

# CIAO BELLA, CIAO: WHY ARE PARTIES LOSING MEMBERS

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# Abstract

While research on party membership evolves around who joins a party and why, we do not know why party members are leaving parties. Although parties continue to lose members, there are no distinct theories about party disengagement. This thesis tries to fill that gap by establishing a theory of party disengagement using narrative interviews with 10 ex-members of German and Austrian social-democratic parties. The outcome of this inductive theory building approach was that first, leaving a party is a rather long process and, secondly, that structural and ideological intraparty factors are the underlying causes for the party exit. While a certain trigger event can eventually spark the concrete exit, members are disengaging because of internal issues that then increase the feeling of not having efficacy. However, the social environment can extend the leaving process.

In the second part of the thesis, I conducted a descriptive analysis by combining the MAPP and PPDB datasets to see if the structural intraparty factors that were identified as exit reasons can explain the decline of party membership numbers. Membership decline does not affect all parties, but overall, we can see that parties that allow for intra-party policy ballots perform better than those who do not. Allowing all members to vote for the party leader, however, does not seem to be particularly beneficial. Finally, party family plays a role: while low hierarchies, more intra-party democracy and more power for factions benefit social-democratic parties, and to some extent ecological and liberal parties, the pattern is reversed for conservative and Christian-democratic parties.

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# I. Introduction

Throughout Europe, parties are losing members. Since the 1980s, this phenomenon has been empirically observed by political scientists. Party membership, both in terms of raw membership numbers and the percentage of party members compared to the electorate steadily decreased and did neither spare established nor new democracies (Mair and van Biezen 2001; van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012). The bulk of this decline can be attributed to the decline of mass membership parties such as social democratic parties (Köln 2016). Since their membership peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, they continue to lose members. The membership decline can be attributed to two factors: the parties' inability to recruit the masses and party exits of party members. This thesis focuses on the second: why are party members leaving traditional mass membership parties such as social democratic parties?

The question why members are leaving parties has been studied rarely so far and brings the supply side – the party – into focus. Whiteley (2011), who studied party decline in 36 countries, found that 8.6 percent of survey respondents used to belong to a political party (Whiteley 2011). In some countries, this number is even higher than the actual number of party members. However, very little theoretical and empirical research has examined this social group and explored the reasons for exiting parties. Previous research concentrated on the description of aggregated party decline (Mair and van Biezen 2001; van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012) or on finding macro-level explanations for decreasing party activism (Whiteley 2011; Köln 2016). Rohrbach (2011) was the first one – to my knowledge – who studied the individual decisions for party members to leave a party. She found that in Germany, over two-thirds of ex-members left their party to intraparty reasons, such as discontent with policy positions, the political course of the party or conflicts and scandals (Rohrbach 2011, 198). Another study on ex-members was published more recently by Wagner (2017), who tested five theories of party activism. His results show that an ideological gap

between the member and the party is the most prevalent factor to spark an exit, but also increasing disengagement from politics and scepticism regarding the influence one can make by being a party member (Wagner 2017). The results of Rohrbach's (2011) and Wagner's (2017) research were based on large-scale surveys and both worked with theories, which are usually used to explain why someone joins a party, but not why someone leaves a party. Hence, they did not fully cover the whole trajectory of party disengagement which ultimately resulted in the decision to leave a party. They only explored the end-point – the exit – and they solely worked with variables, which originally were developed to explain party entries. A party membership, however, is a dynamic process (Whiteley 2011, 25) and each phase of this process is distinct. Members might have different motivations to join than to leave, therefore theories on party engagement do not fully assess the whole picture of party disengagement.

This thesis should fill that gap and shed light on the intraparty processes which can enhance the dissociation between a party and its member. Therefore, I aim to construct a theory of party disengagement, as previous literature only developed theories which should explain party engagement by asking why someone joins a party. In particular, I want to find out why the youth disengages in party politics, because it is especially the mass membership parties, which nowadays “still rely on the generation that entered both parties in the 1970s” (Spier and Klein 2015, 91). This generational gap, where younger cohorts do not want to be involved in party activism, might explain the steady party decline in the past decades (Whiteley 2011) and is an important factor for the course of traditional mass membership parties. Even if they actively engage in party politics, parties seem to be unable to retain younger activists, as the likelihood of exiting a party is higher among younger cohorts (Rohrbach 2011, 90). Party decline will continue if incentives for younger people to join parties are remaining low or if the obstacles young activists face in intraparty politics are too high. By conducting qualitative interviews with former party members, I want to find out what factors contribute to party exits. Considering that it is especially young party members who

disengage from party activism and this could have implications for the overall party decline of traditional mass membership parties, the research question addressed for Part I of the thesis, establishing a theory of party disengagement, is:

