

The Member Fallacy? Supporter Involvement in British Election Campaigns

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Traditional analyses of grassroots involvement in party election campaigns in Britain have focussed almost exclusively on formal members. However, analyses of the 2010 general election revealed that non-member (supporter) involvement was widespread, reflecting developments in other democracies where political scientists are beginning to recognize the role of supporters. Using new data collected at the 2015 British general election, this paper will extend the examination of supporter involvement, analysing not only the range of activities undertaken by supporters and members but also the timing of these activities in the campaign, and whether levels of supporter activity are responsive to similar or different cues as levels of member activity. In the light of these results and other comparative trends, the paper will question whether models of party organisation that focus only on formal members need to be recast.

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Traditional analyses of grassroots involvement in party election campaigns in Britain have focussed almost exclusively on formal members. However, analyses of the 2010 general election revealed that non-member (supporter) involvement was widespread, reflecting developments in other democracies where political scientists are beginning to recognize the role of supporters. Using new data collected at the 2015 British general election, this paper will extend the examination of supporter involvement, analysing not only the range of activities undertaken by supporters and members but also the timing of these activities in the campaign, and whether levels of supporter activity are responsive to similar or different cues as levels of member activity. In the light of these results and other comparative trends, the paper will question whether models of party organisation that focus only on formal members need to be recast.

Introduction

In recent years, clear evidence has emerged from several countries that traditional notions of party membership have come under challenge (Cross & Gauja, 2014; Fisher, Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2014; Gauja, 2015a, 2015b; Gauja & Jackson, 2015; Sandri & Seddone, 2015), with non-members or supporters playing key roles in party activities traditionally associated with formal party members. This has manifested itself in a variety of ways; involvement in election campaigning, candidate selection and even policy formation, leading one author to propose a framework to catalogue these developments (Mjelde, 2015). Organisational changes in the British Labour Party are an excellent example of such developments, with supporters being required simply to pay a fee of £3 to take part in the election of the party's leader in 2015; a development analogous to the selection of the French Socialist Party's presidential candidate in 2011, where supporters were required to pay €1 in order to participate (Fisher, Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2014: 77).

The implications of such developments are numerous. First, it challenges our traditional understanding of parties, whereby formal members constitute the principal source of voluntary labour and electorates for internal decision

making. Second, it challenges many models of party organisation, which have focussed on membership incentives through participation in a range of party processes. Third, it challenges the party decline thesis, whereby formal membership decline is a key indicator, with a party evolution approach, recognising newer modes of 'membership'. Thus, the emerging evidence from a variety of democracies suggests that the existing understanding of parties needs to be revised. Members continue to be of importance, but they are evidently no longer the only pool from which grassroots involvement is drawn. In this paper, therefore, we examine this phenomenon in the British context.

Our first study of campaigning by party supporters at the 2010 British general election revealed that a significant proportion of campaigns (around three quarters) at the constituency level involved supporters (Fisher, Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2014). Not only that, the participation of supporters was nontrivial. On average, supporters engaged in around two thirds of the activities undertaken by members. The principal variation revolved around high and low intensity participation – supporters were much less likely to engage in pre-election voter contact: doorstep and telephone canvassing.

Yet supporters were not simply additional workers, duplicating the activities of members. While supporter activities did complement those of members, they also supplemented them. For example, while existing party strength was a good predictor of levels of supporter activity for the Liberal Democrats, the same was not true for either Labour or the Conservatives. Indeed, for these parties, existing party strength had only a very weak predictive effect. And, while levels of both member and supporter activity were similarly associated with levels of campaign preparation, the target status of the seat and the type of electoral contest (such as a seat where the Liberal Democrats were challenging the Conservatives), there was some variation in the types of contest that prompted more member and supporter activity. Indeed, Labour benefited from the fact that while member activity was prompted where the party was challenging in a Conservative seat (where the chances of electoral success in the context of 2010 were slim), supporter activity was higher in seats that the party was defending from the then increasingly popular Liberal

Democrats. In sum, the 2010 study showed that supporters made independent and positive contributions to all three main parties' campaigns.

In this paper, we examine the involvement of party supporters in election campaigns using new aggregate-level data collected at the 2015 British general election. Data are derived from a survey of the election agents of Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP, Plaid Cymru and UKIP candidates who stood for 629 of the 632 constituencies in Great Britain – a total of 2,592¹. The data reported here are based on 912 valid responses from agents of the three principal GB-level parties. These comprise of 244 Conservative, 336 Labour and 332 Liberal Democrat agents. The responses were representative of the total population of these agents, based on the electoral status of their seats (see Appendix). We also analyse individual level data collected by the 2015 British Election Study (Wave 6). We ask three questions:

- 1) ***Are the findings from 2010 broadly replicated in 2015?*** If they are, this would confirm the importance of supporters in election campaigns and suggest a certain embeddedness of the practice of recruiting non-members to assist in election campaigns.
- 2) ***Is there variation in respect of when members and supporters are most active during election campaigns?*** Successful campaigns require significant preparation and activity weeks and sometimes months before polling day. This question will assess whether supporters become involved principally at the climax of the campaign. If that is the case, and members' efforts are more spread, this suggests that members continue to have a particular utility in campaigns.
- 3) ***Is there variation between members and supporters in terms of their demographic and ideological profiles?*** This question will test whether different kinds of people are more attracted to election activity through formal membership or through the less formal supporter route.

