and challenge ourselves with new methods. Thus, we hope that, for at least some of the members of our audience, our article will serve as an inspiring incentive to reach for methods and techniques they have not previously employed.

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