

Grassroots

Britain's party members: who they are,
what they think, and what they do

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About the Party Members Project

Party membership is vital to the health of our representative democracy. Members contribute significantly to election campaigns and to party finances. They are the people who pick party leaders. They constitute the pool from which parties choose their candidates. And they help anchor the parties to the principles and people they came into politics to promote and protect.

Beginning just after the 2015 General Election, and with funding from the UK's social science research council, the ESRC, we have, with the help of YouGov, been surveying the members of the country's six biggest parties. The surveys we've conducted - after the 2015 and 2017 general elections, as well as an additional survey of Labour Party members in 2016 and a survey of those who've decided to leave their parties - constitute a rich resource for anyone wanting to understand who joins political parties, as well as why and how they do so. They give us an insight into their ideas and their priorities. And they give us a sense of what members do for their parties at election time, how they see candidate selection, and their impressions of, and their satisfaction with, the organizations they've joined.

This pamphlet reports the results of surveys we conducted just after the General Election in June 2017, in particular those covering the members of the Conservatives, Labour, the Lib Dems and the SNP. Each sample is a mix of party members we were able to re-contact from our earlier surveys plus members who have joined the parties since then (see Appendix).

Although we will also be putting a version on our project's webpage, we thought it would be handy to produce something in hard copy that can be easily read and passed around the office. We hope it might also kick off a worthwhile discussion at ward, branch or association meetings, so feel free to share and/or copy it.

Feel free, too, to come back to us to discuss or dispute our findings. We're all ears (or eyes anyway) at **partymembersproject@gmail.com** - and you can keep in touch via our Facebook page, **facebook.com/esrcpartymembersproject**, and our Twitter feed, **@ESRCptyMembers**.

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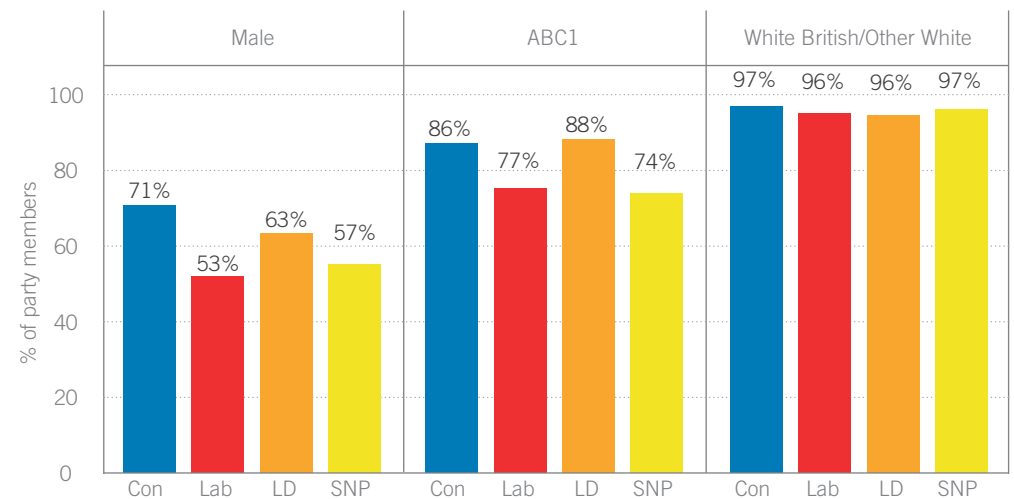
Chapter One:

What do party members look like?

Members of the four main parties are more likely to be male, more likely to be middle-class, and more likely to be older than the average Briton (see Figure 1 and Table 1, overleaf). They are also more likely to be white. With the obvious exception of SNP members, they're more likely, too, to live in London and the south of the country rather than in the north or the Midlands and Wales (see Table 2 overleaf).

That said, except when it comes to ethnicity (all parties have relatively few BAME members), there are pronounced party differences. Perhaps not surprisingly given the skew in the parties' electoral support, Tory and Lib Dem grassroots members are heavily concentrated in London and the South, whereas Labour can make a better claim to be a national party in geographic terms.

Figure 1. Demographics



Members of the four main parties are more likely to be male, more likely to be middle-class, and more likely to be older than the average Briton. They are also more likely to be white.

What do party members look like?

Labour's membership also comes nearer to gender parity than the other three parties'. Getting on for two-thirds of Lib Dems, and not far off three-quarters of Tory members are men. And, while it's true to say that all four parties are disproportionately middle-class, it's even more true of Tory and Lib Dem members, nearly nine out of ten of whom can be classified as ABC1.

However, when we ask members to use a one to five scale to tell us whether they think of their *party* as middle class (1) or working class (5), they are all rather reluctant to go with the former, with the Tories and the Lib Dems giving their party an average rating of 2.7 and 2.5 respectively and Labour and SNP members both on 3.3.

Table 1. Age related demographics

	Percentage of members in each age range			
18-24	5	4	6	5
25-34	9	12	14	11
35-44	10	12	17	13
45-54	16	15	16	16
55-64	17	27	18	23
65-74	29	25	24	25
75+	15	4	6	7
	Con	Lab	LD	SNP
Average age	57	53	52	54
	Con	Lab	LD	SNP

Table 2. Region related demographics

	Percentage of members per region			
London	12	12	15	1
Rest of South	42	34	45	2
Midlands/Wales	18	21	16	1
North	17	29	18	1
Scotland	10	5	6	96
	Con	Lab	LD	SNP

While it's true to say that all four parties are disproportionately middle-class, it's even more true of Tory and Lib Dem members, nearly nine out of ten of whom can be classified as ABC1.

Given the photographs that often accompany stories of surging membership in the Labour Party, for instance, it may come as a surprise that Labour members aren't, on average, that much younger than grassroots Tories, especially since the latter are frequently stereotyped as a bunch of retired colonels and blue-rinsed dragons.

The over 65s make up around 18% of the UK population, which means that members of all parties are relatively grey-haired (see Table 1). That said, the over 65s constitute 44% of the Conservative Party membership compared to around 30% of each of the other parties. Although more than a quarter of the members of all the parties are aged between 65 and 74, significantly more Tory members are 75 and over. Labour (and to a lesser extent the SNP) seems to have a big bulge of people in the mid-to-late-fifties and early-sixties, possibly as a result of the Corbyn surge bringing back members who left in the Blair years, whereas thirty and forty-somethings seem best represented in the Lib Dems (and least well represented among Conservatives).

None of the parties, however, has got that much to write home about when it comes to young people: only about one in twenty UK party members is aged between 18-24 compared to around one in ten of the general population, although clearly the sheer size of the Labour Party compared to the Conservative Party means it has far more younger members in absolute terms.

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What do party members look like?

This age difference may explain why Tory members are at least twice as likely as members of other parties to see themselves as belonging to Saga (see Table 3), which provides services specifically aimed at older, often retired people. More generally, the most popular organisation for members to have joined - particularly popular with Lib Dems - is the National Trust. English Heritage, its close equivalent, lags some way behind, along with the RSPB, which those who like to think parties are dying never tire of repeating has more members than all the parties put together. More predictable is that members of the Labour Party are far more likely to belong to a trade union than are their counterparts in other parties - although this may well also be related to the fact that many Labour members (41% of them, compared to 20% of Tory members) work in the public sector, where unions are stronger than they are in the private sector. Union membership is lowest of all among grassroots Conservatives.

Table 3. Inveterate joiners? The top five other organizations that UK party members belong to

	Percentage of each party's members who belong			
National Trust	27	22	34	10
Trade Union	5	32	11	15
RSPB	5	10	9	6
English Heritage	10	8	12	1
Saga	6	2	3	2
	Con	Lab	LD	SNP

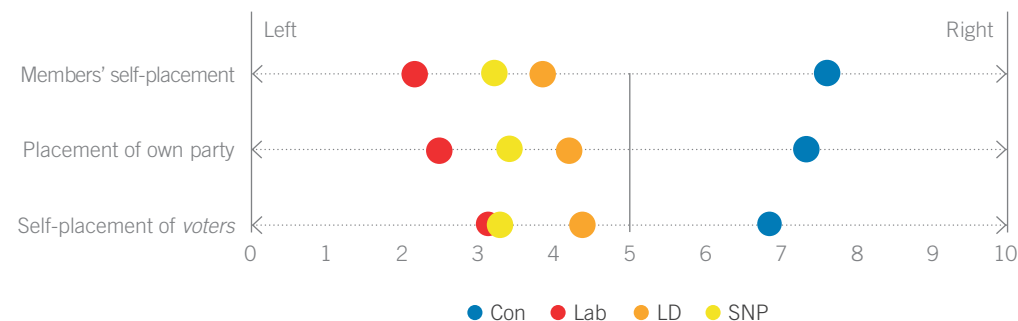
Chapter Two: Ideology, issues and policies

So much for what UK party members look like, what do they think? The answer is: it depends on which party they belong to, with Conservative Party members standing out (sometimes a long way out) from the other parties on almost everything we asked about.