¹ No questionnaires were sent to agents in Buckingham (the Speaker's seat), or to Rochdale and Heywood & Middleton. In the case of the latter two constituencies, the local authority (Rochdale) did not publish details of the agents. No electoral agent address details were available for 18 UKIP agents. This was principally the case where the agents were also Parliamentary candidates.

Are the findings from 2010 broadly replicated in 2015?

Recruitment of Supporters

The analysis of the 2010 election suggested that significant work in election campaigns was undertaken by party supporters. However, because such findings had never previously been measured or demonstrated, we had no way of knowing whether these results were typical. In the conclusion to our article, we suggested that parties might find it more difficult to recruit supporters where a party had little chance of success or where the outcome was very predictable (Fisher, Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2014:92). In other words, supporters were more likely to be active in tighter elections, where a party's possible chances of success were fairly strong. 2010 was one such election.

The 2015 election, however, presented different scenarios for the parties. For the Conservative and Labour parties, the circumstances for recruiting active supporters were arguably strong. The opinion polls suggested that the election would be a very tight one, with the possibility that either party could form a government (albeit most likely in a coalition or as a minority government). The fact that the opinion polls turned out to be incorrect in respect of the relative standing of the Conservatives and Labour (but not the Liberal Democrats) is irrelevant in this case, because they created an expectation of a close race which would stimulate supporter recruitment.

In the case of the Liberal Democrats, however, the picture in 2015 was very different from the one in 2010. From soon after entering the coalition, the party's popularity had plummeted, and from 2013 onwards, had been behind UKIP in the national polls. Moreover repeated poor performances in local authority and European elections after 2010 further highlighted the party's electoral plight. Under those circumstances, we would expect Liberal Democrat supporters to be fewer in number compared with 2010, since the incentives for participation would be less attractive for individuals who had not committed themselves to formal party membership.

We assess these predictions in Table 1, which illustrates the proportion of constituency campaigns recruiting supporters and the mean numbers of

supporters recruited where this occurred. The results are striking. The first column illustrates the proportion of constituency where supporters were recruited and compares the findings with those from 2010. The figure for Labour is virtually identical – some three quarters of Labour campaigns involves non-members. For the Conservatives, there is a small decline – 65% compared with 75% in 2010. Nevertheless a clear majority of Conservative campaigns involved supporters. For the Liberal Democrats, however, the impact of the party's unpopularity is stark. In 2010, some 86% of campaigns recruited supporters, reflecting the party's traditional and ideological commitment to community politics and the similar ideological structuring of Liberal Democrat members and supporters (Fisher, Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2014: 81; Whiteley *et al*, 2006: 65). In 2015, however, that proportion sank to 45% - a drop of nearly 50%.

Our initial predictions are therefore confirmed for Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Labour's level of supporter recruitment was maintained in a close electoral race, while that of the Liberal Democrats fell sharply, reflecting the poor electoral circumstances in which the party found itself. The slight fall in Conservative recruitment is possibly more difficult to explain. On electoral prospects alone, we would expect supporter recruitment to be maintained. In one sense it is – nearly two thirds of Conservative campaigns recruited supporters. But of course, compared with 2010, the level fell by ten percentage points. Clearly an additional explanation is required. One possibility is the 'cost of governing' – popularity may wane among supporters the longer a party is in power, particularly if it has to make unpopular decisions. A further possibility, however is one rooted in Fisher, Denver & Hands' hierarchy of election outcomes (2006). In respect of the retention of party members, they argue that election performance matters and that some outcomes are better than others. Thus, winning is always better than losing, but that a new victory is in turn better than repeating a victory. In this case, the possibility of ending Labour rule in 2010 would have been a slightly better recruiting sergeant for supporters than the prospect of simply maintaining Conservative rule, with a strong possibility that that would be in coalition, particularly given that no

public polls suggested a Conservative majority was a likely outcome and only 11% of voters thought such an outcome likely.²

The second column in Table 1 (the mean number of supporters recruited) tells a slightly different story, however. In seats where supporters were recruited, the Conservatives secured an identical number compared with 2010. Labour, too, recruited a very similar number, even increasing the mean figure slightly. For the Liberal Democrats, while the proportion of seats where supporters were recruited fell dramatically, the average number actually recruited rose from 19 to 24. This suggests that supporter recruitment may have been better targeted compared with 2010. Certainly, analyses of the effectiveness of the 2015 constituency level campaigns suggest that Liberal Democrat targeting was effective (with an emphasis on the party's hitherto safe seats) and that this helped prevent the outcome for the Liberal Democrats being even worse (Fisher, Cutts, Fieldhouse & Rottweiler, 2015). This finding would run counter to our prediction if the seats where recruitment was maintained were in the seats where the Liberal Democrats focussed most activity. This is indeed, what occurred. The largest numbers of party supporters were recruited in its nominally safest seats.