**Why are young party members leaving traditional mass parties?**

The second goal is to expand the disengagement theory constructed in this thesis to other contexts, countries, and party types. Part II of the thesis looks at structural intraparty factors which were identified as exit reasons in the interviews and links them to change in membership numbers over time. By combining party membership with internal party organization, I combine two research areas which are seldomly linked together. The research question for the Part II is therefore:

**Can structural intraparty factors that were identified as exit reasons explain the general decline of party membership?**

The thesis is structured into five chapters. In Chapter II, I define what is usually understood by party membership, as the concept is central for this research. Then I give a short overview on the development of party membership numbers in Europe. Moreover, I discuss the current literature on party membership and party engagement and point out that party exits have mostly been omitted in the research. In Chapter III, I establish the theory of party disengagement. The methodology as well as the results and its discussion are outlined in this part of the thesis. In Chapter IV, I present the data and variables I use for the descriptive analysis. The analysis first looks at the relationship between the change in membership numbers and the single independent variables and then combines the independent variables with each other. Chapter V combines Part I with Part II and discusses the overall results and limitation of the thesis.



## II. Party membership: definition, development & theories

In this Chapter, I first define the concept of party membership and then give an overview of the development of party membership numbers in Europe. Then I give a short overview on the current research on party engagement. Finally, I summarize the few studies which deal with party exits and discuss how they are insufficient to explain how the process of party disengagement works.

### a. What is party membership?

Party membership is a central concept of this thesis and therefore it is vital to conceptualize it. Party membership is not a particularly clear-cut concept, both for political parties and in political science. Party membership is conceived differently across countries and political cultures (Ponce and Scarrow 2016, 683–84). Most scholars either work with the party's self-reported membership figures or with survey responses and rarely define the concept (Scarrow and Gezgor 2010; van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012; Peters 2016), leaving the interpretation of the concept to the parties or the survey participants.

Although party membership can take on different forms, we normally can distinguish between a formalized membership and a more informal concept of a party's broader supporter base, where behaviour is more pivotal than a formal membership (Ponce and Scarrow 2016, 683–84). Usually, the traditional formal membership consists out of obligations and rights: the obligation to pay membership fees on the one hand and a set of rights (such as the right to participate in party meetings or vote on issues or personnel) on the other (Scarrow 2015, 30). With this definition, party members officially belong to a party organization and its community (Lisi and Cancela 2019). The informal association with a party could be frequently voting for a party, expressing support–

online or offline – or making irregular donations. A better term to describe this informal association with a certain party could be the concept of partisanship.

In *The American Voter* (1960), partisanship was originally conceived as a stable alignment with a party which is expressed in a persistent attachment towards a party (Campbell et al. 1960, 146–49). According to this traditional view of partisanship (Kroh and Selb 2009), fluctuation in party identification rarely occurs, usually only when personal circumstances fundamentally change (Campbell et al. 1960, 150). As partisanship is viewed as a stable attachment, it is rather a psychological identification with a party than a concrete action to support a party. This is a major difference to party membership, as paying membership fees is the initial and indispensable supportive action a party member must undertake in order to count as an official member. Normally, partisanship results in repeated voting for the same party (Schmitt and Holmberg 2003, 97), but this is not a necessary condition. But party membership should also not be equated with vote choices if we define it as a formal procedure (registering as a member and paying fees), because vote loyalty would only count as a behavioural pattern and is not an exclusive characteristic of a party member (Ponce and Scarrow 2016).

Partisanship as a concept was developed in the US-context, but empirical evidence shows that partisanship also exists in European multi-party contexts (Kroh and Selb 2009; Dalton 2014; Lisi 2014), although its strength is declining in many Western European countries (Schmitt and Holmberg 2003, 101). Similar to party membership (Whiteley 2011), partisanship also suffers from a generational gap, as older cohorts have stronger party ties than younger cohorts (Dalton 2014).

Although party membership and partisanship share some similar characteristics, this thesis concentrates on the traditional formal party membership. I use the concept developed by Scarrow (2015). She specified multiple overlapping types of party activism such as followers, cyber-members or news audience. The traditional party membership entails, as already discussed above, certain

rights and obligations, meaning “[w]hen there are multiple ways to affiliate, traditional membership is the mode that confers the most political rights within the party, and also carries the heaviest obligations” (Scarrow 2015, 30).

## b. Empirical development of party membership in Europe

There are two approaches for measuring party membership: either we rely on the party’s self-reported membership figures or we use survey data (Scarrow and Gezgor 2010). But both approaches come with limitations. First, parties have an incentive to overreport their membership numbers to display their organizational strength. Moreover, rules for party membership vary from party to party, which makes the self-reported data harder to compare. The Austrian conservative party (ÖVP), for example, includes members of affiliated organizations in their self-reported membership figures, although the members of affiliated organizations are not necessarily actual party members (Steinmüller-Schwarz 2017). Surveys, on the other hand, are more expensive, but could be more comparable if all survey participants work with the same definition of party membership. But there might be an over-representation of party members, as “people who once were members may report that they still are, and the question may prompt false responses from some people who feel guilty that they are not members.” (Scarrow and Gezgor 2010, 825–26). However, both measurements seem to similarly capture overall membership numbers of established Western European parties (Scarrow and Gezgor 2010).