This would not necessarily surprise them. As Figure 2 shows the country's party members seem to have a pretty good idea of where they stand - and, interestingly, it seems to be in reasonably close accord with where they see their parties, too. Members tend to see their parties as just a touch more moderate or centrist than they are, but there's rarely a big gap.

However, except when it comes to the SNP, there is slightly more of a mismatch between where *voters* for the parties place themselves and where *members* place themselves, with Conservative, Lib Dem and especially Labour voters seeing themselves as more centrist than the party's members do. Ultimately, though, what is most striking is that those who tend to see Labour and Tory members as polar opposites have a point: pick almost any issue and one may as well be dealing with two tribes.

Figure 2. Ideology: where do UK party members place themselves and their parties on the left-right spectrum - and how do they compare to their parties' voters?



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Perceptions of left-right placement is a very broad-brush measure of ideology - taking in, at the very least, where one stands, on the one hand, on the relative role of the state and the market, and, on the other, how liberal or cosmopolitan one is. Figure 3 taps into this first set of issues by asking a series of questions about the economy. Labour members in particular are overwhelmingly in favour of redistribution, sceptical of big business and convinced that working people don't get their fair share. SNP members aren't far behind them on all fronts. That makes for a big contrast with Conservative members, although it's worth noting that a third of them aren't huge fans of big business either. Lib Dem members stand some way between the two poles, but they are nonetheless a long way from being in the middle. Vince Cable, then, is an avowedly centre-left politician in charge of what is, at grassroots level anyway, an ideologically centre-left party.

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Figure 3. Party members' views on economic issues

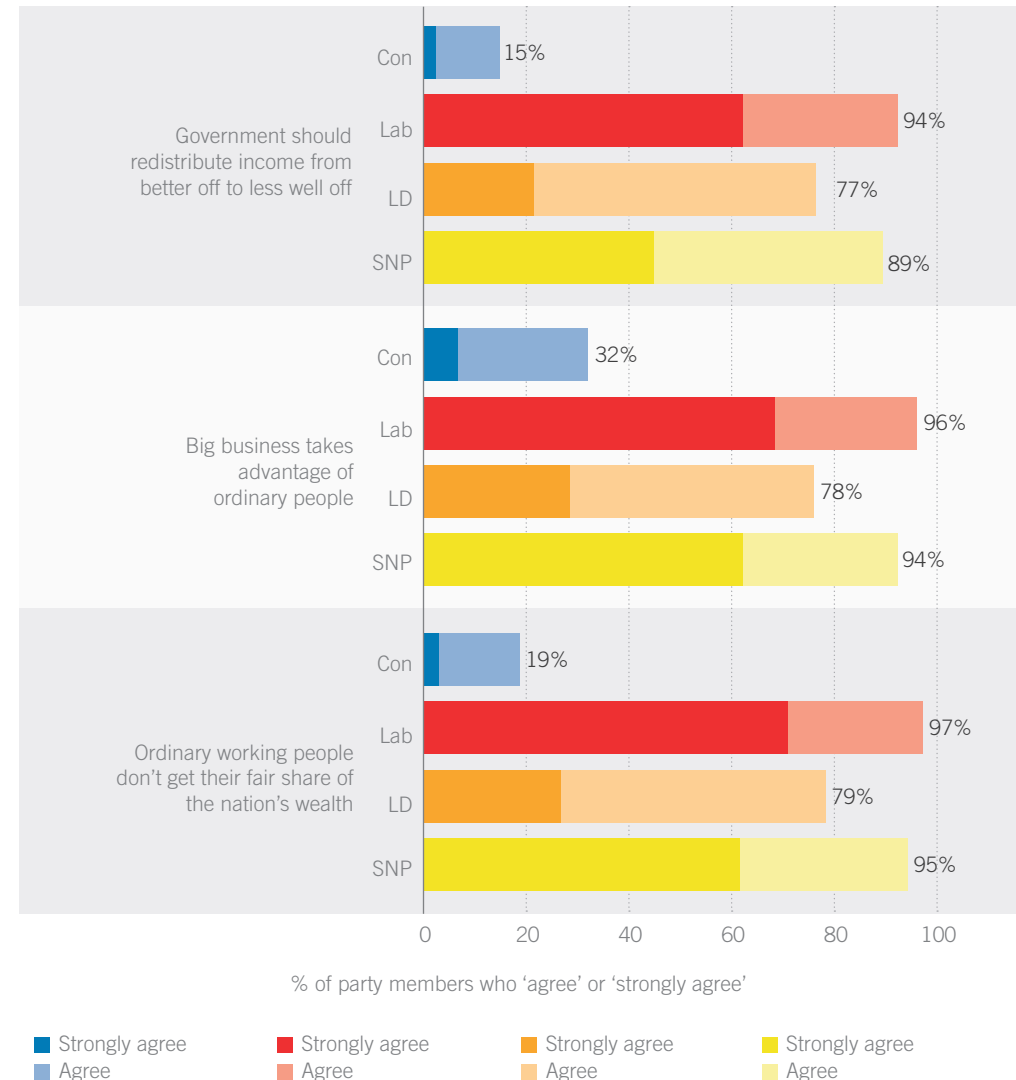
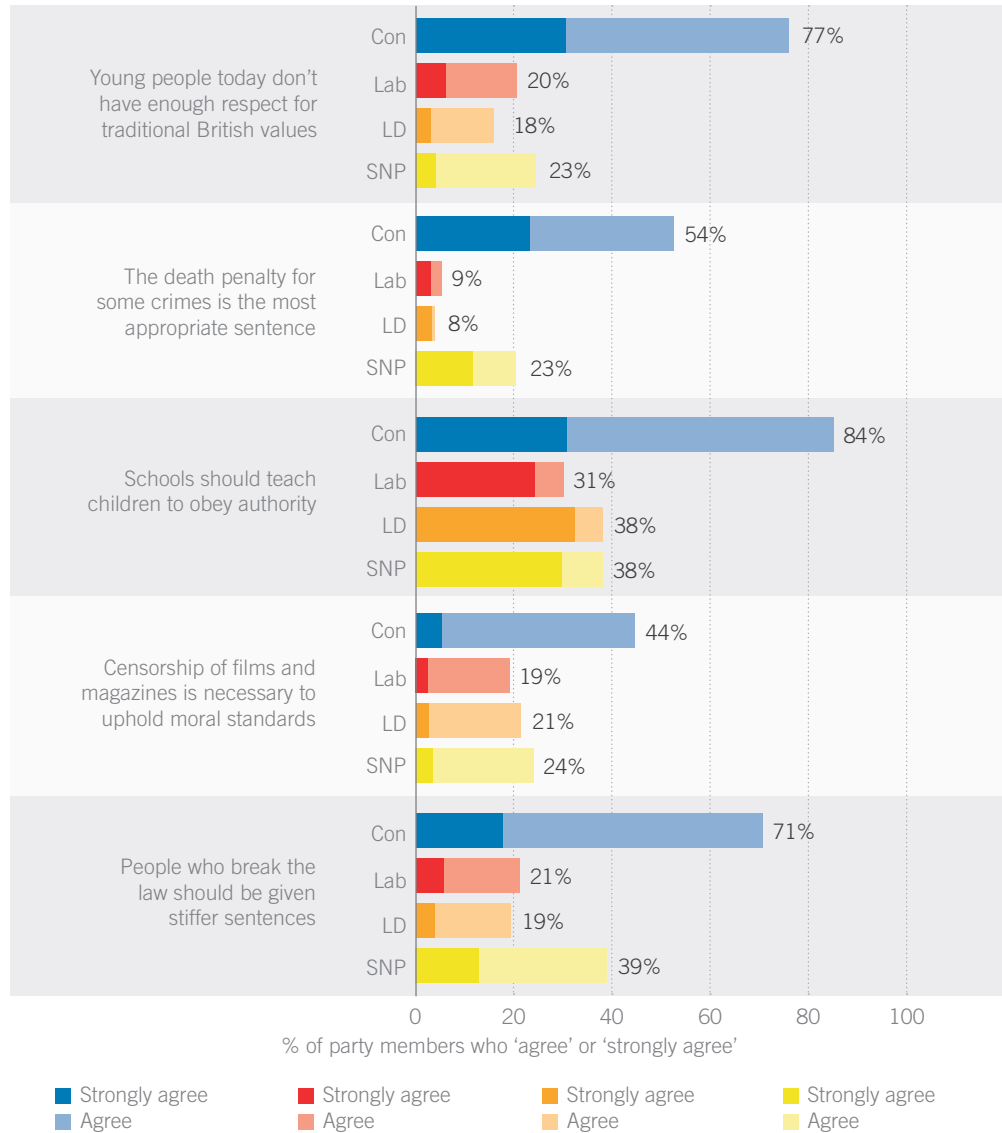