Table 1. Supporter Recruitment by Party

	% saying Yes	Mean no's recruited
	<i>(2010 in parenthesis)</i>	<i>(2010 in parenthesis)</i>
Conservative	65 (75)	22 (22)
Labour	74 (75)	15 (13)
Liberal Democrat	45 (86)	24 (19)

Note: n for Percentage saying Yes: Conservative = 157; Labour = 246 Liberal Democrat = 147
n for Mean numbers of supporters recruited: Conservative = 152; Labour = 237; Liberal Democrat = 144

² Voter election outcome expectations are derived from an Ipsos-MORI poll in April 2015. <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2565/Expected-general-election-outcome-19792005.aspx>. Accessed 11/8/15

Levels of Participation

We examine next the nature of election activities in which party supporters engaged (Tables 2a, 2b and 2c). For comparison, we also illustrate the activities undertaken by party members where supporters were recruited, as well as the propensity of supporters to engage in activities in 2010. In the last election, we found that supporters were generally more likely to engage in leaflet delivery, taking numbers at polling stations and helping out in the campaign office – low intensity activity; and less likely to involve themselves in contacting electors prior to the election – high intensity activity. Our conclusion was that many supporters effectively excluded themselves from pre-election voter contact.

Broadly speaking, those patterns are replicated. As in 2010, the activity in which supporters were most likely to engage was leaflet delivery. This was the case in at least 96% of campaigns for all three parties. In other areas, the findings were strikingly similar in both election years, with the notable exception of doorstep canvassing. For both the Conservatives and Labour, there was a seven-to-eight percentage point increase in supporters engaging in that activity, while for the Liberal Democrats, participation declined by eight percentage points. Otherwise, the Conservatives experienced some decline in supporters helping at the campaign office and acting as a polling station number taker.

Once again, however, we find the largest variation between activities undertaken by supporters and those undertaken by members were in areas of pre-election voter contact. Despite rises in participation in doorstep canvassing by supporters in Conservative and Labour campaigns, this was still the activity for all parties where the difference between member and supporter participation was greatest – just as in 2010 (Fisher, Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2014: 83). Notwithstanding, just as in 2010, the involvement of supporters across a range of election activities was nevertheless nontrivial, and in some instances, as extensive as it was for party members.

Table 2a. Activities of Members and Supporters – Conservatives

% saying YES Differences from supporters in parenthesis	Supporters (n=155) (2010 in Parenthesis)	Party Members (Where Supporters) (n=155)
Delivering Leaflets	97 (92)	96 (-1)
Telephoning Electors	20 (24)	52 (+32)
Polling Station Number Takers	53 (65)	70 (+17)
Doorstep Canvassing	50 (42)	88 (+38)
Helping at Campaign Office	42 (54)	73 (+31)

Table 2b. Activities of Members and Supporters – Labour

% saying YES Differences from supporters in parenthesis	Supporters (n=245) (2010 in Parenthesis)	Party Members (Where Supporters) (n=245)
Delivering Leaflets	96 (89)	99 (+3)
Telephoning Electors	26 (27)	72 (+46)
Polling Station Number Takers	35 (33)	60 (+25)
Doorstep Canvassing	45 (38)	96 (+51)
Helping at Campaign Office	51 (56)	80 (+29)

Table 2c. Activities of Members and Supporters – Liberal Democrats

% saying YES Differences from supporters in parenthesis	Supporters (n=142) (2010 in Parenthesis)	Party Members (Where Supporters) (n=142)
Delivering Leaflets	97 (94)	97 (0)
Telephoning Electors	16 (16)	55 (+39)
Polling Station Number Takers	47 (47)	63 (+16)
Doorstep Canvassing	14 (22)	82 (+68)
Helping at Campaign Office	38 (40)	62 (+24)

In order to make an overall comparison, both between members and supporters, and with results from 2010, we create a single additive scale of the five election participation items. The scale runs from 0 (no activities undertaken) to 5 (all five activities undertaken). The first comparisons are featured in Table 3, which shows the mean number of activities in which both supporters and members engaged and compares the scores with those from the 2010 election. The results from the two elections are quite similar – indeed those of Labour are virtually identical. For the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, supporters did a little less than in 2010. Thus, while Conservative

supporters on average engaged in 2.8 activities in 2010, in 2015, they engaged in 2.5. Equally, the comparable Liberal Democrat scores fell from 2.2 to 2.0. But in the case of the Conservatives, the number of activities undertaken by members also fell; from 4.1 to 3.8. Thus, the mean proportion of activities undertaken by Conservative supporters compared with members increased slightly from 0.68 to 0.70. The mean Labour proportion fell slightly (to 0.62 from 0.64), and that of the Liberal Democrats also fell slightly (from 0.63 to 0.61). Overall, it remained the case that on average for all three parties, supporters engaged in between 60-70% of those undertaken by members.