So far, the most extensive research on party membership has been conducted on the aggregate level. Mair and van Biezen (2001) observed a consistent membership decline among 20 European democracies throughout the 1990s, both in terms of raw membership numbers and the party membership-electorate (M/E) ratio. Moreover, they found a dichotomy between large and small

countries: among established democracies, larger polities have the lowest M/E ratio, whereas polities below eight million eligible voters have the highest percentage of party membership (Mair and van Biezen 2001, 10). Party decline continued throughout the first decade of the 21st century. Almost all 23 countries which were under investigation in van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke's research of 2012 reported a decline in party membership. Looking at the M/E ratio (Figure 1), the only European democracies which gain party members since the 1980s are the Southern European countries Spain and Greece.

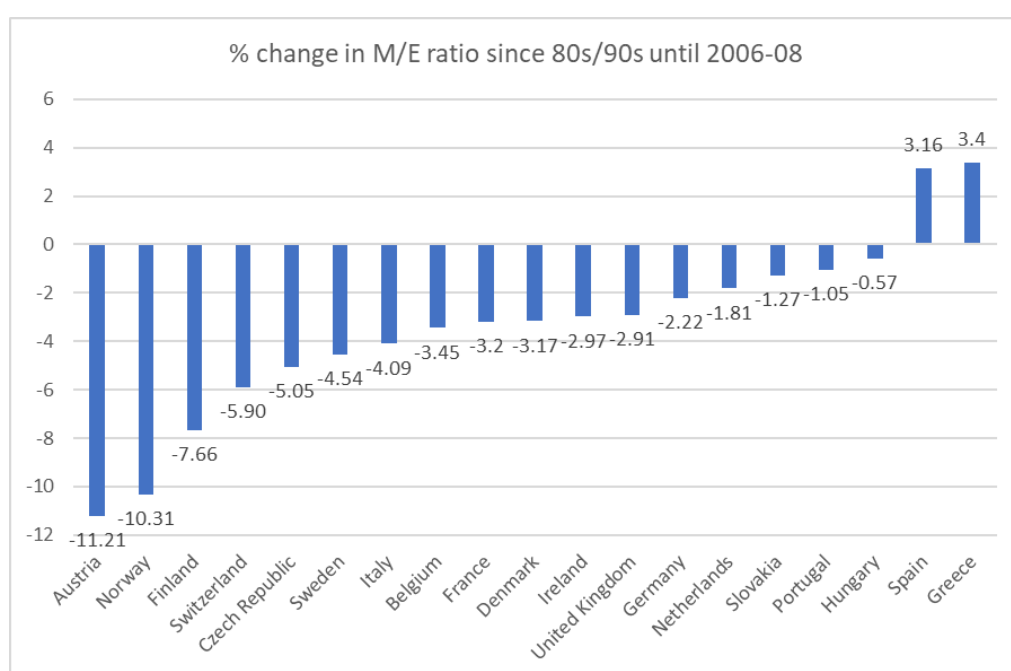


Figure 1: Data from van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke (2012)

With regard to Central and Eastern Europe, the authors found that the new democracies did not manage to build up mass membership parties (van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012). Except Estonia, Bulgaria and Slovenia, all other Central and Eastern European parties have an M/E ratio below the European mean (Figure 2), some of them are even among the worst performing

countries (Latvia, Poland & Hungary). Similar to previous results found by Mair and van Biezen (2001), van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke (2012) found a statically significant effect between small countries (less than 20 million voters) and large countries (more than 20 million voters), where the former on average have 2.48 % more party members than the latter.