Figure 4. Party members' views on social and moral questions



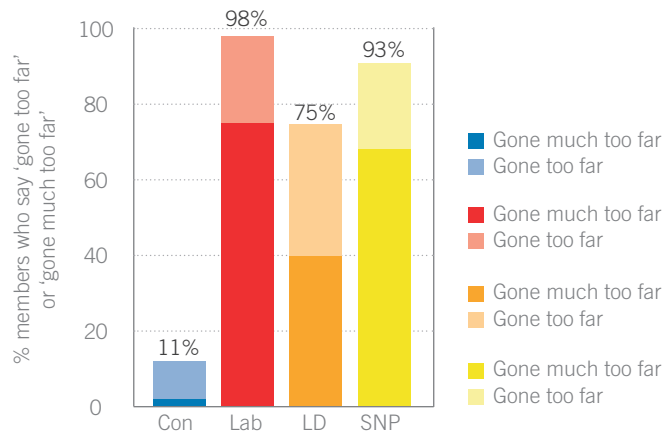
The big gap between the Conservatives and the rest is, just as noticeable on 'social' or 'moral' questions - as shown in Figure 4 - not least because, on these anyway, the Lib Dems (the clue is in the name) are basically as liberal as their counterparts in the Labour Party. The SNP membership is actually a little more socially conservative than some might imagine, although not in the same league as Tory members.

Only just over half of Conservative Party members approve of capital punishment and just under half think censorship necessary to uphold moral standards (although that stands in stark contrast to the much more permissive views of members of the other three parties). But well over two-thirds of Tory members would like to see stiffer sentences, compared to just over a third of SNP members and only a fifth of Labour and Lib Dem members. Only two out of ten members of the other parties think youngsters don't have enough respect for traditional British values, but eight out of ten Tories think that's the case. The same high proportion of Conservative grassroots members think schools should be teaching kids to obey authority - a view that strikes a chord with far fewer members of the other three parties.

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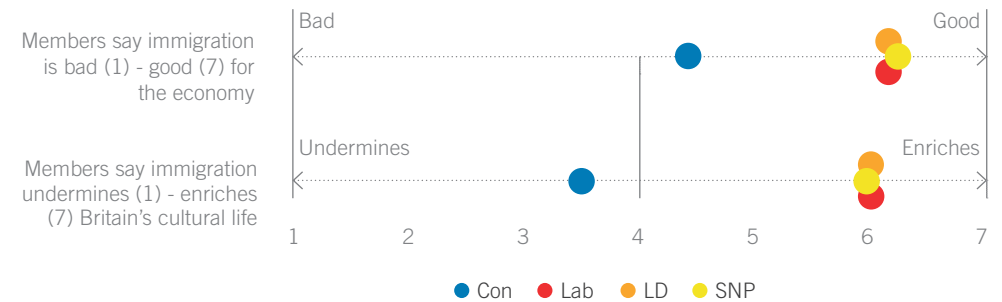
We also asked about specific political issues. Figure 5 shows responses to a question about austerity, and whether members thought cuts to public services had gone too far (or not far enough). Again, there is a gulf between the Tory grassroots and the rest, with Lib Dems sitting on the centre-left rather than in the centre, notwithstanding the fact that their party was a coalition partner in the government that committed the country to austerity back in 2010. Attitudes on all sides will, of course, be affected by whether the party a member belongs to is in office or opposition (at least in Westminster), although it is difficult to believe that, had Labour been in power and arguing for cuts, its grassroots members would have proved as accepting of their necessity as their Conservative counterparts.

Figure 5. Party members' views on austerity



When it comes to immigration, there is, as Figure 6 shows, once again a contrast - although not perhaps quite as glaring - between Tory members and the rest. Labour, Lib Dem and SNP members come over as confirmed multiculturalists and are convinced of the economic upsides of immigration. The Conservative grassroots are prepared to concede the latter, albeit a little more grudgingly. But they are notably more sceptical about the cultural benefits of immigration.

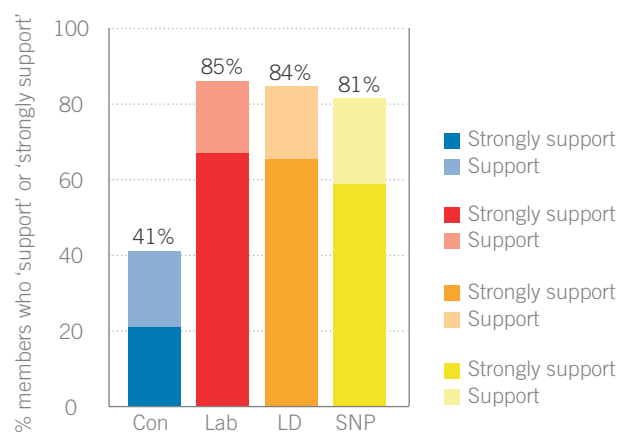
Figure 6. Party members views on immigration



There is a gulf between the Tory grassroots and the rest, with Lib Dems sitting on the centre-left rather than in the centre.

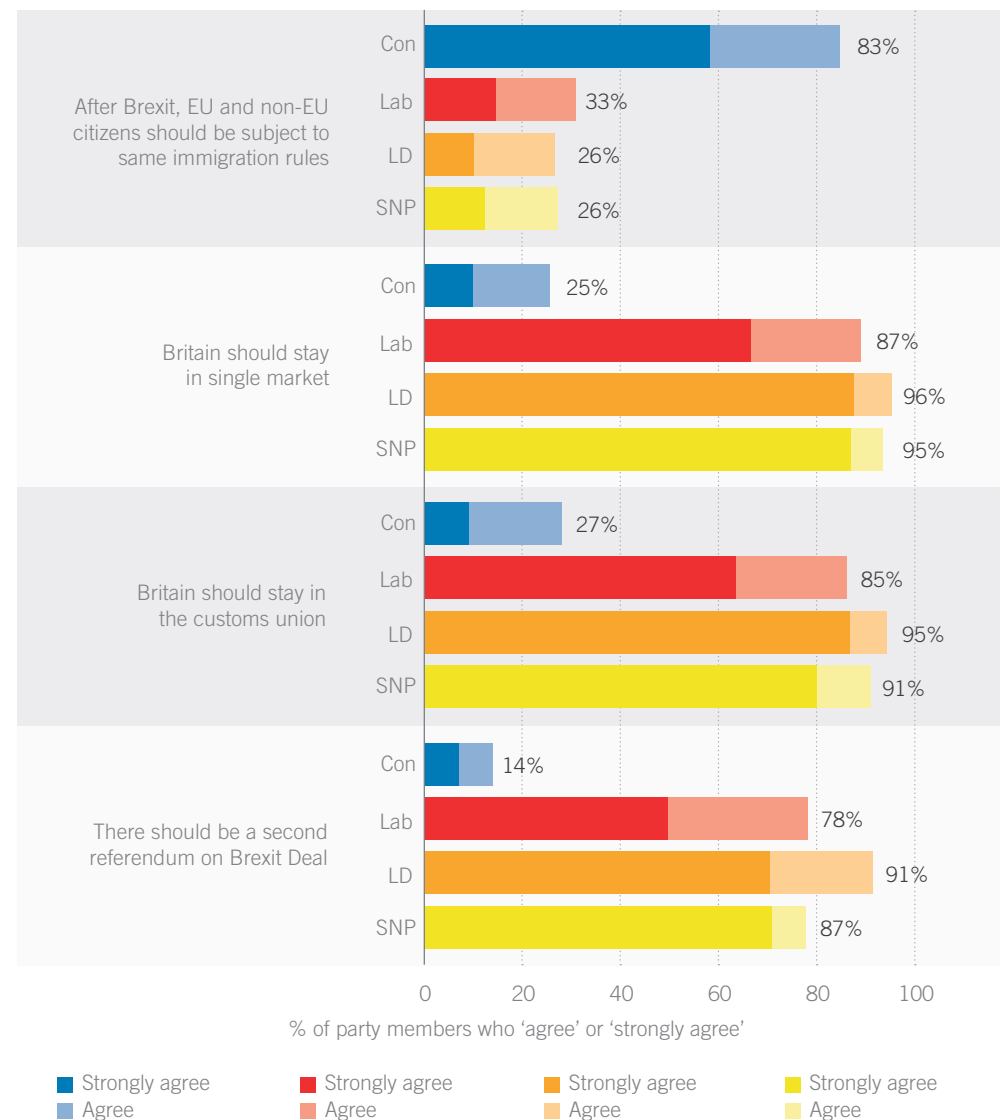
Similarly, as Figure 7 shows, not all Conservative Party members oppose gay marriage. Yet as a whole, and no doubt partly because of age, they are far less happy about it than are members of the other three parties: at the Tory grassroots, gay marriage only has half the support it enjoys among Labour, Lib Dem and SNP members.