Table 3. Member and Supporter Activity Means (Where Supporters Recruited)

(2010 in Parenthesis)	Members	Supporters	Mean Proportion
Conservative (<i>n</i> =157)	3.8 (4.1)	2.5 (2.8)	.70 (.68)
Labour (<i>n</i> =240)	4.1 (3.9)	2.5 (2.4)	.62 (.64)
Liberal Democrat (<i>n</i> =143)	3.6 (3.6)	2.0 (2.2)	.61 (.63)

Proportion - Proportion of Supporter Activity to Member Activity

Predictors of Activity

Our article on the 2010 general election showed that levels of supporter activity were in part a function of existing local party strength. However, there was significant variation by party. The relationship between existing party strength and levels of supporter activity was much stronger in the case of the Liberal Democrats and much weaker for both the Conservatives and Labour. Indeed, for both of these parties, the level of membership had no statistically significant effect. To assess the extent to which these findings were pertinent only in 2010, we repeat the analysis for 2015 (Table 4).³ The results in fact are very similar. Once again, the relationship is easily the strongest in the case of the Liberal Democrats, with both the size of membership and the typical level of activity in the constituency producing statistically significant effects. The results for Labour and the Conservatives are, however, a little

³ In order to maximize the number of cases in the model featured in Table 4, multiple imputation was used for the two independent variables, based upon the electoral status of the seat for the individual party.

different. While existing party strength is again a much weaker predictor of supporter activity for both parties, in 2015 the size of the local party has a small, but statistically significant effect for the Conservatives. In the case of Labour, the membership level also has a marginal effect, as does the proportion of the constituency covered by an active local party organisation. Thus, just as in 2010, we can suggest that supporter activity complements that of members, but that in the case of the Conservatives and Labour, also supplements it to an extent.

Table 4. Existing Membership Strength and Supporter Activity

<i>Dependent Variable = Level of Supporter Activity</i>	Conservative (n=157)				Labour (n=240)				Lib Dems (n=143)			
	b	Beta	S.E.	Sig	b	Beta	S.E.	Sig	b	Beta	S.E.	Sig
Constant	1.858		(.206)	**	1.551		(.182)	**	1.082		(.165)	**
No. of Party Members	.001	.209	(.001)	*	.001	.190	(.000)	*	.004	.298	(.001)	*
% Covered by Active Local Org.	n.s.				.011	.221	(.003)	*	.013	.265	(.005)	*
Adj. R²			.093				.107				.247	

Note 1: ** p<.01 * p< .05 n.s not statistically significant;

Our second set of predictors relates to correlates of activism of both supporters and members. The 2010 study revealed two broad sets of stimuli – *politics* and *parties*. *Politics* refers to two types of incentive: the type of electoral contest and the characteristics of the candidate. The type of electoral contest captures both whether the party holds the seat or is the principal challenger, and which party was the principal opponent. In 2010 we found, for example, that while Conservative–Labour seats were likely to stimulate activity by members, supporters were likely to be active in Labour-Liberal Democrat seats. The latter made more sense electorally and in the context of 2010, it was unlikely that Labour would gain seats from the Conservatives. However, there was a threat to Labour seats from the increasingly popular Liberal Democrats. This prompted us to suggest that supporter activity might be more responsive to electoral conditions. The logic of including candidate characteristics was that there was the potential for supporters to be

particularly attracted to supporting candidates from groups less well represented in Parliament. And indeed, this is what we found in the case of one party – Conservative supporters were more active where the party fielded a non-white candidate. In the case of members, those of Labour were more active where there were women candidates.

The category of *parties* captures two measures over which a party could influence the level of supporter and member activity. First and foremost, the process of targeting seats meant that we would expect more supporter and member activity in seats in which the party was focussing. Certainly, we know that parties' campaign efforts are quite strongly differentiated by the electoral status of a seat (Fisher, Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2011; Fisher, Cutts, Fieldhouse & Rottweiler, 2015). Secondly, the level of preparation undertaken in a seat before the campaign would also be a likely stimulus of both supporter and member activity.

In our original analyses, we also included a wide range of aggregate level demographics as predictors in our model. However, by and large, these did not achieve statistical significance or offer anything of particular interest. We include these variables in our model again here as control variables, but do not report the coefficients in the tables as again, they are largely non-significant in statistical terms.⁴ The results are reported in Tables 5 and 6. In both tables, target seats for the Conservative and Labour parties are those where the party either held the seat with a majority of under 10%, or where the party was under 10% behind the winning party in 2010. For the Liberal Democrats, we feature two models. The second defines Liberal Democrats target status in the same way as the Conservatives and Labour. However, the analysis of campaign effort in 2015 reveals that on account of the party's unpopularity and successive poor election results, the Liberal Democrats ran a very defensive campaign, focussing most attention of what conventionally would be described as safe Liberal Democrat seats – ones where the party

⁴ The demographic variables included in our model as control variables, but which are not reported here, are: Proportion of White Residents, Proportion of Manual Workers, Proportion of Higher Professionals, Proportion of with No Qualifications, Proportion of Students, Proportion of Graduates, Proportion of Home Owner/ Occupier, Proportion of Council House Tenants, Population Density

held the seats with a majority of 10% or more (Fisher, Cutts, Fieldhouse & Rottweiler, 2015). So, the first Liberal Democrat model in categorises the party's target seats as one that it held with a 10% or greater majority.