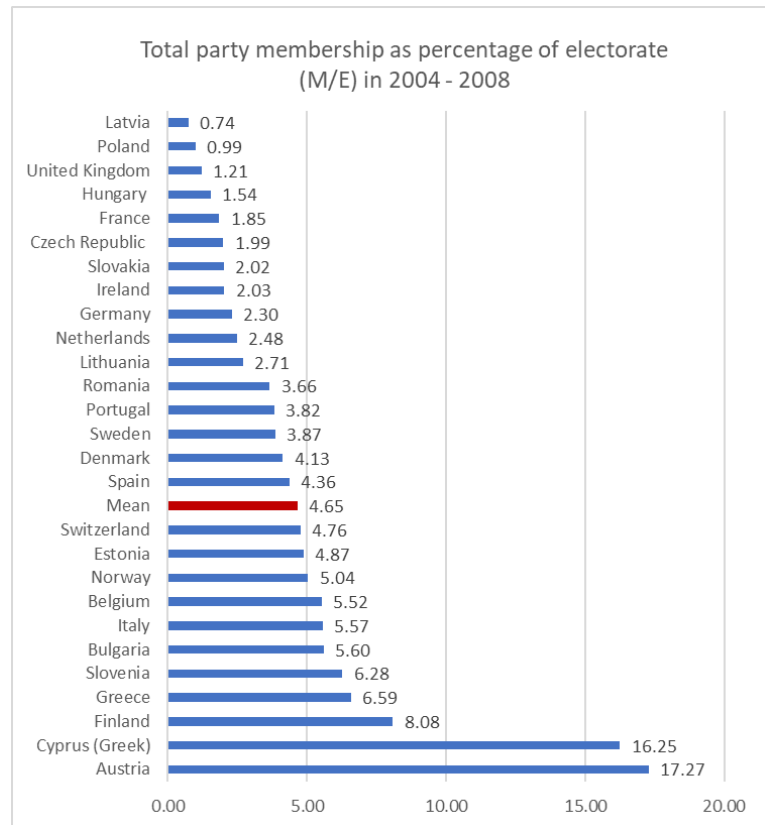


Figure 2: Data from van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke (2012)

When looking at the party level, however, the picture is more nuanced. Plenty smaller and newer parties throughout Europe record increasing membership numbers, but it is the old mass membership parties such as the social democrats and Christian democrats which contribute the most to the overall party decline (Van Haute and Gauja 2015; Kölln 2016). Mass membership parties are hence not what they used to be anymore: they lost their masses.

### c. Theories of party engagement: Who joins a party and why?

Apart from research on aggregate membership numbers, the scholarly interest on party membership was centred around the question who joins a party and why (i.e. Bruter and Harrison 2009; Cross and Young 2008; Achury et al. 2020; Cross and Young 2004; Kosiara-Pedersen, Scarrow, and Van Haute 2017; Gomez et al. 2019; Lisi and Cancela 2019; Scarrow 2015; Spier

2019). The question why someone joins a party led to a number of models and theories which try to explain party engagement, but a lot of research also centred around the sociodemographic characteristics of party members.

One of the most prevalent theories is the **General Incentive Model** (Clark and Wilson 1961). Clark and Wilson (1961) distinguish between purposive, social and material incentives influencing the decision to join an organization or a political party. While some members of organizations seek material benefits such as jobs, monetary profits or tax reductions, others join an association to socialize, to find a sense of group identification or to have fun. Some also join an organization to achieve a greater goal and their main incentive is therefore purposive (Clark and Wilson 1961, 134–36). Especially in a political context, these purposive incentives can also be called ideological incentives. Clark and Wilson's incentives are not mutually exclusive among members of an organization and they mention that the plurality of interest and goals can be a source of intraorganizational dispute (Clark and Wilson 1961, 160). The General Incentive Model has been tested in various different contexts, for example in Spain (Gomez et al. 2019), Germany (Spier and Klein 2015; Weber 2018), the UK, France, Norway or Hungary (Bruter and Harrison 2009) and was extended by other incentives, such as selective and collective incentives (Bruter and Harrison 2009), altruistic (Bruter and Harrison 2009; Laux 2011), normative (Laux 2011) and expressive (Laux 2011; Spier and Klein 2015) incentives or the incentive to select the party's leadership (Gomez et al. 2019). Generally, ideological or moral motivations dominate as the main reason for joining a party (Van Haute and Gauja 2015), especially for socialist or social democratic party members (Bruter and Harrison 2009; Weber 2018).

Another popular explanation of why someone participates in the political sphere are **individual resources**. According to Verba et al. (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), resources are decisive for political participation. They found that individual resources such as education, income, free

time and civic skills are significant predictors for political participation. It is especially those who have a higher level of education and income who are more politically active. Moreover, those who acquired civic skills such as communication or organizational skills through their job or through activity in other organizations are more likely to have a higher level of political participation. Finally, free time also has a positive effect on the level of political participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 351–53).