Figure 7. Party members' views on gay marriage



At the Tory grassroots, gay marriage only has half the support it enjoys among Labour, Lib Dem and SNP members.

Figure 8. Party members' views on Brexit



What about Brexit? As Figure 8 indicates, the UK's party members have very different takes on the issues wrapped up in Britain leaving the EU - and, in Labour's case, views which contrast markedly with the party's leadership.

At first, it seems to be a case of the familiar 'Conservative members vs the rest' pattern. But when we look beyond that, there are one or two subtle nuances. Take members' views on immigration post Brexit. It comes as no surprise, perhaps, that grassroots Tories are clearly much keener than their counterparts in other parties to ensure that migrating to the UK after Brexit will be as tough for EU citizens as it is for people coming from outside the EU. What is rather more surprising, however, is that a third of all Labour members (and a quarter of Liberal and SNP members) agree with them. And when we look at the question of whether a post-Brexit UK should retain membership of the single market and the customs union, we see that a quarter of Conservative Party members would like to see that happen and are presumably therefore unhappy with the 'hard Brexit' that their government, for all the talk of transition periods and implementation phases, still seems intent on pursuing.

Over three quarters of Labour members would like to see a referendum on whatever deal the government eventually puts together.

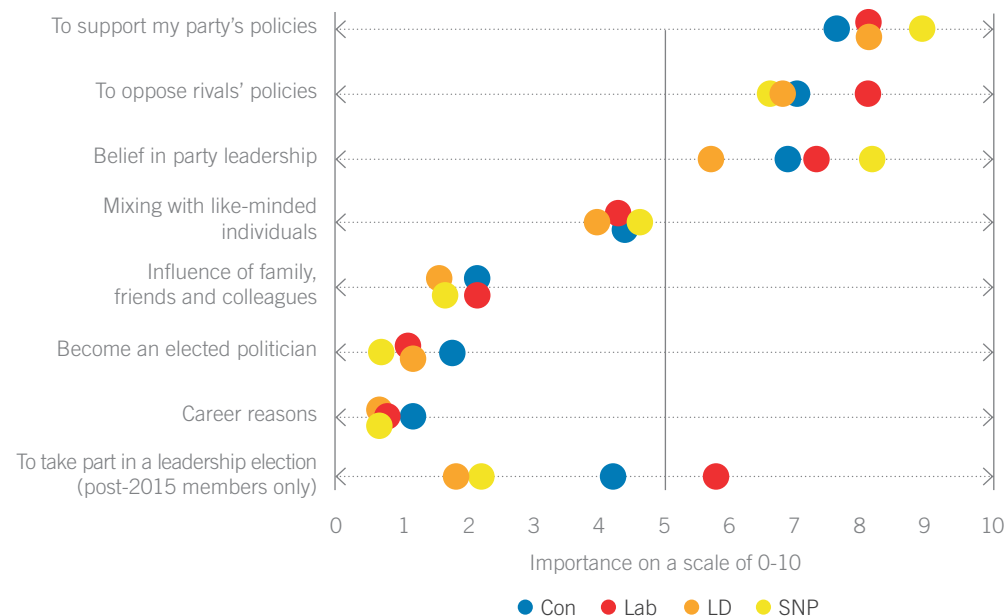
That said, the overwhelming majority of Conservative Party members don't want anything that might stop Brexit from happening: only 14% would like to see a second referendum compared to 91% of Lib Dem members. Of more import, though, is that more than three-quarters of Labour members would like to see a referendum on whatever deal the government eventually puts together - an idea that is definitely not official Labour policy, at least not yet. Nor, notwithstanding the party's recent shift towards arguing for a softer and longer transition than the government wants, is retaining membership of the single market and the customs union once Brexit is completed. And yet that is precisely what overwhelming majorities of Labour members (like Lib Dem and SNP members, for whom it is party policy) want to see happen. It will be interesting to see whether a leadership that is apparently so keen to take members' views seriously will in the end move all the way, as opposed to just part of the way, towards them.

Academics have spent a lot of time and effort trying to work out why people join parties in the first place, not least because, strictly-speaking, joining, like voting, is arguably, irrational: a single individual has very little say over policy and could very likely reap the benefits of that policy simply by virtue of their citizenship. It's therefore worth asking members themselves why they made the decision to belong to a party.

People join up not only to support what their party is doing but to oppose what other parties (or groups in society) are proposing.

We presented them with a series of reasons and asked them to score how important they were out of ten. Their answers, shown in Figure 9, suggest that the policies parties put forward are a big motivator but they also suggest that people join up not just to support what their party is doing but also to oppose what other parties (or groups in society) are proposing - this seems to be especially true of Labour members (many of whom presumably joined when the Conservatives were in power).

Figure 9. Why did party members join up in the first place?



Leadership also matters a lot, although judging from the Lib Dem and SNP responses (which run in different directions) this may depend on how good a party's leader is thought to be. Getting the chance to take part in a leadership election - something we only asked people who joined their parties after the 2015 election about - was also a fairly popular reason, particularly (for obvious reasons) but not exclusively for Labour members. This suggests that contests (and giving members the right to vote in them) can be a great chance to increase membership; indeed, the fact that the Tories haven't held a membership ballot on their leadership for over a decade may partly explain why, in contrast to their rivals, their numbers have been static if not falling in recent years.

Other motives for joining don't score as highly. The chance to mix with like-minded individuals was clearly important to many members, but family, friends and colleagues don't appear to be a big influence. Personal ambition also seems to come very low down the list, although it may of course be the case that this isn't something people feel comfortable about admitting.

Is joining a party something that people get it into their heads to do themselves or can they be nudged into it somehow? Table 4 strongly suggests that it is much more likely to be the former rather than the latter. The differences between parties when it comes to whether they approach the local or national party, however, does give rise to some interesting questions. For instance, are the Conservatives missing a trick when it comes to facilitating people joining nationally? And could Labour and the SNP (and even perhaps the Lib Dems, who pride themselves on operating close to the ground) somehow make their local parties a more welcoming or tempting prospect?

Table 4. Who approached who?

	Percentage of members who say			
I approached the local party	46	32	32	29
I approached the national party	35	61	55	67
The local party approached me	15	4	10	2
The national party approached me	4	3	3	1
	Con	Lab	LD	SNP

Table 5 looks in more detail at what prompted people into joining, with the fact that news and current affairs coverage is such an important trigger serving as a useful reminder that 'events, dear boy, events' may make more difference than anything the parties can do. Websites, broadcasts (presumably watched as much on social media as on television these days), and email campaigns are clearly worth doing - and Facebook and Twitter will presumably grow in importance: they may only look so irrelevant now because so many members will have joined before they became ubiquitous.

