

The Internet's Role in the Recent Revival of the SNP and Labour Party

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Abstract

Political party membership within the UK has been in long term decline and by 2013, had fallen to a historic low of 0.8% of the electorate. However, this downward trajectory appears to have subsided and even reversed in recent years and we may be witnessing something of a revival of party membership. For instance, membership rates have more than doubled, increasing from 0.8% in 2013 to 1.7% by 2018. Of the main political parties, membership of the SNP and Labour Party has increased the most. The SNP's membership has risen from 24,000 in 2012 to 118,000 in 2018, while the Labour Party's has increased from 338,000 to over 552,000 in a shorter period of time. Both parties membership compositions have also altered in recent year's with females now accounting for 47% of Labour's membership and 43% of the SNP's. The number of under-30s within the SNP has also doubled to 20% of the party's total. This has occurred while both parties have come to increasingly utilize the internet to improve their Intra-Party Democracy (IPD) processes. For example, both allow their members to vote in leadership contests and debate party policy online. While not discounting expressive motivations such as support for Scottish Independence in the case of the SNP or support for Corbyn's anti-austerity policies for Labour, this research seeks to determine whether the parties' use of the internet for IPD purposes has played a role in their rising membership's and changing compositions. To do this, a mixed methods explanatory sequential design will be employed.

Introduction

Political parties play an important role in society: They connect government and civil society, recruit candidates and political leaders and structure election campaigns (Cross and Katz, 2013:1). Their other important functions include aggregating the many and diverse interests in society into coherent political programmes, simplifying electoral choices, providing citizens with political education and enabling them to participate in the policy development

process (Whiteley, 2009:250-1). Political parties also play a key role in organising parliament, government and other essential state institutions (Mair, 2013:90). These important functions led Schattschneider (1942:1) to claim that “political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties”. Muller and Sieberer (2006:436) further emphasise the importance of political parties by describing them as the “engines” of the political process.

Despite this perceived importance, political party membership within the UK has been in long term decline and by 2013, had fallen to a historic low of 0.8% of the electorate (Audickas et al, 2018:4). Falling rates of party membership can also be observed across Europe: Mair and Van Biezen (2001) conducted a study of twelve other long-established European democracies and found that membership rates had declined in each. However, this membership decline has been particularly pronounced within the UK. For instance, data indicates that the UK has lost close to one million members over the past three decades (Van Biezen et al, 2009). Those members who remain also fail to represent the electorate: they are predominately white males who have high levels of education, income and occupational status (van Biezen et al, 2012:38). This general fall in membership led Mair (2013:1) to claim that “the age of party democracy has passed”.

These developments have significant repercussions for the future of democracy as they restrict parties’ ability to carry out the key functions outlined above: Namely, their role in connecting government and civil society and aggregating the many and diverse interests in society into coherent political programmes (Whiteley, 2009:242). Wider society is also likely to be affected due to weakening of social capital (Whiteley, 2009:253). Social capital has many benefits such as the lowering of crime rates, improving levels of community health, life satisfaction and education and is typically created through voluntary organisations, such as political parties (Putman, 2000). Since political parties are the most important voluntary organisations in democratic politics, the decline of its volunteer’s (its membership base) results in parties no longer contributing to the creation of social capital which will affect all of the benefits highlighted above (Whiteley, 2009:253).

Numerous explanations for this decline have been offered in the literature. Some have argued that the ever-closer relationship between parties and the state has contributed to the fall in party membership (Whiteley, 2011:32), while others insist that it has been brought about by

parties' failure to provide the electorate with significant policy alternatives (Webb, 2005; Mair, 2013). The decline of the mass party and the development of the catch-all people's party has also been blamed (Gibson and Ward, 1999:342), so too has alternative forms of participation (Whiteley, 2011:33). Some of these can be observed within the UK political system which perhaps explains the long-term decline of party membership. For instance, policy convergence between the Labour Party and Conservatives has been well documented and can be traced back to 1945 (Rose 1984; Marquand 1988; Kavanagh and Morris 1989; Evans and Norris, 1999). Labour and the SNP also provide a potent demonstration of the catch-all people's party (McTavish, 2016:77). Much of New Labour's policy development aimed to appeal to a wider support base while the SNP has introduced policies which have transgressed traditional left-right consistencies (McTavish, 2016:77). For example, it passed the Climate Change Act in 2009, while it also decreased business rates for small businesses each year between 2007 and 2011. What's-more, until fairly recently, the party advocated a "business friendly" policy of cutting corporation tax. There are also many alternative ways for individuals to participate in politics within the UK. One of which is an e-petition site, launched in 2011 by the former Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government, to "build bridges between people and parliament" (Rath, 2012). In one year, it had amassed 6.4 million signatures.