In the case of supporters (Table 5), the predictors of activity are very similar for the two main parties. Both the level of preparation and the target status of the seat stimulate activity, with no variables from the *politics* group reaching statistical significance. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, there are slightly different results. In both models, the level of preparation is a positive stimulus, as are the circumstances where the Liberal Democrats were defending a seat from the Conservatives. However, the target status of a seat is only relevant in marginal seats, not in the safer seats upon which the party placed most emphasis.

The models predicting member activity produce results that are both similar and different. In terms of similarities, the results for the Liberal Democrat members are almost identical to those of the party's supporters. Activity increased where parties were more prepared and particularly in Liberal Democrat seats being defended against the Conservatives. And, once again, it was marginal seats that stimulated Liberal Democrat activity rather than safe seats. Finally, for all three parties, higher levels of local preparation were a key predictor of member activity. However, for both the Conservatives and Labour, target status did not independently prompt member activity, while in the case of Labour, contests where it was defending seats against a national party in either Scotland or Wales boosted member activity.

These results suggest first, that supporters may be more responsive to the electoral status of a seat than members, reflecting the difficulties that parties have to varying degrees, mobilizing members outside their own seat. Second, it suggests that the type of contest matters for activists of some parties. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, both members and supporters were likely to be mobilized when defending seats from the Conservatives, recognizing the threat that this posed. But with Labour, it was only members who responded to the challenge from the national parties. Although this includes seats where

both the SNP and Plaid Cymru were challengers, it suggests that in these countries at least, members may understand the electoral threat of national parties a little more. A further possibility, of course, is that in the context of Scotland in 2015 at least, activity was not an attractive prospect for supporters, whereas existing members were, perhaps, more 'loyal'. Finally, in the case of the Liberal Democrats, it is notable that levels of both member and supporter activity were stimulated in marginal seats, but not in the ones where the party arguably needed most assistance – its hitherto safe seats, suggesting that activists were less clear about the electoral plight of the party.

Is there variation in respect of when members and supporters are most active during election campaigns?

Our final comparison at the aggregate level is concerned with the point at which the supporters and members engaged most with the campaign. Success in campaigns is partly dependent upon activity some weeks (and indeed months) prior to the election. Given the more formal attachment of members to the party, we might expect there to be a greater propensity to engage in most activity earlier in the campaign, with supporters engaging most towards the end. We test this in Table 7 which compares when peak activity occurred for supporters and members. The differences between the two groups are not huge, but the results are as predicted: while the activity of both supporters and members was most likely to peak in the last two weeks before polling day, this was more likely to be the case for supporters. Thus, while for all three main parties 62% of seats saw the peak level of member activity being in the last two weeks of the campaign, this was the case for 74% of supporters. Equally, the peak period of member activity was in the three weeks before the final two weeks in 28% of seats for the three main parties, compared with 20% of supporters. These patterns were replicated for each party, suggesting that while supporters are clearly important to campaigns, parties are a little more likely to be able to rely on members to engage in campaigns earlier on.

Table 5. Predictors of Supporter Activity

	Conservative (Marginal=Target) (n=157)				Labour (Marginal=Target) (n=240)				Lib Dems (Safe=Target) (n=141)				Lib Dems (Marginal=Target) (n=141)			
	<i>b</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Std Err</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Std Err</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Std Err</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Std Err</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Constant	n.s.				n.s.				n.s.				n.s.			
Con/ Lib Dem	n.s.				n/a				n.s.				n.s.			
Lib Dem / Con Seat	n.s.				n/a				1.455	.388	(.366)	**	1.230	.328	(.343)	**
Con / Lab Seat	n.s.				n.s.				n.s.				n/a			
Lab / Con Seat	n.s.				n.s.				n.s.				n/a			
Lab / Lib Dem Seat	n/a				n.s.				n.s.				n.s.			
Lib Dem / Lab Seat	n/a				n.s.				n.s.				n.s.			
Lab / Nat Seat	n/a				n.s.				n.s.				n/a			
Candidate Sex	n.s.				n.s.				n.s.				n.s.			
Candidate Race	n.s.				n.s.				n.s.				n.s.			
Level of Preparation	.150	.296	(.045)	*	.164	.320	(.038)	**	.154	.308	(.040)	**	.125	.249	(.040)	*
Target Seat	.758	.246	(.249)	*	.463	.160	(.214)	*	n.s.				.577	.184	(.235)	*
Adj. R²		.282				.242				.373				.400		