Table 5. Prompts to joining

	Percentage of members whose reasons to join include			
As a result of general observation of political news in the national media	47	53	62	63
Checking the party's website	16	16	22	25
Talking to friends	15	16	14	18
Talking to family	16	14	11	15
Watching a Party Political/Election broadcast	10	9	12	14
Getting an email from the party	11	5	4	4
Talking to colleagues at work	3	7	3	6
Talking to canvasser on doorstep	5	2	5	3
Seeing a tweet from the party on your Twitter timeline	2	3	3	4
Getting contacted by the party via Facebook	2	2	3	2
	Con	Lab	LD	SNP

News and current affairs coverage...may make more difference (to people becoming members) than anything the parties can do.

Judging from these replies, parties probably shouldn't waste valuable canvassing time trying to recruit people 'on the doorstep'. Encouraging supporters and members to talk positively about the party to family and friends (and, to a lesser extent, colleagues) seems like a better way to go, although the figures suggest there is almost certainly room to do more here too. True, Table 6 suggests that around four out of ten members are reluctant to get stuck into political discussion and/or nail their colours to the mast if they do. But that still means around half of all party members are willing to do just that.

Table 6. Ambassadors in the community'? If you are in a social situation, or at work, and the talk turns to politics, which of the following best expresses what you usually do?

	Percentage of members who say			
I get involved but I don't say I'm a member	33	31	36	27
I get involved and I say I'm a member	50	60	53	59
I prefer not to get involved	14	7	9	11
	Con	Lab	LD	SNP

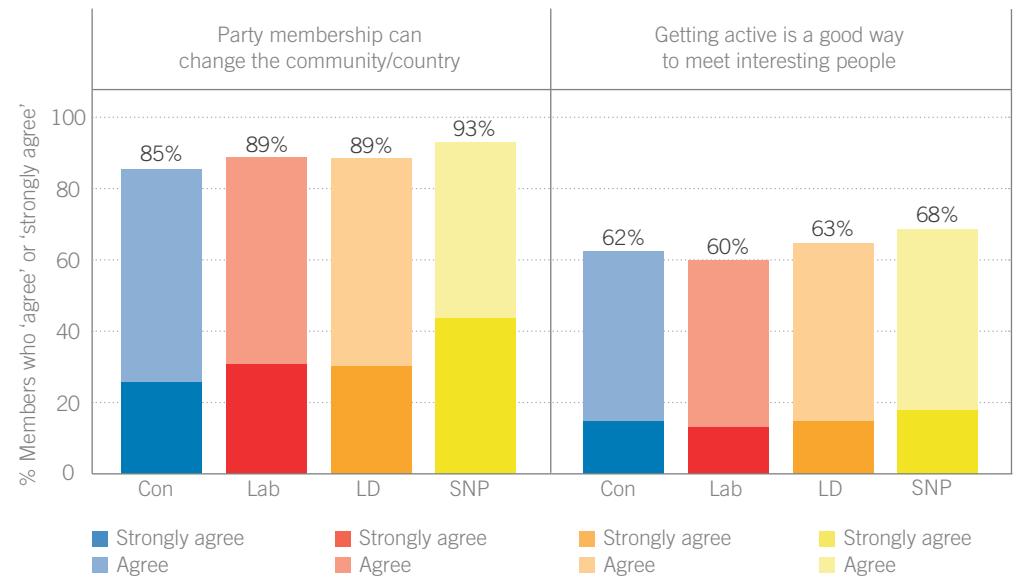
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Chapter Four:

The upsides and downsides of party membership

Once people have joined parties, as Figure 10 shows, they clearly feel that getting involved can get things done locally and nationally - and, on balance, it can be a good way of meeting interesting people.

Figure 10. Upsides of party membership



The upsides and downsides of party membership

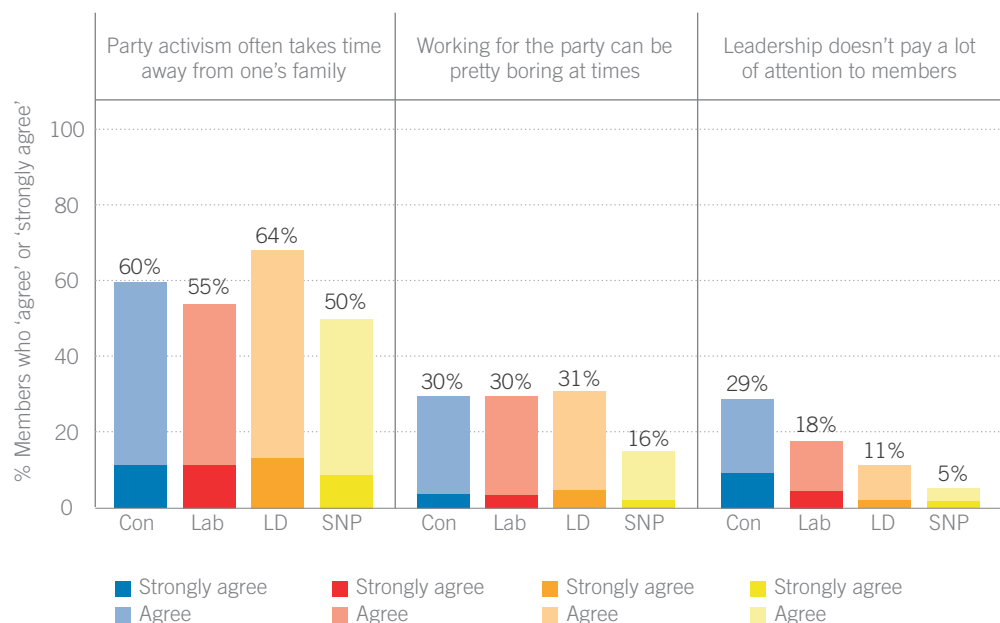
Of course, there are some things that aren't so great about being a party member. As Figure 11 shows, it can be a little time-consuming. Relatively few members find it dead dull, although perhaps those who do have already left! And only a minority feels the leadership pays them insufficient attention - although in the Conservative Party that minority, at 29%, is much bigger than it is in other parties. This might account for the fact that, when we asked members of all four parties whether they thought they were respected by the leadership, the proportion of Tory members agreeing (around six out of ten) was significantly lower than the nine out of ten members of the Labour Party, the Lib Dems and the SNP. It might also account for the fact that Tory members were more inclined to tell us, too, that they should have more influence on policy.

What, though, do party members think of their parties more generally? We explored that by asking them to rate them on a scale running from one to five, at each end of which were opposite impressions, one positive, one less so: for instance 'modern' and 'old fashioned'. Overall, as Figure 12 shows, members of all four parties, albeit with some differences between them, seem to feel pretty positive about them.

Members of all four parties seem to think that, on balance, their parties are moderate and competent, as well as concerned about gender equality, welcoming to ethnic minorities, sympathetic to people claiming benefits, and more likely to unite rather than divide the country, although on the last four, Conservative members seem more concerned than their counterparts in other parties that this might not be the case. Grassroots Tories also worry most that their party is old-fashioned, and aren't quite so sure either that their party is competent, or friendly to gays and lesbians, or concerned about the environment, or that it stands up for immigrants. And they think, on balance, that their party is divided - but then so do Labour members. Both Tory and Labour members join Lib Dems in thinking that, on balance, their party is efficient rather than inefficient - but only just.