Despite all this, membership rates within the UK have begun to rise and we may be witnessing political parties' revival. For instance, since its historic low of 0.8% in 2013, it has more than doubled to 1.7% (Audickas et al, 2018). Of the main political parties, membership of the SNP and Labour Party has increased the most. The SNP's membership has risen from 24,000 in 2012 to 118,000 in 2018 and accounted for 3% of the Scottish electorate. While the Labour Party's has grown from 338,000 in December 2015 to around 552,000 in May 2018 (Audickas et al, 2018:10). Overall, the Labour party membership across the UK has risen from 0.4% of the electorate in 2013 to 1.2% in 2018. Evidence also suggests that the compositions of these parties have altered somewhat and that they are now more representative of the electorate. Labour's rise in membership has seen its female base increase to 47%, while the SNP's female membership has risen to 43% of the party's total (Bale et al, 2018:7). Previously the SNP had twice as many males than females and the lowest ratio of female members than any of the main political parties in Scotland. The number of under-30s within the party has also doubled from 10% of the party's total to 20%.

How can these sudden membership rises be explained; particularly when, as was previously discussed, a number of the processes which have contributed to the decline of party membership still persist in the UK? While not discounting expressive factors such as Scottish Independence or Corbynism, this paper argues that the parties increased use of the internet to facilitate IPD, at a time of record internet access within the UK (ONS, 2017), has played some role. It can also account for the parties changing compositions. This is a theory which has so far remained unexplored in research examining the recent surges of party membership (Mitchell et al, 2017; Keen et al, 2018). It is also contested by Katz (2013:49) who does not believe that improving the quality of IPD would reverse the trend of declining membership. This is because factors out-with the internal democratic arrangements of parties have made partisan participation a less attractive option to citizens. These factors include greater social mobility, increased secularisation and the breakdown of social class divisions.

Nevertheless, the premise of this argument is supported by many practicing politicians in Western democracies who believe that introducing greater IPD procedures would help to reverse the trend of declining party memberships (Van Biezen et al, 2012). This helps to explain why party leaders have recently “revised their party constitutions to give members a greater role in the recruitment of candidates, the election of leaders and in the policymaking process more generally” (Whiteley, 2011:26). Parties have utilised the internet to do this which this article will firstly discuss. It then focuses on an explanatory theory of political participation; the civic voluntarism model. This theory has been selected as “an impressive amount of empirical evidence has been provided for the explanatory power” of it (Gerl et al, 2017:90). However, it was developed for traditional offline forms of political participation and it is thus unclear whether it can account for online political activity. Therefore, the way in which the internet influences or overcomes the barriers to participation discussed in this theory will be examined. Attention will then turn to the methods employed within this study, before discussing the findings.

SNP and Labour’s Use of the Internet for IPD Purposes

Evidence suggests that new and old parties have begun to introduce measures to encourage membership participation and have been using Web 2.0 technologies to achieve this (van Biezen et al., 2012; van Biezen and Poguntke, 2014; Gomez and Ramiro, 2017). For instance, Podemos, Spain’s third largest party, enable its members to select candidates and leaders online, as well as have their say on manifesto development, electoral coalition and government participation (Gomez and Ramiro, 2017:4). Another party (or movement) which

utilises the internet for IPD purposes is The Five Star Movement. This organisation and its leadership envision an internet based and driven system of direct democracy and, in the run up to the 2013 Italian elections, the party allowed its members to select candidates online (Musiani, 2014:139). It has since entered into coalition with the League (formally Northern League) after winning the most votes in the 2018 election. Pirate parties, who have also won parliamentary representation in other countries such as Iceland and the Czech Republic gaining 10 and 22 seats respectively (Boldyreva and Grishina, 2017; BBC News, 2017), also place IPD and the internet at the centre of their organisations (Hartleb, 2013:363). Indeed, the Icelandic Pirates website states that

“Discussions are spread over in-house meetings, social media and various online groups. A great deal of dialogue takes place on Facebook pages, but there are also more focused web discussions at discourse.piratar.is. where Icelandic Pirates debate, interact and reach consensus on a variety of topics” (Pirate.is, 2018)