Note 2: ** p<.01 * p<.05 n.s not statistically significant; n/a not applicable

Table 6. Predictors of Member Activity

	Conservative (Marginal=Target) (n=157)				Labour (Marginal=Target) (n=240)				Lib Dems (Safe=Target) (n=141)				Lib Dems (Marginal=Target) (n=141)			
	<i>b</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Std Err</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Std Err</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Std Err</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Std Err</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Constant	n.s.				4.733		(2.040)	*	n.s.				n.s.			
Con/ Lib Dem	n.s.				n/a				n.s.				n.s.			
Lib Dem / Con Seat	n.s.				n/a				1.002	.230	(.417)	*	.758	.174	(.390)	*
Con / Lab Seat	n.s.				n.s.				n/a				n/a			
Lab / Con Seat	n.s.				n.s.				n/a				n/a			
Lab / Lib Dem Seat	n/a				n.s.				n.s.				n.s.			
Lib Dem / Lab Seat	n/a				n.s.				n.s.				n.s.			
Lab / Nat Seat	n/a				1.098	.214	(.373)	*	n/a				n/a			
Candidate Sex	n.s.				n.s.				n.s.				n.s.			
Candidate Race	n.s.				n.s.				n.s.				n.s.			
Level of Preparation	.182	.376	(.043)	**	.154	.365	(.030)	**	.289	.496	(.046)	**	.255	.438	(.046)	**
Target Seat	n.s.				n.s.				n.s.				.670	.184	(.267)	*
Adj. R²		.309				.284				.398				.426		

Note 1: ** p<.01 * p< .05 n.s not statistically significant; n/a not applicable

Table 7. Peak Period of Activity

	Main Three Parties		Conservatives		Labour		Liberal Democrats	
	Members n=520	Supporters n=512	Members n=144	Supporters n=145	Members n=239	Supporters n=233	Members n=137	Supporters n=134
Last two weeks before polling day	62	74	64	73	64	77	64	70
First three weeks of April 2015	28	20	26	19	26	19	27	22
Before March 2015	9	6	10	8	10	4	9	8

Is there variation between members and supporters in terms of their demographic and ideological profiles?

While the aggregate level analyses tell us a fair amount about levels of activity by supporters and members, they cannot tell us anything about the individual level characteristics of these activists, either in terms of demographics or attitudes. Fortunately, however, Wave 6 of the British Election Study carried some post-election questions which identified whether respondents took part in the party's election campaigns and whether they were party members or not. This allows us to explore whether supporters are different in any way from members. Inevitably, the numbers of respondents are relatively small – election activity is a minority sport - particularly when disaggregated by party, but they nonetheless provide useful indicator of whether the social and ideological predictors of election activity vary depending on formal party membership.

We begin with social characteristics (Table 8). Where differences between members and supporters are statistically significant (using Chi Square), this is indicated in the table. The profile of Liberal Democrat members and supporters is very similar. This may be expected since as we say earlier, the difference between Liberal Democrat members and voters has been found to be marginal. By and large, the same is true for the Conservatives. Here, the only demographic difference between active supporters and members is that members are less likely to be home owners. In the case of Labour, however, there are several differences. Supporters are less likely to be male, white British, own their homes or be higher earners. They are also more likely to be graduates. Indeed, in only one of our demographic categories (average age) is the profile of members and supporters similar.

Such results for Labour may be a little puzzling. On the one hand, just as under-represented candidates could have the ability to mobilize support, so groups under-represented amongst the party's membership (women and non-white British) may be more likely to be mobilized as supporters. Equally, the fact that supporters are more likely to be graduates chimes with the idea that

improved resources tend to boost participation. However, in respect of home ownership and salaries, supporters have fewer resources. On the one hand, this may help explain participation in the election campaign by members, but on the other, supporters have more barriers to entry in respect of campaign involvement – they are not regular members and therefore need to be recruited. That being so, we might expect active supporters to have more resources than party members.

We explore next whether there is variation in ideology and policy preferences. There are two tables. The first (Table 9) examines preferences in respect of Left and Right, while the second (Table 10) covers positions on Liberal-Authoritarian issues and those associated with Post-Materialism. Where differences in the mean position are statistically significant (captured using ANOVA), these are highlighted. On account of the small number of cases, we include those differences that are statistically significant at both the 5% and 1% levels. In terms of Left and Right, we use three indicators: self-positioning on an 11-point scale where a higher score indicates to a more right wing position; self-positioning on an 11 point scale in respect of redistribution, where a higher score indicates a less positive position; and a composite variable running from 1 to 5 combining scores for five variables capturing left-right values, where a higher score suggests a more left wing position.⁵ The variables in Table 10 are measured in a variety of ways. Attitudes to the European Union are captured on an 11-point scale, where a higher score indicates a more pro-European position. The variable capturing attitudes on the environment is a five point scale – higher scores indicating positions that are more sceptical about environmental measures. Finally, there are two composite variables running from 1 to 5, one capturing responses to a range of liberal-authoritarian values, the second, responses to questions on equality

⁵ The five variables included in the Left-Right scale are all five-point Likert scales. The combined scale is an additive one, which is then divided by 5. The variables capture responses to: Left-Right values towards government's responsibility for income redistribution; Big businesses taking advantage of ordinary people; Ordinary people not getting their fair share; Unequal laws for rich and poor people; Management is always trying to get the better of employees.

of opportunity. Higher scores capture a more authoritarian position and one less well disposed towards equality of opportunity measures.⁶

Liberal Democrat members and supporters have a similar ideological profile in respect of left and right, with no differences being statistically significant. For the Conservative and Labour activists, however, there are differences. For both parties, supporters are somewhat more centrist in their thinking. This is demonstrated in one of the self-placement variables in the case of the Conservatives and two in the case of Labour. In terms of Liberal-Authoritarian and Post-Materialist issues, the profile of Conservative and Liberal Democrat supporters and members is generally very similar, with there being no statistically significant differences between activists for the Conservatives and only a marginal difference in respect of liberal-authoritarian values, with supporters being less liberal (albeit at the 10% level of statistical significance). For Labour, however, there are differences for every variable. Labour supporters are less pro-European, less green, less liberal and less well disposed toward equality of opportunity measures. In general, just as with Left-Right issues, Labour supporters are more centrist than members.