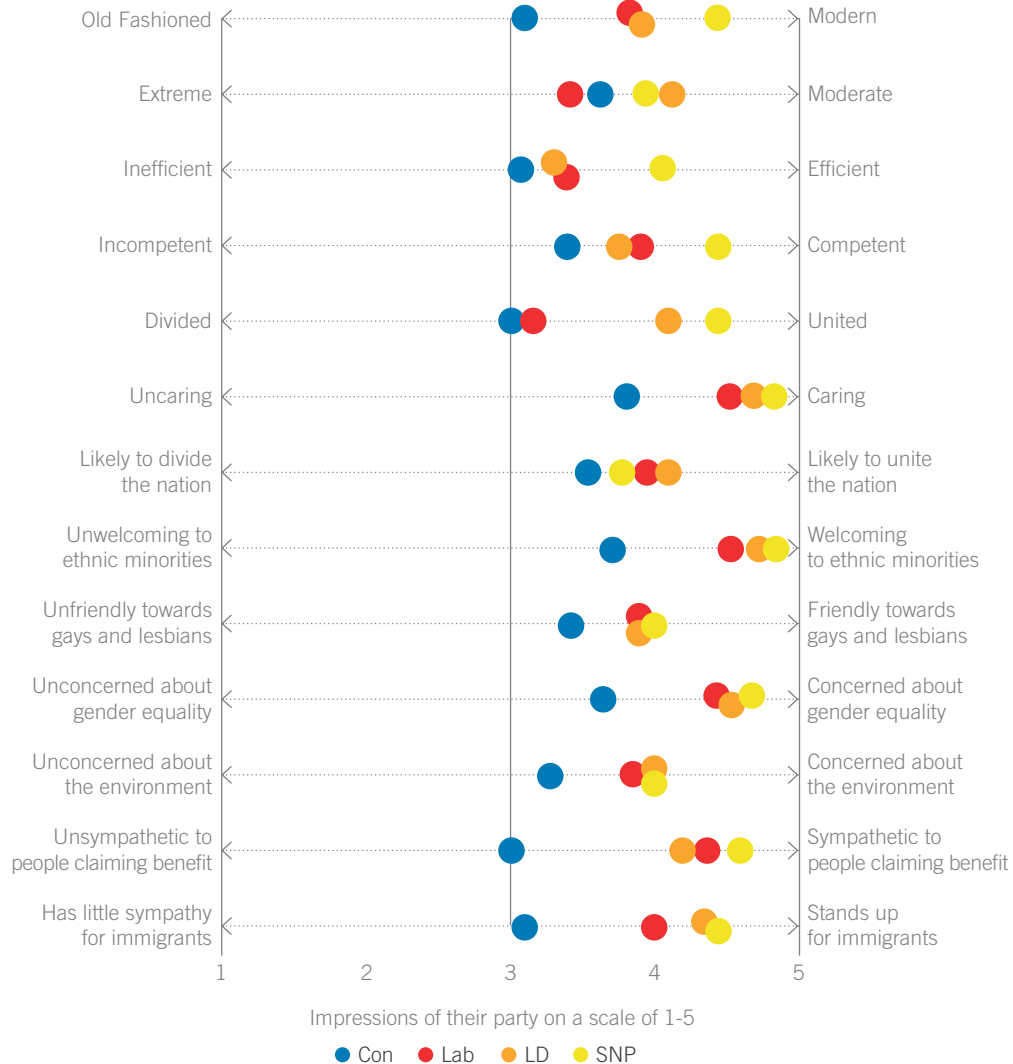
Members' impressions of their parties are generally positive - and this also extends to their local parties

Figure 11. Downsides of party membership



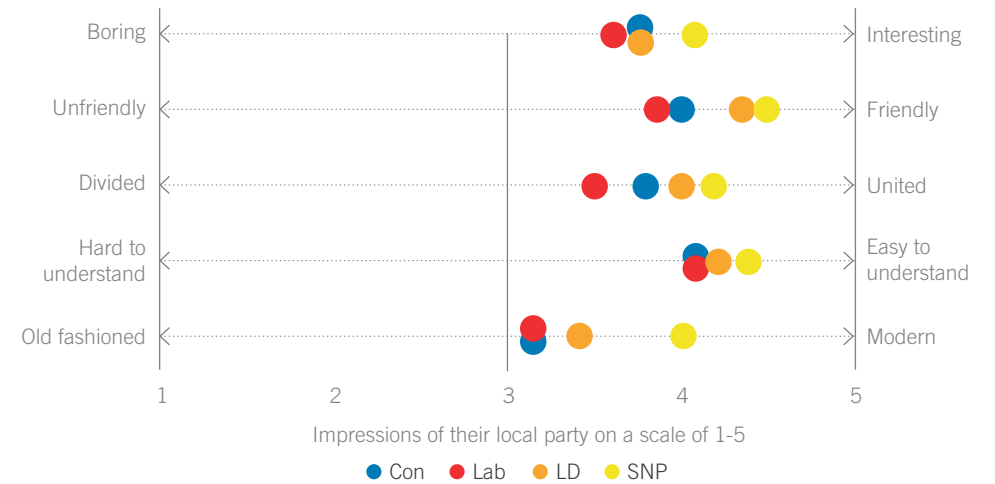
The upsides and downsides of party membership

Figure 12. Members' overall impressions of their party



Still, members' impressions of their parties are generally positive - and this also extends to their local parties. We asked them to tell us what they thought of party meetings, if they'd been to one, and, as Figure 13 shows, they rate them (perhaps surprisingly, given parties' oft-expressed concerns about how dull, old fashioned and unwelcoming they can be) pretty positively. Further analysis shows there is a statistically significant correlation between members having a positive take on party meetings and their taking part in a whole range of party activities.

Figure 13. Members impressions of local party meetings

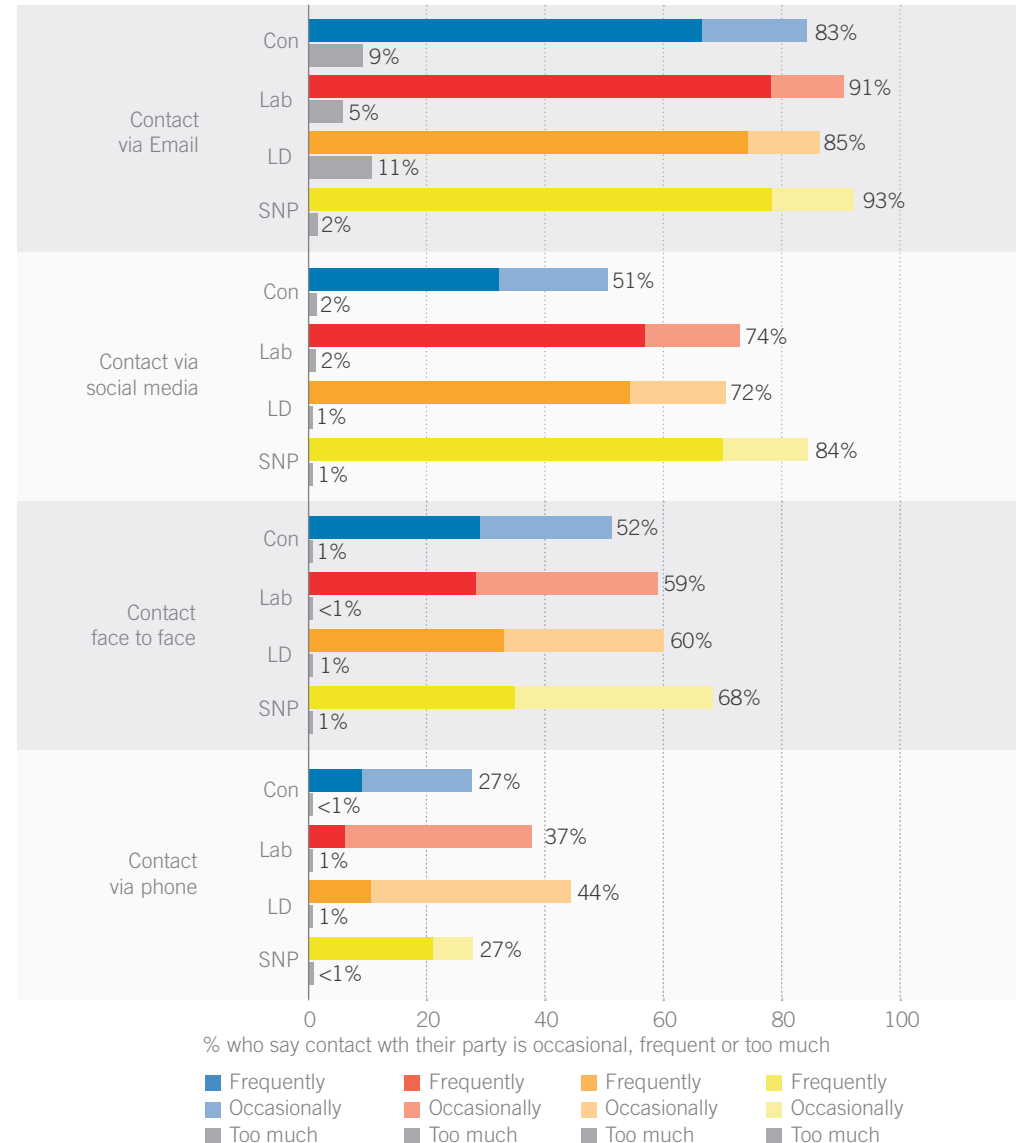


The upsides and downsides of party membership

Another thing parties often fret about is communicating with their members (see Figure 14). It's clear that email is the most frequently used method of contacting members among all four parties - and the only one they risk using a little too much in the view of some members (although, reassuringly for the parties, that doesn't seem to be a widely-shared concern). Parties differ, though, in the extent to which they use social media to contact their members. But whether the Conservatives could do more on, say, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram in this respect is a moot point; it could simply be that their members are less reachable through such methods. The fact that parties don't use the phone much is fascinating given the ubiquity of mobile devices: perhaps texting is seen as too intrusive or just too expensive. It is also revealing to note that at least a third (and in the Tories' case nearly a half) of all members don't see anyone from their party face-to-face in a whole year.