By combining resources with indicators for political engagement (political interest, political efficacy, political information and party identification), Verba et al. developed an influential model of political participation, the so-called **Civic Voluntarism Model**. Out of the four indicators for political engagement, political interest has the largest effect on political activism. However, they note that

*“[i]t is not sufficient to know and care about politics. If wishes were resources, then beggars would participate. Political engagement, however, does not produce resources, and the resource-poor are less politically active than those who are better endowed with resources.”*(Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 355)

The reasons for joining a party are as diverse as its members. Bruter and Harrison (2009) developed three distinct membership categories based on the predominant incentive which motivated young party members to join a party: **the moral-, social-, or professional-minded member**. The three types of members vary in their attitudes, their behaviour, and their level of participation. The moral type represents the idealistic, altruistic member who actively participates in more radical participation forms and who considers herself to be more radical and ideological than the party's elite. The social type, on the other hand, is more focused on socializing and entertainment and is the least politically active type. Finally, the professional-minded member is motivated by pursuing a political career or by other job opportunities provided by the party and therefore participates most in traditional party activities (Bruter and Harrison 2009). The heterogeneity of party members

was also observed in the Portuguese context. Lisi and Cancela (2019) distinguish between two main types, the **active and passive party member**. The two types not only differ in their level of party activity, but also show different ideological and attitudinal characteristics. Active members are found to be ideologically closer to the party whereas the passive type “is more likely to distance themselves from the party” (Lisi and Cancela 2019, 397).

Moreover, the **social composition of party members** is also influenced by individual resources. Lisi and Cancela (2019) found that Portuguese party members are above average in terms of their level of education and income (Lisi and Cancela 2019, 396). In Germany, party members are usually more educated than the average population, although there are differences between the parties. The rate of higher educated members is lower for the traditional mass parties CDU/CSU and SPD than for smaller, newer parties such as the Green party or FDP (Spier and Klein 2015, 94). Also, being retired has a positive effect on party membership in Germany (Hoffmann 2011). Other **sociodemographic features of party activists** are age and gender: older and male members are generally overrepresented, while younger and female members are underrepresented (Van Haute and Gauja 2015). The age gap can be found in almost every party. Members under 30 are usually highly underrepresented and retired members overrepresented (Van Haute and Gauja 2015, 195). The strength of gender imbalances, however, varies between countries and parties. In the UK, Norway and Canada, 40 % of the party members are female, whereas the share of female members is significantly lower in Germany (28 %) and Italy (26 %). Moreover, leftist party usually have a higher share of female members whereas women are underrepresented in right-wing parties (Van Haute and Gauja 2015, 194).

In sum, a lot of research has been conducted on who joins a party and why. But, as the next section will show, we still do not know much about why party members are leaving parties.



#### d. Party disengagement: Why does someone leave a party?

Section II. b. showed that, overall, party membership is declining. To what extent party decline can also be attributed to party exits is not clear yet. Data from the ISSP Citizenship Study of 2014 (ISSP 2014), however, suggests that party exits are relevant and should not be omitted. As displayed in Table 1, the percentage of ex-members is not much lower than the percentage of party members. In 2014, the difference between members (10.1 %) and ex-members (8.9 %) was only 1.2 %.

Status of belonging to a political party in %					
	Belong and actively participate	Belong but don't actively participate	Used to belong but do not any more	Never belonged	Total
2004	3.8	7.5	8.4	80.3	100
2014	3.2	6.9	8.9	81	100

Table 1: ISSP 2004 & 2014

When breaking down the results according to countries, we can see that the amount of ex-members varies quite significantly from 4.6 % in Turkey to 15.3 % in Sweden (see Figure 3).