Finally, we examine preferences between members and supporters in respect of diversity of representation. At the aggregate level, candidates from under-represented groups (in respect of women and ethnic minorities) were seen as factors that could prompt higher levels of supporter activity. In fact, the evidence was mixed, with women candidates being more likely to increase levels of Labour member activity in 2010 and ethnic minority candidates prompting more Conservative supporter activity. In 2015, however, neither had a statistically significant impact at the aggregate level. The evidence in Table 11 suggests why this might be the case. The table features responses

⁶ The five variables included in the Liberal-Authoritarian scale are all five-point Likert scales. The combined scale is an additive one, which is then divided by 5. The variables capture responses to: Attitudes towards young people's respect for traditional British values; The death penalty; School's responsibility to teach children to obey authority; Censorship of films and magazines to uphold moral standards; Stiffer sentences for law breakers.

The three variables captured in the Equality scale are five point scales. The combined scale is an additive one, which is then divided by 3. The variables capture responses to: Attitudes towards equal opportunities for ethnic minorities; Equal opportunities for women; Equal opportunities for homosexuals.

to two questions capturing preferences on whether there should be more or fewer MPs from women and ethnic minorities. Both are measures on a five-point scale, with a higher score indicating a preference for more. Broadly speaking, most respondents favour there being more, and for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, there is no real difference between members and supporters. In the case of Labour, however, the differences are apparent – supporters are less committed to representative diversity than members. Once again, this places Labour supporters in a more centrist position.

Such findings for Labour suggest possible utility for May's Law of Curvilinear disparity (May, 1973). May suggests that there may be a significant difference between the ideological positioning of activists compared with voters, with party leaders providing a link between the two. In this case, the link may also be expressed between the supporters and the members on the one hand, and with voters on the other. We can test this by examining the mean positions of Labour voters on the various issues illustrated in Tables 9, 10 and 11 and comparing their positions with those of supporters and members. If the principle of May's Law is useful here, we would expect the positions of supporters to fall somewhere between those of the members and the voters.

The evidence is very mixed. It works as predicted on some issues - attitudes towards the EU (Labour voters mean 4.2) and Liberal Authoritarian values (mean 3.6). On others, the findings indicate that voters are closer to the preferences of supporters than members - the environment (mean 2.5) and equality of opportunity (mean 2.8), suggesting that supporters may play an important role in reflecting voters' views within parties. But in other areas, the positions of voters falls between those of members and supporters – on the left-right self-placement scale (mean of 3.4), the self-placement scale on re-distribution (mean 2.9), and in respect of preferences for representative diversity, particularly for women (mean 4.0). In those areas, while the differences are small, Labour supporters appear to be more centrist than the party's voters.

Table 8. Demographic Characteristics of Members and Supporters Involved in Election Campaigning

	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrats	
	Members	Supporters	Members	Supporters	Members	Supporters
N	54-71	28-39	86-116	61-72	25-32	10-11
% Male	54	49	77**	50**	75	64
Aver. Age	43	54	46	44	51	50
% White British	87	95	83**	51**	97	92
% Grad. Above	24	18	26**	41**	41	42
% Own/Mortgage	52**	72**	64**	45**	66	58
% Earn 50k+	37	18	24**	7**	28	20

Note: ** Difference is statistically significant using Chi-Square

Table 9. Mean Left-Right Policy Preferences of Members and Supporters

	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrats	
	Members	Supporters	Members	Supporters	Members	Supporters
N	64-71	34-39	105-115	66-72	29-32	11
Left-Right Self	7.8	7.4	2.8**	4.3**	4.5	5.1
Redistrib. Self	8.1**	6.7**	1.5**	3.5**	4.4	4.4
Left-Right Values	2.8	2.9	4.3	4.2	3.5	3.4

Note: ** p<.05 * p<.1 Difference is statistically significant using ANOVA

Table 10. Mean Liberal-Authoritarian and Post-Materialist Preferences of Members and Supporters

	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrats	
	Members	Supporters	Members	Supporters	Members	Supporters
N	64-71	34-39	105-115	66-72	29-32	11
EU	3.1	3.0	5.8**	4.6**	5.1	4.9
Environment	3.2	3.3	2.0**	2.5**	1.9	2.1
L-A	3.8	3.7	2.8**	3.4**	2.5*	3*
Equality	3.3	3.5	2.3**	2.9**	2.3	2.5

Note: ** p<.05 * p<.1 Difference is statistically significant using ANOVA

Table 11. Mean Candidate Preferences of Members and Supporters

	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrats	
	Members	Supporters	Members	Supporters	Members	Supporters
N	64-71	34-39	105-115	66-72	29-32	11
Prefer Women MP	3.5	3.6	4.3**	3.7**	4.2	4.1
Prefer Ethnic Minority MP	3.2	3.3	4.2**	3.4**	4.2	4

Note: ** p<.05 * p<.1 Difference is statistically significant using ANOVA

Members in Waiting?