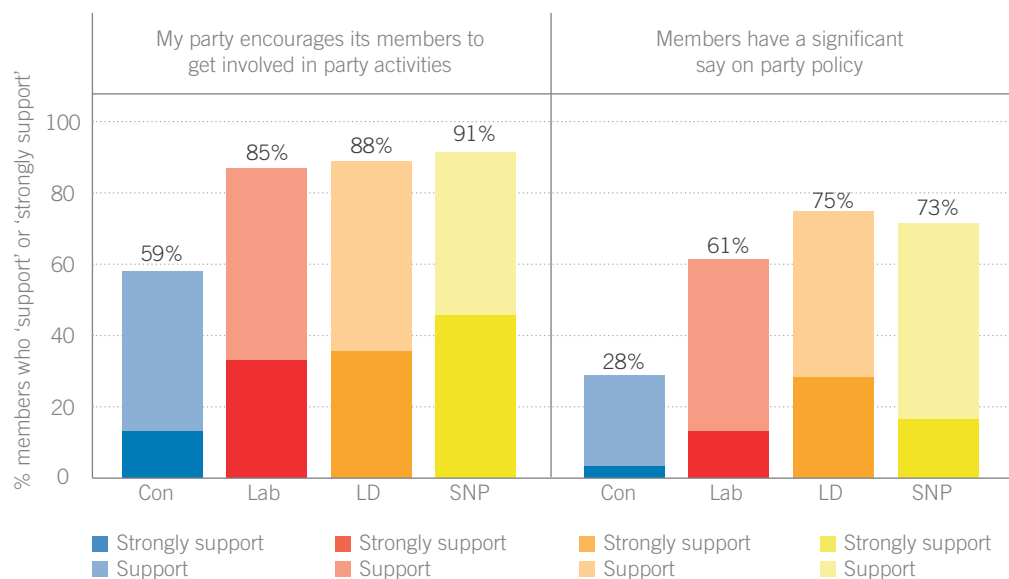
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Figure 14. How often - and how - members have had contact with their parties over the last year?



The upsides and downsides of party membership

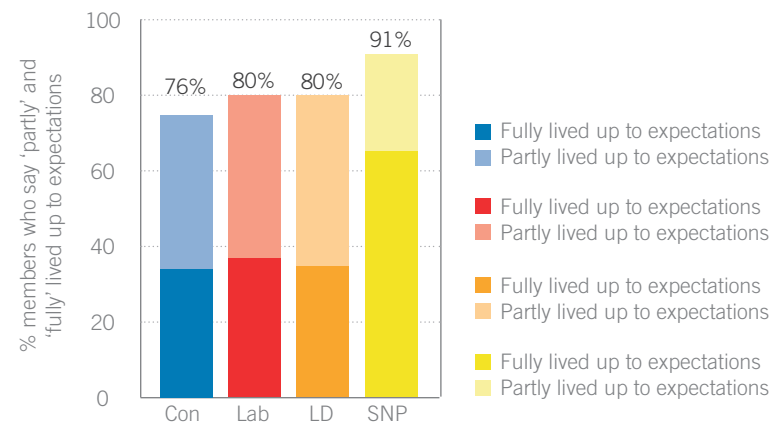
Figure 15. Do parties encourage involvement and give members a say?



As Figure 15 shows, in all of them, a majority of members think they're encouraged by their party to get involved, although grassroots Tories are significantly less inclined than their Labour, Lib Dem and SNP counterparts to think that's the case. The extent to which members feel they have a say in policy (explored in the same Figure) arguably reflects reality, with Lib Dems believing they have most influence and the Conservatives believing they have very little.

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Figure 16. Members' satisfaction rates



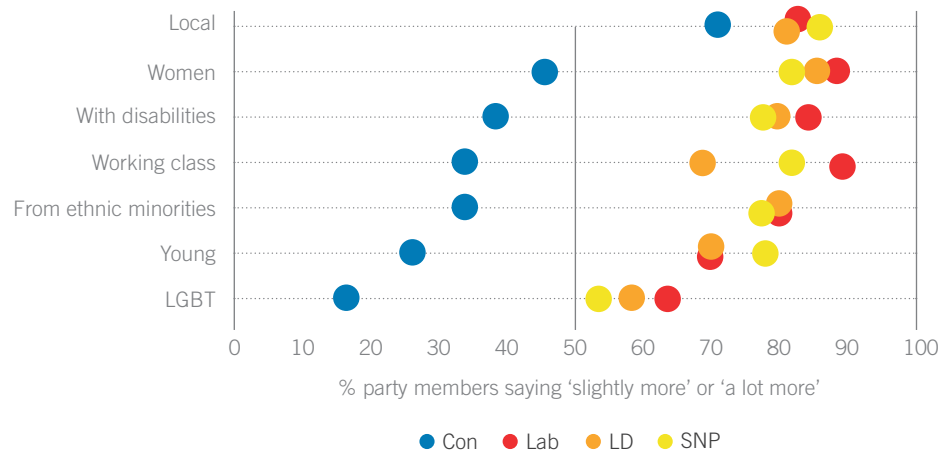
And so, to the big question. Political parties are often beaten up for providing a poor experience to members - and, especially when they're having trouble recruiting and retaining people, they worry a good deal about it themselves. So we asked members what they thought. It turns out, looking at Figure 16 that, while things are far from perfect, they're not necessarily terrible. Admittedly, some parties - notably the SNP - seem to do better than others: the Conservatives, Labour and Lib Dems probably can't afford to ignore the fact that only a third of their members say membership has fully lived up to their expectations, even if arguably the people they need to worry about most are those supporters who quit (and therefore don't show up in these figures) or never join in the first place (likewise). However, the fact that, in all four parties with substantial representation at Westminster, at least three-quarters of those who have joined and who haven't quit seem to feel they've got something out of membership is an encouraging sign.

Chapter Five:

Choosing MPs and other privileges

We've already seen that helping to choose the party leader is one reason why people join a party. But we shouldn't forget that they also have a wider say in who represents it by playing a big part in selecting its candidates at general and other elections. Indeed, in safe seats whoever they pick is almost bound to be endorsed by the voters. We therefore asked them about the sort of MPs they would like to see sitting on the green benches at Westminster.

Figure 17. What sort of people would party members like to see more of in the Commons?



As Figure 17 shows there is fairly widespread agreement that local MPs are a good thing, although it is interesting to note that the party differences are reflected in figures recently compiled by Demos on the proportion of parties' MPs who were born, educated or live within 20km of their constituency, namely 74% for the SNP, 64% for Labour and only 33% for the Conservatives.

There is fairly widespread agreement that local MPs are a good thing.

When it comes to the other categories, however, the differences between the members of different parties - and particularly between the Conservatives and the other three - are still very pronounced. Apart from being more doubtful about the virtues of electing more working class MPs to parliament, the Lib Dems line up pretty near exactly with Labour and SNP members, with the Conservatives still suspicious of anything that looks like political correctness or positive discrimination. LGBT MPs may be a little disappointed to see that their cause doesn't seem to be as popular as those of other underrepresented groups (particularly among the Tory grassroots), although this could perhaps reflect an awareness among party members that the UK parliament is already one of the most LGBT-friendly (or at least lesbian- and gay-friendly) in the world.