As demonstrated above, this use of the internet to facilitate member’s participation has proved to be popular amongst the electorate in a number of countries. It has also been successful in attracting members with Podemos reported to have 165,000 registered supporters just seven months after its formation (Casero-Ripolles et al, 2016:396). In light of these successes and with falling levels of party membership, many established parties may begin to utilise the internet to facilitate interaction and participation (Hartleb, 2013:363). Indeed, the Labour Party had previously identified the participatory and democratic potential of the medium before Podemos and the Five Star Movement’s successes. For instance, the party conducted an internal review of its organisation in 2011 called “Refounding Labour” which stated that:

“New technology and fresh techniques... could help to revive the party’s internal democracy by closing the gap between the leader and the led. Genuine two-way communication could assure that the authentic voice of the grassroots is heard and cannot be ignored”. (Hain, 2011:17).

Within this review, the party also questioned how they could utilise the internet to engage young members and to support the policy-making process (Hain, 2011). Labour then launched “fresh ideas” which allowed members of the public to use online forums to suggest ideas around key labour priorities such as “building a fairer economy” and “the cost of living

crises” (Gauja, 2013:124). Party members can also contribute to party policy debate online through the Labour Policy Forum page (policyforum.labour.org.uk). The party also enabled members to vote online for the first time in the 2014 National Executive Committee elections (NEC) before introducing online voting for leadership/deputy leadership contests in 2015 (BBC News, 2015). 343,995 members or supporters cast their votes online in this leadership election; making it the UK’s largest ever online poll (Dorey and Denham, 2016:274). Indeed, over four times more votes were cast online than by post. The party has more recently utilised the internet to launch the Labour Party Democracy Review where members could electronically suggest ideas and offer their opinion about the democratic processes in a number of areas such as “diversity and participation”, “electing Our Leadership” and “How We Make Policy”. When promoting this review, party leader Jeremy Corbyn claimed that “new technology is opening up participation..... We must encourage participation of our members at every level”. The SNP also enable its members to vote online in leadership elections and contribute to party policy development through the internet (snp.org). When considering this internet use, as well as the successes of newer parties which utilise the internet to facilitate member’s participation, this researcher believes that it is worth testing whether the SNP and Labour Party’s use of the internet for IPD purposes has played a role in their membership surges in recent years. Therefore, the following research question is proposed:

Research Question 1: Has the SNP and Labour party’s use of the internet for IPD purposes played any role in their recent membership surges?

Civic Voluntarism Model and the Internet

When investigating why citizens do not take part in politics, Verba et al (1995:269) found that it is because they cannot, because they do not want to or because nobody asked. In other words: individuals lack resources such as money, time and civic skills, subsequently reducing their ability to take political action; they are not psychologically engaged with politics and lack the motivation to become politically engaged; and because they are outside of recruitment networks which mobilize citizens into political life. Verba et al (1995) combine these into what they refer to as the civic voluntarism model. Resources are the most important component of this model (Verba et al, 1995:270) and will thus be the part which this research focuses on.

The extent to which one possess money resources is stratified along socioeconomic lines; leading to unequal levels of participation between different groups. Verba et al (1995:301) report that those with higher levels of education and employment status earn more than those with lower educational attainment and occupational positions. What's-more, females were found to make less money than males, while ethnic minority groups also earn less. Subsequently, these groups are all less likely to participate in politics. Civic-skills, the communication and organisational capabilities which enable individuals to effectively utilise money resources when taking political action, are also unequally distributed between groups (Verba et al, 1995:304-6). For instance, those with higher levels of education were found to possess greater levels of civic-skills. Education also has an indirect effect on the production of these skills later in life. It enables individuals to obtain high status occupations where they can give speeches, organise meetings and further develop and improve the skills required for participation (Ibid). Ethnic minority groups were also found to have lower levels of civic-skills; perhaps a result of the fact that English is often not their primary language (Verba et al, 1995:308). While little difference was found in the educational levels of males and females (Verba et al, 1995:307), it is important to note that males are more likely to secure high status jobs (Holt, 2012) which will indirectly enable them to further enhance their civic-skill resources. Time resources, in contrast, are more equally distributed between different groups. Indeed no relationship was found between SES and free-time (Brady et al, 1995:273). Unlike money, time is a resource with a fixed limit: there are only 24 hours in a day. What's-more, it cannot be stored and used at a later date.