#### % of survey respondents who used to belong to a political party in 2014

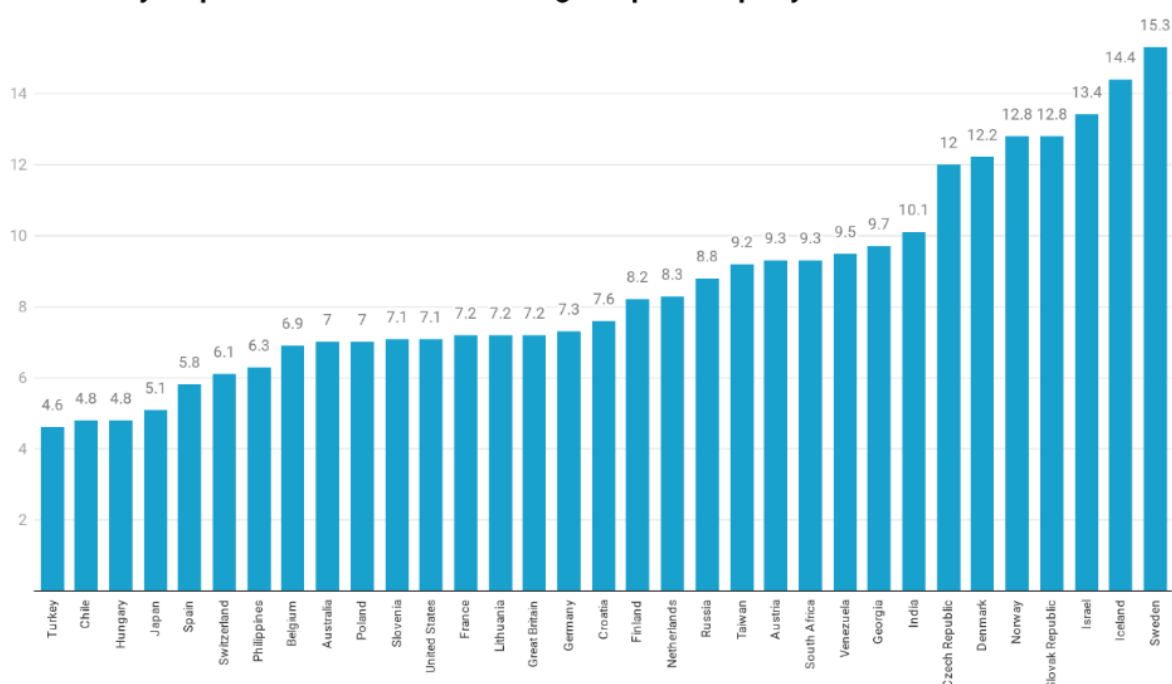


Figure 3: ISSP Citizenship Survey 2014

North European countries, as well as some Central European countries, are amongst the countries with the highest percentage of ex-members.

When comparing the share of ex-members in 2004 (ISSP 2004) and in 2014 (see Figure 4), we can see that the share of ex-members of some Central, Eastern and North European countries decreased between 2004 and 2014, while there are more former party members now in the United States, Austria, Sweden or Spain. Of course, sampling could play a role for the results, but it becomes clear that party membership is a fluid concept and a process rather than a static condition.

#### % change of ex-members from 2004 - 2014

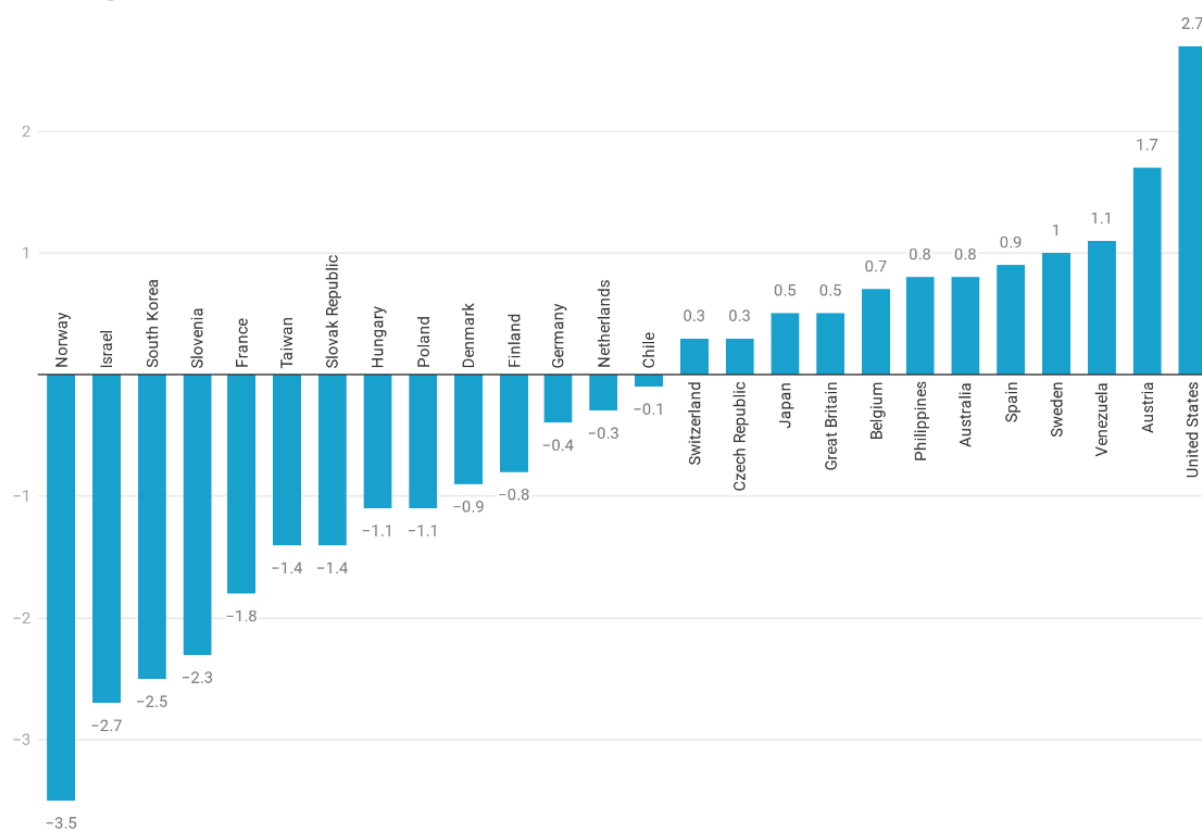


Figure 4: ISSP Citizenship Survey 2004 & 2014

Although ex-members are an important segment of the population, they themselves and their reasons to leave a party has seldomly been studied in Political Science, although it would give party scholars additional insights to the functioning of parties and the engagement and disengagement process of party members.