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Table 7. Members' views on candidate selection methods

Candidate selection	Percentage preferring			
	Con	Lab	LD	SNP
Open postal primary	6	10	9	8
Open primary	14	8	8	7
Closed postal ballot	41	54	56	59
Closed meeting	30	18	17	15

As for how party members prefer to go about choosing parliamentary candidates, Table 7 shows that it's still very much the case that, by a big majority, they want to preserve their privileges - and if possible to do so by the least time-consuming method possible, namely a membership-only postal ballot.

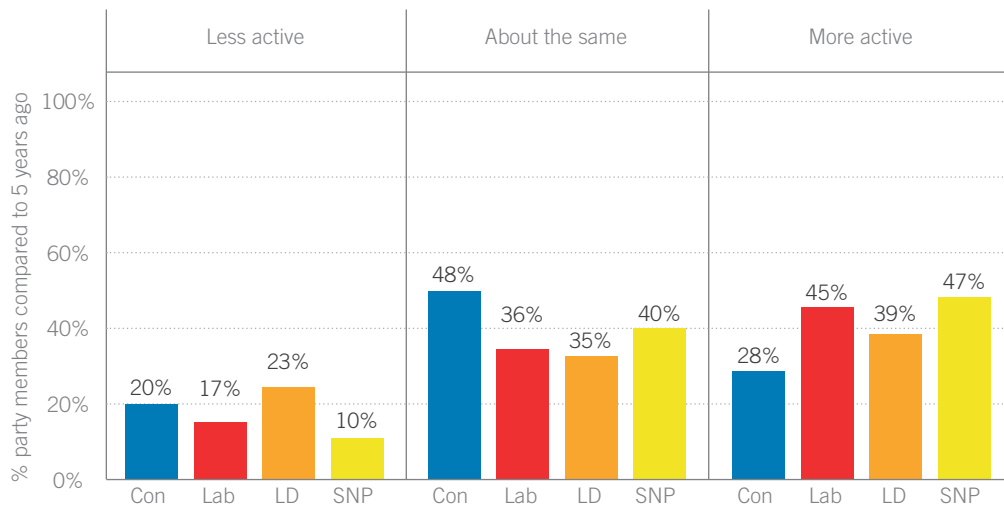
Chapter Six: Campaigning

So what do members do in order to get the candidates they select into parliament when elections come round? We asked a lot of questions about how much and exactly what members do for their parties when it comes to campaigning - so many that we can't go into all of them here. But what we can say is that it is a mistake to see the words 'member' and 'activist' as synonyms. Some 29% of SNP members admit they do absolutely nothing for their parties in the average month, a figure which rises to 39% for the Lib Dems, 41% for Labour, and 45% for the Tories.

If this seems a little depressing, then, as Figure 18 shows, at least things don't seem to be getting worse in this respect, although, for the Conservatives, the fact that fewer of their members claim to be more active than they were five years ago might be a bit of a worry.

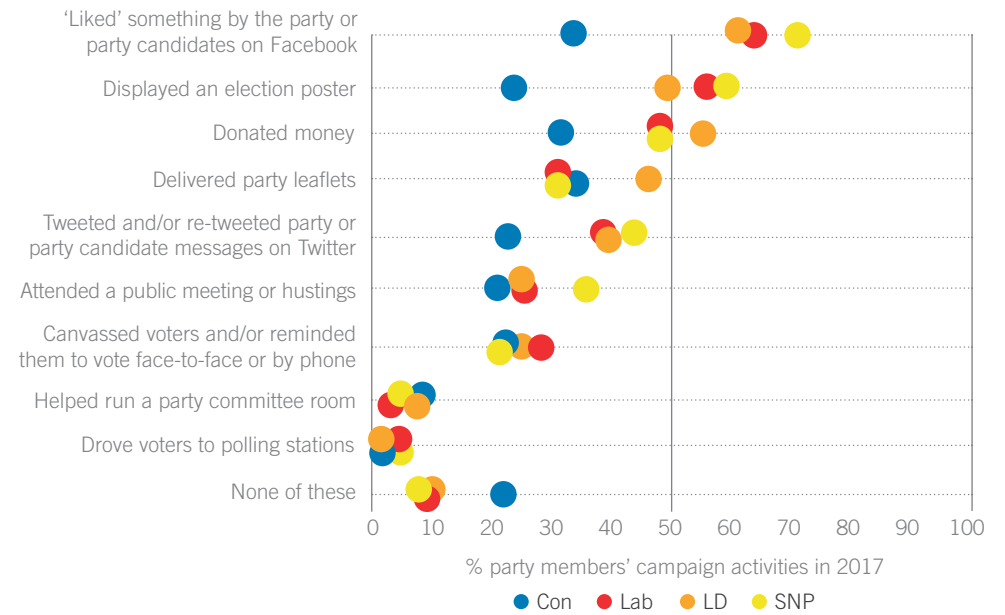
It is a mistake to see the words 'member' and 'activist' as synonyms.

Figure 18. Are members more or less active?



When we look at what members did for their parties during the 2017 general election campaign, we suspect that there may be a fair bit of over-claiming. That said, we have no reason to think that members of some parties are more likely to boast about what they did than others, so the interesting differences between parties probably still stand.

Figure 19. Which, if any, of the following things did you do during the election campaign?



Average number of activities claimed	1.75	2.51	2.59	2.74
	Con	Lab	LD	SNP

Conclusion

What is most striking about Figure 19 is the fact that Tory grassroots members did less on almost every count than their counterparts in other parties - and sometimes significantly so, with the difference being particularly marked when it came to the most popular activity (and one that has attracted a great deal of media attention since the election), namely expressing support for one's party and/or its candidate on Facebook. Twitter is less popular but, like Facebook, Tories turned to it far less than did members of other parties during the election. A similar gap is evident with regard to displaying posters and donating money.

Getting on for a quarter of Tory members did nothing at all for their party during the election. That said, the Tories can take some comfort from the fact that they were, to all intents and purposes, on a par with Labour when it came to canvassing and reminding voters to vote, as well as when it came to delivering leaflets. The Lib Dems will be glad to know that they are still very much the top dogs when it comes to pushing leaflets through our letterboxes.

If what members do for their parties does make a difference to how they do in elections, then Labour's surprisingly impressive performance may well have been partly down to its huge advantage over the Tories in this respect.

Size matters

Parties with the biggest and/or fastest growing memberships tend to boast about it, while those who can't make much of a claim keep quiet or refuse to release regular figures. Ultimately, it's impossible to prove, but the results of the 2017 general election - and in particular the performance of the Labour Party - suggest that having more members can make a difference.

We can estimate what the information reported in Figure 19 implies for the overall amount of campaign activity conducted by the various party memberships during the 2017 campaign by multiplying the average number of activities claimed by each party by its total number of members at the time. This shows that Labour leads the way, with a minimum of 1,385,520 campaign activities claimed by its vast membership during his period, compared to 323,320 by SNP members, 264,180 by Liberal Democrats, and just 262,150 by Tory members. If what members do for their parties does make a difference to how they do in elections, then Labour's surprisingly impressive performance, at least in terms of share of the vote if not share of seats in the Commons, may well have been partly down to its huge advantage over the Tories in this respect.

One week after the June 2017 UK's General Election, we conducted an online survey of members of the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party (SNP). YouGov recruited the survey respondents from a panel of around 300,000 volunteers who are rewarded for completing a survey. Upon joining the YouGov panel, volunteers complete a survey asking a range of demographic questions, which are subsequently used to recruit respondents matching desired demographic quotas for surveys. Potential respondents for the party member survey were identified from questions asking respondents if they were members of any of a list of large membership organisations, including the political parties. Some of the respondents surveyed in June 2017 had already been surveyed for our Party Members Project in May 2015, in the aftermath of the General Election or, in the case of the Labour party, in May 2016 as well, in the aftermath of the local elections. Previously surveyed members are shown in brackets here:

- Conservative Party: N=1,002 (535 from 2015)
- Labour Party: N=1,024 (426 from 2015 and 302 from 2016)
- Lib Dems: N=1,082 (362 from 2015)
- Scottish National Party: N=1,009 (411 from 2015).

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