The internet provides a variety of alternative ways to participate in politics (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011:453) beyond the traditional acts examined by Verba et al (1995). An individual can visit and/or create political blogs, contribute to a forum, arrange and sign e-petitions and organise/facilitate political demonstrations online. Furthermore, as was discussed in the preceding section, members/supporters can now take part in a number of party processes through the internet. Technological developments such as Web 2.0 therefore contain participative structures which encourage citizens to engage in politics (O'Reilly, 2005; Gerl et al, 2018). Scholarship (Delli Carpini, 2000; Best and Kruegar, 2005) has found that this online political participation requires a different set of resources and skills than offline political acts. These new resources are connected to an individual's internet capabilities and their ability to take advantage of the new participatory opportunities which the internet

provides (Anduiza et al, 2010). In this sense, the impact of the resources outlined by Verba et al (1995) decline in significance when focusing on online forms of activism.

Evidence of the inconsequential role played by traditional resources in accounting for online participation is provided by Anduiza et al (2010). These scholars test three forms of internet participation: contacting an official online, signing an e-petition and making an online donation and find that internet ability is the primary predictor for each. Internet skills was found to stimulate online participation by enabling individuals to more easily acquire political information online, by allowing them to understand how the information society works and also how to exert influence in it (Anduiza et al, 2010:359). Those with internet skills are also better able to make use of the mediums features which save time and maximise efficiency when undertaking political acts.

The diminished influence of traditional resources in accounting for online forms of political participation is further highlighted by Wang et al (2017:16-7) who also find that internet-specific resources and skills had the biggest impact on Chinese youth's online participation. Therefore, internet skills may overcome traditional barriers to participation and enable individuals to engage in the political process; albeit through the web. This is supported by Schlozoman et al (2010:490) who, while investigating the internet and political participation, concede that there is a "significant counter-stratificational effect of the internet". This is not to discount traditional resources entirely. Anduiza et al (2010:357) find that they are important factors in determining whether an individual has access to the internet in the first instance. For example, money enables citizens to overcome the costs of internet access as those with greater financial resources can afford the medium in the first instance. However, it is important to reiterate that internet access within the UK is at a record high with 90% of households now possessing broadband (ONS, 2017). This suggests that either a greater number of citizens now possess the traditional resources discussed by Verba et al (1995) or that they are no longer as important in determining internet access.

Even if these traditional resources did impact online political activism, the internet limits their influence in a number of ways. It allows activity to take place at any time and from any location which has access to the internet. This reduces time constraints as participation can take place within the confines of one's own home; excluding travel time and allowing it to be undertaken amongst the many other errands of everyday life. For example, an individual can vote for a leadership candidate or contribute to party policy debate in-between childcare and

other caring and household duties. The internet also reduces financial costs associated with participation: Citizens can send emails and contact party officials without accruing postage and packaging, telephone or travel costs. All of which this form of participation would otherwise entail. Therefore, the time enhancing and money saving features of the internet may reduce the importance of these resources in determining political participation (Wang et al, 2017:3). This contribution to party policy debate and contact with public officials is also likely to be undertaken within a program which has spell-check assistance. This will help individuals with their grammar and spelling, alleviating a lack of civic-skill resources and reducing their importance in shaping political participation.

Min (2010:22) disputes these arguments and insists that rather than contributing to the development of all humans, the internet is widening existing inequalities in political participation further. Norris (2001) supports this by claiming that a “digital divide” exists and that the internet simply acted as an additional medium in which politically engaged citizens can participate further. Therefore, the internet leads to the politically disengaged participating less than engaged citizens in the digital world, as well as in the real one. These assertions are confirmed by research which has demonstrated that those with higher socioeconomic status use the internet more for political purposes (Hill and Hughes, 1998; Norris, 1999). A Pew Research’s (2013) study of *Civic Engagement in the Digital Age* has also found that those with higher levels of education and income were more likely to be politically active on Social Networking Sites, to communicate/write about political issues online or to become involved in a civic group or activity online. Nevertheless, the rise and changing compositions of Labour and SNP members, as well as the parties previously discussed attempts to improve IPD and member’s participation through the internet, means that this argument should be revisited. When doing so, this researcher will seek to answer the following question:

Research Question 2: Has the SNP and Labour party’s use of the internet for IPD purposes had an impact on their compositions?