Whiteley (2011) was one of the first to include ex-members in a study about party decline. He tested if either state capture or the rise of new forms of political participation are convincing reasons for party decline. State capture means that the ties between parties and the state intensify through the state's party financing policies. The logic is that the ties between the party and civil society weakens thereof because financial contributions from members become less important for the party. Therefore, the party's incentives to recruit and retain party members decreases (31-32). Whiteley argues that state capture is an important reason for party decline. He found a statistically significant and strong negative correlation between the Kaufmann government regulation index and party activists, members and ex-members. The strongest effect can be found on activists (-1.038), followed by members (-0.830) and ex-members (-0.520). But there are two issues: first, the effect on ex-member is the weakest. Second, the index measures only "the ability of governments to formulate and implement effective regulatory regimes" (Whiteley 2011, 32). Whiteley assumes "that countries that regulate extensively may also over-regulate their party systems" (Whiteley 2011, 32), but this is a strong assumption and he does not directly measure the amount of state-funded party financing. Overall, the state capture theory does not seem to explain well why people are leaving parties.

A more extensive study on party membership and also party exits is the German party membership study from 2011 (Spier et al. 2011). Rohrbach's chapter on ex-members (2011) was the first study, to my knowledge, that looked at exit reasons. She differentiates between core members, members at risk for exiting and ex-members. For members at risk, the reasons for considering an exit are predominantly policy decisions (53 %), especially regarding social policy and foreign policy, followed by other intraparty reasons (34 %), such as dissatisfaction with personnel decisions, intraparty conflicts, or the ideological orientation of the party. For ex-members, the reasons to leave are similar. Ex-members say that personal political reasons (13 %), such as lack of personal efficacy, and intraparty reasons (76 %), such as disagreement with policy decisions (17 %) or

dissatisfaction with the ideological orientation of the party (13 %) were contributing to their exit. External efficacy, the feeling that someone can achieve something with their political engagement, also seems to play a decisive role when it comes to leaving a party. Rohrbach found a significant relationship between exits and the feeling of not being able to achieve anything with political engagement (Rohrbach 2011, 192). Looking at these descriptive results, it seems like intraparty dynamics and the feeling of not having efficacy are important factors for party exits and should not be overlooked.

Rohrbach also tests models that were developed to explain party engagement and links it to party exits. Testing the General Incentive Model, she found that the likelihood to exit is lower for members who aspire to hold an office and higher for members with normative incentives. But with an  $R^2$  of 6,3, the General Incentive Model is not able to explain exits very well. Another model – she calls it the socio-psychological model – has a better explanatory power ( $R^2$ : 12,7) (Rohrbach 2011, 196). However, both models are usually used to explain party engagement, and both have a rather weak explanatory power.

The 2011 party membership study was one of the most advanced studies on party exits so far. Still, its results suggest that models for party engagement cannot explain disengagement very well and that intraparty processes play a very important role for party exits.

Examining party exits in Austria, Wagner (2017) also builds his analysis upon theoretical models that should explain political engagement rather than disengagement, namely civic resources, cognitive engagement, alternative forms of political participation, ideological preferences and material benefits. He works with the data of the Austrian National Election Study of 2014 and based his analysis on the self-reported exit reasons of 187 ex-members. Most of them indicated that the ideological gap between them and the party was too big (27 %). In line with the German results, lack of personal efficacy on party (13 %) and the party's efficacy on society (8 %) were

reasons to exit. Out of the tested models and variables, a lack of external efficacy (cognitive engagement model) explains party exits the best. Also, 22 % of the respondents said that the membership was no longer useful to them, Wagner calls this reason material benefits. However, he does not clarify why he considers “usefulness” to be connected to material benefits. This is one of the weaknesses of this paper, as well as the low sample. Wagner’s (2017) study also shows that reasons for exits are manifold and there is still no agreement on what reasons are particularly relevant and decisive for party exits.

Although former party members are a considerably big population (ISSP 2014), the few studies dealing with ex-members (Whiteley 2011; Rohrbach 2011; Wagner 2017) were not able to establish convincing models regarding party exits. The two survey studies (Rohrbach 2011; Wagner 2017) identified that personal efficacy, disagreement with the party’s ideological development and other intraparty reasons were the main reasons for ex-members to leave. However, when it came to the statistical testing of these reasons, models that were originally used to explain party engagement seem not to be able to explain party disengagement very well. This suggests that the decision to enter a party is influenced by other factors than the decision to leave a party.