So – supporters clearly matter. They make an important contribution to campaigns, are a further link with the electorate and in some areas, have a different ideological profile from members. But are they principally formal members in waiting? To test this, we turn finally to the extent to which campaigns can be good recruiting grounds for membership amongst those supporters who take part. Table 12 illustrates what proportion of local parties were able to recruit supporters who had assisted in the campaigns into full membership and the mean number recruited, where this was the case. What is very clear is that involving supporters in campaigns is a means by which members can be recruited. Some 70% of the three main parties recruited at least one supporter who had taken part in the campaign into full membership, and on average, parties recruited a mean of 8 new members this way. Yet, there is variation across the parties. While some 71% and 78% of Conservative and Labour parties were able to recruit supporter activists as members, the same was true for only 56% of Liberal Democrat parties.

What explains this variation? Two possible explanations present themselves. First, it is possible that Liberal Democrat unpopularity was a disincentive – as we have seen, many fewer Liberal Democrat campaigns were able to recruit supporters in 2015 compared with 2010. But a further reason may be more to do with the Liberal Democrats themselves. The 2010 study showed, for example, that the party had particularly high levels of supporter recruitment (some 86% of seats). While there are no data on supporter activity prior to 2010, the high number would suggest that there was some history of supporter involvement in the party, and as agents said in 2010, there are many supporters, who help out repeatedly in elections, but do not wish to join a party formally (Fisher, Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2014: 82). Overall then, some supporters are members in waiting, evidenced by the recruitment by all parties. Equally, many are not and choose to remain outside formal party membership, despite being engaged in election activity.

Table 12. Recruitment of Active Supporters in Membership

	Main Three Parties n=536	Conservatives n=153	Labour n=239	Liberal Democrats n=144
% Recruited into full membership	70	71	78	56
Mean Number of recruited volunteers (n)	8 (349)	7 (101)	8 (171)	8 (77)

Conclusions

Supporters are an integral part of parties' election campaigns. Not only is participation widespread, the level of activity is clearly nontrivial. Supporters do not engage in as many activities as members, but their contribution remains important. Evidence from two general elections shows that parties make considerable use of the volunteer activity offered by those, who for whatever reason, have not signed up to be formal members. And, there is growing evidence, both in Britain and elsewhere, that supporters are becoming integrated into other aspects of party organisation. The assumption, therefore, inherent in many studies of parties and party organisations that formal members provide the sole source of grassroots engagement in parties is - in one sense - a fallacy.

But none of this is to suggest that members no longer matter. First and foremost, the evidence from 2015 in respect of the Liberal Democrats (and to a lesser extent the Conservatives), suggests that the involvement of members in election campaigns is less volatile. In a wake of significant party unpopularity, the number of Liberal Democrat local parties that recruited supporters fell by nearly 50%, suggesting that the level of supporter involvement may be affected by electoral conditions more than that of formal members. Of course, this can work to the benefit of parties – the study of the 2010 election showed that Labour supporters were more responsive to electoral conditions than members to the benefit of the party. But the dramatic fall in Liberal Democrat recruitment is a clear indicator that supporters may form a less reliable pool of support. Equally, though the difference is small, supporters are more likely to engage in peak levels of activity towards the end

of an election campaign. That work is vital, but at the same time, campaigns require significant work weeks and sometimes months before polling day, and members are more likely to engage in that.

Yet, in general, supporters are not always so different from members. With the exception of Labour, supporters have a similar demographic profile, and on many issues, a fairly similar ideological one. But there are differences. Conservative supporters are more centrist on left-right issues, while Labour supporters are more centrist across a wide range of issues. And, Labour supporters also differ demographically. Being a Labour supporter is a clear route to participation for under-represented groups such as women, non-white British and the less wealthy. These similarities and differences can help explain why some supporters ultimately become full-members, but also why many do not.

So, members are evidently not the only fruit and as such, models of party organisation that focus on participation incentives based on the assumption that formal members singularly constitute the grassroots need to be re-cast. But, it would be an overstatement at this stage to proclaim the member fallacy. Members still matter – they participate more than supporters, engage in more campaign activities, and are seemingly a more reliable source of labour. But they are not the only game in town – that assumption is clearly a fallacy.

Appendix

Representativeness of Responses

%	Ultra-Marginal Maj. <5%	Marginal Maj. 5-10%	Safe Held Maj.>10%	Safe Not Held Maj.>10%
All Seats (631)				
Conservative	11	15	36	38
Labour	11	13	28	48
Lib Dems	5	6	5	84
Responses				
Conservative (244)	7	13	43	37
Labour (336)	10	12	23	55
Lib Dems (332)	5	6	6	83

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