

# Reforming the ALP?

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[My column this week](#) deals with the challenges facing political parties in the established democracies, and then some of the implications for current ALP debates about organizational structure. Here is some additional information, and then references and further reading.

## Declining membership and aging

In virtually all the established democracies, the membership of political parties is in steep decline.

That said, it is worth noting some exceptions. First, the United States, though party affiliation in the US does not have the same connotations, in terms of activism and militancy, as being a member of say the Swedish social democrats or the German CSU.

A second exception is ‘outsider parties’, such the Swiss SVP, the Austrian FPÖ or the Die Linke in Germany (and possibly the Greens and the Katter party in Australia).

Finally, the picture in the emerging or recent democracies (such as those in Eastern Europe) is more varied and fluid.

Those exceptions noted, the situation for the long-established mainstream parties is pretty dire. Some of the mammoths have shrunk to the point of virtual disappearance. Membership in the Swedish SAP (the social democratic party), for example, has shrunk by two-thirds since the early 1990s. The party’s youth movement, which once had nearly 40,000 members, now has 5,500 – fewer than the Swedish Pirate Party (see Micus, 2010). But it is important to note that the SAP’s conservative counterpart, while substantially increasing its share of the vote, also saw its active membership fall some 50 percent (see Bergman and Strom, 2011).

As for party aging, all parties got a membership boost from the baby boomer generation, with the left gaining especially in the wake of the Vietnam war. But as the depression generation has died off, while generation X and Y have not joined political parties, the boomers are now the only ones left, and they are not getting any younger.

Here too, the picture is dire. Consider Austria, whose socialists once enrolled the highest share of the population in a democracy. In 1979, over 10 percent of all Austrians carried the party’s red membership book; today, that share is barely 1.5 percent. But even more dramatic is the aging of the membership base: according to the party’s own demographic projections, “if things carry on as they are, the loss of the last SPO? member is expected as early as 2018” (Micus 2010).

An excellent statistical analysis of the changing profile of party membership in Western Europe is Scarow and Gezgor, 2010. I derive the odds ratio for member age cited in the column from the estimates they set out in Table 9.

### **Membership and viability**

As I explain in the column, declining membership need not undermine parties' viability. The simplest way to think about this is to view parties as converting inputs (of labour and human capital, including that voluntarily provided by members, and finance) into programs, votes and elected positions. As people become more reluctant to join, the effective price of the voluntary labour input rises. Parties can react to this by substituting other inputs and/or by increasing the price they pay for voluntary labour (for instance, by reducing membership fees or giving members greater privileges, including power in shaping the party program).

There is evidence that broadly what parties have done is used increased access to government funding to offset the rising 'cost' of members – see Dalton, Farrell and McAllister, 2011. However, there is a proposition in political science called May's Law (or the principle of curvilinear disparity) which states that the rank and file members of a political party tend to be more ideological than both the leadership of that party and its voters (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curvilinear\\_Disparity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curvilinear_Disparity)). Moreover, it follows from the general nature of that Law that as membership shrinks, the ideological disparity between members and the electorate should rise. That proposition is examined in Scarow and Gezgor, 2010 and discussed in Dalton, Farrell and McAllister, 2011.

The modeling in Scarow and Gezgor, 2010 casts doubt on the Law; in essence, it suggests members are increasingly drawn from the middle rather than the extremes. Their modelling, for example, finds that in 1990, the likelihood of a German woman being a member of a mainstream political party increased more than threefold as her views moved from the political centre towards the right or left; in the 2000s, by contrast, members were only marginally more likely to be extremists than centrists. One explanation of this is that a larger share of members are careerists, who effectively look at issues as 'party managers' rather than in ideological terms.

### **Primaries and other responses to declining membership**

In the column, I argue that the primaries shift parties further from the median voter, while exacerbating intra-party divisions. A very useful discussion of US primaries (and of the dynamics of primaries generally) is in Stimson 2004, who shows how primaries cemented the anti-abortion rights attitude in the Republican party (which historically, had been the 'pro choice' party in the US).

On the way European social democratic parties have responded to declining membership, Micus 2010 is very useful.

### **Further reading**

My 'must read' books in this area are:

Aldrich J.H., 1995, *Why Parties?: The Origin And Transformation Of Political Parties In America*, University of Chicago Press. <http://www.amazon.com/Why-Parties-Transformation-Political-American/dp/0226012727>

Torbjorn B. and Strøm K. (eds), 2011, *The Madisonian Turn: Political Parties and Parliamentary Democracy in Nordic Europe*, The University of Michigan Press. <http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=312561>

Dalton R.J., Farrell D.M. and McAllister I., 2011, *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage: How Parties Organize Democracy*, Oxford University Press. <http://www.amazon.com/Political-Parties-Democratic-Linkage-Comparative/dp/0199599351>

McAllister I., 2011, *The Australian Voter: 50 Years of Change*, University of New South Wales. [http://books.google.ca/books/about/The\\_Australian\\_Voter.html?id=OMn4tgAACAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](http://books.google.ca/books/about/The_Australian_Voter.html?id=OMn4tgAACAAJ&redir_esc=y)

The last of those should really be on every Australian's reading list.

I have also drawn on:

Barr R.R., 2009, 'Populists, Outsiders and Anti-establishment Politics', *Party Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp 29-48. <http://ppq.sagepub.com/content/15/1/29.abstract>

Nassmacher K-H., 2009, *The Funding Of Party Competition: Political Finance In 25 Democracies*, Nomos Publishers. <http://www.isbs.com/partnumber.asp?pnid=298246>

Micus M., 2010, 'Organisational Identity and Reform of Social Democratic Parties in Europe', The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, International Policy Analysis, December. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/ipa/07720.pdf>.

McCann A.J. and Kitschelt H., 2005, 'The Radical Right in the Alps', *Party Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp 147-171. <http://ppq.sagepub.com/content/11/2/147.short>

Scarow S.E. and Gezgor B., 2010, 'Declining Memberships, changing Members? European Political party members in a new era', *Party Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 6, pp 823-842. <http://ppq.sagepub.com/content/early/2010/05/04/1354068809346078>

Stimson J.A. 2004, *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*, Cambridge University Press. <http://www.amazon.com/Tides-Consent-Opinion-American-Politics/dp/0521601177>

Whiteley P.F., 2010, 'Is the party over? The decline of party activism and membership across the democratic world', *Party Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp 21-44. <http://ppq.sagepub.com/content/early/2010/06/10/1354068810365505>