Data and Methods

To answer the questions posed above, a mixed methods comparative case study design was adopted. In doing so, this researcher is confirming Crasnow’s (2011:28) assertion that “most political scientists are multimethod researchers”. Indeed, the method is often employed by party scholars (Gauja, 2009) and has also been used in studies of the internet and political participation. For instance, Cantijoch, Galandini and Gibson (2016) employed mixed

methods research in their study of civic action sites and their impact on participation, the quality of democracy and attachment to one's community. The scholars stated that these methods "allows for a richer and more contextualised understanding" (Cantijoch et al, 2016:1900). Castlettrione (2012) also utilises mixed methods in his investigation of Facebook and political participation in the UK and Italy. While Gleason (2013) used this method of data collection to determine the role which Twitter had in informing citizens about the Occupy Movements and how this, as well as the platforms interactive features, led to citizens participating in these protests. As this research aims to build a general explanation for the rise and changing compositions of party membership in the SNP and Labour Party, an explanatory sequential design was adopted. As is commonplace with this design, priority was given to the quantitative phase of the research (Creswell, 2015:38).

The research firstly gathered responses through a quantitative survey of 1063 SNP and Labour members/supporters (affiliated and registered supporters were also included for the Labour Party due to the recent introduction of these supporter categories). In total, 550 responses were gathered from SNP members and 513 from Labour members/affiliated and registered supporters. These individuals were recruited through party members and supporters Facebook pages. The drawback of this recruitment method is that it can only reach party members who have internet access, a Facebook account, who are members of any of the targeted Facebook groups and those who logged into Facebook while the survey was live (Forgasz et al, 2018:268). However, it should again be noted that internet access in the UK is at a record high (ONS, 2017). Furthermore, in 2016, 36 million people in the UK had a Facebook profile; making it the UK's most popular social media platform (Statista, 2016). Of these social media users, a quarter reported that they visited their profile 10 times per day. Therefore, this researcher is confident that utilising Facebook for recruitment did not prevent many party members from completing the survey. Indeed, analysis of the data reveals that the survey was taken by a range of individuals across various lines of SES.

This first, quantitative phase had a number of goals. Firstly, it sought to establish the SES of the survey participants. It then wanted to identify the respondent's motivations for joining the party, before finding out about member's use of the internet for party matters and their perceptions of how the parties' use the internet for IPD purposes. Its final aim was to determine whether this internet use had influenced individual's decisions to join/remain a member of the party and whether this was related to their SES.

This first, quantitative phase will then be followed up with 15-20 purposely selected individuals, divided equally between the two parties, to explore their responses in greater detail and depth. To do this, semi-structured interviews will be adopted. To date, three interviews have been completed. Since the explanatory sequential design aims to explain initial quantitative results (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018:190), individuals selected for the qualitative follow-up phase were a subset of those who participated in the online survey. In other words: as the intention of the design is to use qualitative data to provide more detail and explain the quantitative results (Ivankova et al, 2006:5), the individuals best placed to do this are those who contributed in the first, quantitative phase. To recruit interview participants for the second phase of data collection, the survey invited individuals to leave their email address if they were willing to be interviewed. Individuals were then selected based on their responses to the initial questionnaire, as well as their SES. So those who indicated that the parties use of the internet for IPD purposes had influenced their decision to join the party and who were from groups traditionally not associated with party participation (females, those with low levels of education and income, younger citizens and ethnic minority groups) (Verba et al, 1995) were selected for this second, qualitative phase.

Preliminary Results

Research Question 1

The ways in which Labour and the SNP have utilised the internet to facilitate membership participation was previously discussed and include allowing members to vote in leadership elections, enabling them to debate and propose party policy and asking them to provide feedback on a number of party democratic processes. These opportunities have proved to be popular: This research has found that the vast majority of SNP and Labour members (90 and 94% respectively) claimed to have used the internet for party matters. When focusing on internet use for IPD purposes more specifically, this research also discovered that 45% of SNP and 52% of Labour members had contributed to party policy debate through this medium. 66% of SNP members and 88% of Labour members had also voted in party leadership/deputy leadership elections online. This disparity between the two parties perhaps derives from the fact that the Labour party recently launched the previously discussed Democracy Review and has also had leadership elections in 2015 and 2016. Indeed, 343,995 members or supporters voted online in the 2015 leadership election (Dorey and Denham, 2016:274). One year prior to these elections, as mentioned above, Labour party members had also voted online in the NEC elections, while Labour members have also recently voted in

new members to the party's NEC after leader Jeremy Corbyn created three new positions for party members (BBC News, 2018). The NEC is Labour's governing body and may have been considered as a leadership election by survey participants. When considering this, it appears that in recent years, there have been a greater number of online IPD opportunities available to Labour members.

Has these opportunities played a role in the recent membership rises of the SNP and Labour? Preliminary research findings suggest that it has. A substantial number of members from each party (36% for the SNP and 28% for Labour) claimed that the parties' use of the internet to facilitate membership participation has influenced their decision to join/remain a member. This supports many practicing politicians who believe that improving IPD processes would help to increase levels of party membership (Van Biezen et al, 2012). Despite a greater percentage of Labour members reporting that they utilise the internet for IPD purposes, SNP members are more likely to have joined/remained a member of the party as a result of the parties' use of the internet for this purpose. One potential explanation for this is that the party recently, under the leadership of Alex Salmond, had a very strong and powerful leadership team and lower rates of IPD. This has been suggested by members, interviewed as part of Mitchell et al (2011:48) study, who described the former leader as "dominating his party" and claimed he "blocks out the sun in the internal politics of the SNP". Conversely, Bennie (2015:183) found that SNP members were the most satisfied with the functioning of IPD. However, it should be noted that this study was conducted after Salmond departed as leader and the party introduced online voting to elect its Deputy Leader in 2014 (WebRoots Democracy, 2015). No online leadership election was held on account of the fact that no-one contested Nicola Sturgeon.

While numerous explanation can undoubtedly be offered, the participants themselves were best placed to explain these findings. As mentioned above, this research has so far conducted three semi-structured interviews with party members. Two were with Labour members and the other an SNP member. These interviews provided this researcher with some interesting initial insights. For example, when asking a 20-29 year old male (who will henceforth be known as male 1) why Labour's use of the internet to facilitate membership participation had influenced his decision to join/remain in the party, he stated:

"I feel like maybe the online thing hasn't been utilised enough in a way that, like even just outside parties for like general democracy you could have online participation. There's a lot

of potential for people to have a greater say in their lives in the future like via online participation”.

Male 1 appears to be insinuating that Labour’s use of the internet to facilitate membership participation has made the party more democratic and given him more influence in the party and impacted his decision to join/remain a member. His support for this form of participation and its democratic potential is evident when he says that it could be utilised outside of parties within democracy more generally. An 18 year old unemployed SNP member (male 2) whose highest level of education was Standard Grades SQA level 4/5 or equivalent confirmed that the party’s use of the internet for IPD purposes had made the organisation more democratic and influenced his decision to join:

“Its members can have a bigger say....It’s more democratic and we can also put in some policies onto the SNP website...they have used the internet in a good way”.

When asked to clarify whether he meant that the parties’ use of the internet had made the party more democratic and whether this had influenced his decision to join, he said:

“Yes, very much so”.

Therefore, the parties’ use of the internet for IPD purposes has had a positive impact on membership power and perceptions of democracy which in-turn has played some role in their membership increases. In the introduction, this researcher highlighted that the decline of the mass party model and the development of the catch-all party had played a role in the decline of party membership rates. This is because the catch-all people’s party, in contrast to the mass party, reinforced their leadership teams and reduced IPD and the meaningful participation of party members. Policy development examples were provided above to show that both the SNP and Labour Party could be considered as the catch-all people’s party. However, their previously discussed use of the internet also suggests that these parties have adopted some of the organisational practices of another party model: the cyber party. For instance, while not existing entirely in cyberspace, much of what this party does will be online (Margetts, 2006:533). This would make political participation cost free, eradicate the need to attend party meetings and allow participation to take place at home and at any time. This will be discussed in more detail when answering research question 2.

What’s-more, this party type utilises web-based technologies to reinforce the relationship between the party and voters; rather than the membership. This can be observed within the

Labour Party who introduced supporter categories for the first time in its 2015 leadership election (Dorey and Denham, 2016). The 105,598 supporters who voted in this contest became involved in the party through leadership recruitment which is also consistent with Margetts (2006:531) who insists that such elections are key to facilitating citizen's involvement in the cyber party. Margetts (2006:533) has previously stated that "internet penetration is too new, its potential too unrealized for there to be substantive empirical evidence of its (the cyber party) existence". However, internet access has since increased in the UK from 57% to 90% in just over a decade (ONS, 2017). This, coupled with the SNP and Labour Party's use of the medium, leads this researcher to believe that the cyber party, or at least the fragments of it, has materialised. Chadwick and Stomer-Galley (2016:289) share this view and have recently stated "we are now in a new period of multi-speed party membership along the lines predicted by Helen Margett's cyber party model". Whether the features of this cyber party has played a role in enhancing perceptions of democracy within the parties and contributed to their membership surges is something which this research hopes to explore further in future qualitative interviews. In-particular, this researcher is keen to interview registered/affiliated supporters of the Labour party to help answer this. From the data gathered so far, it appears that it has. For example, a female Labour member who looks after the home full-time (female 1) was asked whether she felt the process for electing party leader was democratic (which as discussed, can now be done online) and stated:

"It's as democratic as it could be really I think and it's online voting as well, you know you can do it by email... yeah so it does feel democratic".

Research Question 2

As highlighted above, there is much scepticism amongst scholars regarding the democratic potential of the internet. Some (Norris, 2001; Min, 2010) insist that the medium will simply reinforce existing participatory inequalities further and result in those with high levels of SES participating more online as well as offline. According to Min (2010:23), if the internet is only being utilised for political purposes by a certain section of the population, most notably those with high levels of SES, "then its democratic potential will be greatly undermined". However, the recent composition changes of the SNP and Labour party memberships, coupled with the parties' use of the internet for IPD purposes, mean that the internet's ability to overcome participatory barriers merits further discussion. To recap, Labour almost has equal numbers of male and female members, while the SNP's female membership base now accounts for 43% of its total (Bale et al, 2018:7). The SNP previously had the lowest ratio of

female-to-male members of the main political parties in Scotland (Mitchell et al, 2011). The number of under-30s has also doubled to 20% of the party's total. What's-more, the 2015 Labour leadership election, the party's first to be conducted online and the UK's largest ever online poll, seen Jeremy Corbyn, whose supporters had lower incomes than those for the other three candidates, win the contest (Dorey and Denham, 2016:274). Supporters of Liz Kendall, who received the fewest votes, had the highest level of income. While not discounting expressive motivations such as support for Independence or Corbyn's policies, it could also be argued that this demonstrates that, far from reinforcing existing inequalities, the internet overcomes barriers to participation and encourages previously marginalised groups to participate. If this were the case, we may expect to find those who were most likely to join/remain a member of the parties' due to their use of the internet for IPD purposes to be from lower SES groups.

This research tests this and finds that those who belong to the groups which Verba et al (1995) claimed were least likely to participate in politics due to their SES status, were most likely to join/remain a member of either of the parties as a result of their use of the internet for IPD purposes. Specifically, females, those with the lowest level of education, the unemployed (being used as an indicator of low income) and ethnic minority groups were least likely to participate in politics. This indicates that the parties' use of the internet for this purpose may have had an impact on the make-up of their memberships. Interestingly, however, older citizens were more likely to join either of the parties as a result of their use of the internet for IPD purposes, while the young were the least. Research (Mitchell et al, 2011; Bennie, 2015; McTavish, 2016) indicates that older citizens are more likely to be party members, while young citizens the least. Therefore, it would appear that the parties' use of the internet for IPD purposes has less impact on younger citizens. This is interesting considering that these citizens are more likely to be internet users (ONS, 2017).

While the role of traditional resources such as time, money or civic-skills in influencing online participation is disputed, this researcher argued above that even if they did have an impact on online activism, the internet reduces it. That is, online participation is cheaper and less-time consuming than offline participation and reduces money and time barriers to participation. Internet activism also overcomes a lack of civic-skill resources and provides people with more confidence. This may explain why those from lower SES, less likely to participate in traditional forms of activism (Verba et al, 1995), were more likely to join/remain a member of either party as a result of their use of the internet for IPD purposes.

These arguments have been confirmed in some of the qualitative interviews which, as discussed previously, were conducted with those with lower levels of SES to explain their answers. For instance, when asked about the Labour Party's use of the internet for IPD processes, female 1 claimed:

"I think it's another way to help more people have a voice in the party. Really just from the viewpoint of people who want to be more involved but are sort of excluded just because of circumstance, you know? Because you can't make particular meetings because you're a carer or you have a disability which restricts you from attending a meeting. So I think it just gives more people the opportunity to get involved".

In this sense, the opportunity to engage with the party through the internet has allowed this interviewee to participate in the party in-between caring responsibilities. It has helped to overcome time-constraints. This interviewee also indicated in the first, quantitative phase that she was more likely to contribute to party policy development online. When asked if this was just because of time commitments or confidence issues she said:

"It's because most meetings are dominated by older men who like to talk a lot and that's pretty much how most meetings go really whether they are grass-root groups involved in the Labour Party or if it's union groups.... It tends to be dominated by men. There are still lots of women but its, you can see how people, especially newer members would be scared to say anything or contribute in the meeting when someone wants to hold forth and start talking-confidently as well about whatever it is they want to talk about. And I think people-women-tend to hold back and not say anything because they feel oh I don't know what I'm talking about and don't want to look silly".

Here, female 1 is suggesting that the internet enables females to more confidently contribute to party policy discussions. Therefore, it helps to overcome a lack of civic-skill resources which refers to the communication capabilities which enable individuals to effectively take political action: it allows them to more confidently express their opinion on policy issues. Male 2, who is an ethnic minority SNP member emphasised the time saving features of online participation:

"It is less time consuming and easy as you can just click and people have busy days and all that.... You can go to emails, click on a link and then vote".

Male 1 expressed similar sentiments by stating:

“If you were going to go to something (party related) you would have travel costs, you would, I don’t know, also have time constraints or whatever else”.

In this instance, the research participant also alludes to the fact that it is cheaper to participate in the party online by mentioning travel costs. When discussing online participation further, male 1 also adds:

“It’s just more accessible. Let’s say the branch meeting is at seven o’clock on a Tuesday and I’m working at 7 o’clock on a Tuesday. You could then come home and check something online or you could read something or watch something whatever like it fits in more with my sort of life”.

According to these interviewees, the parties’ use of the internet to facilitate membership participation has enabled them to overcome barriers to participation and influenced their decision to join/remain a member. By conducting more semi-structured interviews, this researcher hopes to expand and gain a greater understanding of this.

Comparing the SNP and Labour to determine whether one party’s use of the internet for IPD purposes has had a greater impact on low SES members produces mixed results. For instance, this research found that the SNP’s use of the internet for IPD purposes has had a greater impact on its female members than Labour’s has. As has been noted, the party previously had the lowest ratio of female-to-male members (Bennie, 2015:176) which may help explain this. Female membership has since risen to 43% (Bale et al, 2018:7). Scottish nationalism has been found to be male dominated, with females less likely to support independence. Therefore, factors other than support for independence, such as the party’s use of the internet to improve IPD procedures, may have played a role in these female membership rises. The SNP’s use of the internet for IPD also had a greater impact on individuals whose highest level of education was secondary level or below and ethnic minority groups. The Labour party’s use of the internet for this purpose has been more influential than the SNP’s in encouraging the unemployed or those unable to work, to join the party. While the disparities are not huge, this researcher intends to use the qualitative interviews to explore this further and determine what accounts for these differences.

Conclusion

The internet allows parties to enhance their IPD procedures and provide members with more influence and power. As has been discussed above, the SNP and Labour Party appear to be

taking advantage of the mediums participatory potentials. In recent years, both have allowed their members (supporters also in the case of Labour) to contribute to party policy debate online and to use the internet to vote in leadership elections. This has coincided with surges in each of their memberships. This research sought to determine whether the two were related and found the parties' use of the internet for IPD purposes did play some role in their membership rises. Indeed, over one-third of SNP and one quarter of Labour members claimed that it had influenced their decision to join/remain a member of the party.

The parties changing membership compositions were also discussed; with both now having more females and younger members. Traditionally party membership is male dominated, with older citizens also more likely to join. This research tested whether these changing compositions were related to the parties' use of the internet for IPD purposes. It found that those who were traditionally less likely to take part in politics such as citizens with lower levels of education and income, females and ethnic minority groups were all more likely to be influenced by the parties' use of the internet for IPD purposes. In this sense, this internet use encouraged groups previously marginalised from the political process to join the parties'. This is because the internet can overcome the resource barriers to participation identified by Verba et al (1995). This assertion is supported by the data collected through the semi-structured interviews. However, this research found that older citizens were more likely than younger ones to join the parties as a result of their internet use for IPD purposes. This is surprising as not only are these older citizens more likely to join parties in the first instance, they are also less likely to use the internet. This is something which this researcher intends to investigate further in further semi-structured interviews.

This research also discussed how the SNP and Labour party were adopting some of the organisational practices of Margetts cyber party model. The impact which this has had on perception of party democracy and rising levels of party membership within the two parties is also something which this researcher intends to investigate further within the PhD thesis.

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