#### e. The way forward: Why we should start caring about ex-members

Overall, the little research that dealt with ex-members so far, showed, that it is still unclear what motivates party members to leave a party. While a lot of research on party membership evolved around the overall party decline, the characteristics of party members and theoretical models that should explain why someone joins a party, political scientists have not focused much on why party members are leaving parties. This question is as relevant as the question why someone is joining a party. Ex-members are an important but overlooked population. The ISSP study from 2014

showed that the amount of former party members is not significantly lower than the amount of current party members. However, we still do not know much about them yet, although they could tell us even more about the whole party membership process. If we want to have a full picture of party membership, we also need to look at the end point of this process.

This is also important for scholars concerned with party decline. They are asking themselves why parties are declining in membership numbers. Although it is unclear to what extent party exits are contributing to the general decline<sup>1</sup>, we cannot omit ex-members from the discussion. We are wondering why parties are declining, but we are not asking the people that – with their exit – are actually able to decrease the membership numbers of parties.

By asking the ex-members about their membership experiences and their reasons for leaving, I want to shed light on the end point of party membership and hopefully contribute to painting a more complete picture of the whole party membership process. The main aim of this thesis is therefore to establish a theory of party disengagement. This is dealt with in the next Chapter (III.). In the second part, Chapter IV., I then try to connect the theory to party decline by asking if the factors identified as contributing to the leaving process can also be connected to decreasing membership numbers.

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<sup>1</sup> The only other possibility how membership numbers can decrease are members who die. In both cases, parties are not able to recruit enough new members that can replace the parting members. But recruitment is a separate issue and would probably fill another thesis.

### III. Part 1: Constructing a theory of party disengagement

As discussed in Chapter II, there is not much research, let alone theories, about party disengagement. The aim of this Chapter is to establish exactly that: a theory of party disengagement. This is done inductively by using narrative interviews with ex-members of social-democratic parties in Germany and Austria.

As my research question focuses on the question why members of traditional mass parties are leaving the parties, I decided to use social democratic parties as exemplary cases to develop the party disengagement theory. Social democratic parties and other parties on the political left were the ones who invented traditional mass membership parties in the late 19th century (Scarrow 2003), but they are also one of the party families that is most affected by membership decline (van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012). The research participants were all members of the German and Austrian social democratic parties. Both are long-standing traditional social-democratic mass membership parties that are declining in membership numbers. Therefore, I think they are well suited for this research. Using ex-members from social-democratic parties that increase their membership numbers instead of declining would also provide interesting results, but then it would be harder to link the theory to party decline.

Also, the aim here is not to compare, but interview young members from each of the two parties to extend the scope of the theory. With this approach, I might be able to find additional factors contributing to the leaving process which could have been omitted by just investigating one party. Using two parties also has practical reasons, as it is not easy to get access to ex-party members in neither of the two countries and the chances to find participants are higher when using two parties and not just one. As the theory is put in a broader context by the descriptive analysis in Chapter IV, I will see if the theory is able to travel further or not. Regarding the time frame, I am interested

in party exits that occurred in the past decade, as, to me, a more contemporary approach seemed to be the most interesting.

In sum, the general research question posed in the introduction “Why are young party members leaving traditional mass parties?” can now be narrowed down more concretely to

**Why are young people leaving social democratic parties  
in Germany and Austria?**

Section a. of this chapter deals with the methodology of the interviews, by discussing why I used narrative interviews, how I sampled and interviewed the participants and how I coded them. In Section b., I present the results of the interviews and introduce the theory of party disengagement.

a. Methodology interviews

In the following section I present my interview procedure. I chose narrative interviews as the interview method, because it allows for a thick description of the party disengagement process. The ex-members I interviewed were mostly recruited by current members who knew someone who left the party. The sample can be described as a non-probability sample. The chapter also outlines the characteristics of the ex-members and shows that their traits were similar to what previous studies found on the characteristics of party members.



## 1. Narrative interviews

As the main goal of my thesis is to construct a theory of party disengagement, I needed to find a methodological tool to gather detailed data of ex-members' experiences of party disengagement and processes which happened within the party structure. In the field of qualitative social research, scholars propose to use narrative interviews to capture processes, on the one hand, which are reconstructed by the interviewee's narration (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2014) and experiences of involved actors (Bohnsack, Meuser, and Geimer 2018, 126), on the other. Former party members are in the centre of this research, consequently their experiences are the most significant data when looking for detailed description and processes of party disengagement.

The narrative interview style is also a suitable method when constructing a theory, as it leaves room to the interviewee's individual experiences. It is assumed that the structure of the narrative is produced by the structure of the experience, which means that by selecting what is relevant for the story and what is irrelevant, the narrator discloses and shapes the gestalt of her experience (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2014, 80). A more specified and concentrated interview style, for example problem-centred interviews, is not feasible for the theory-generating aim of this thesis, as this approach would require having hypotheses or assumptions in place, which then would be tested with the interview (Bohnsack, Meuser, and Geimer 2018, 127).

The narrative or story is generated by an uninterrupted story telling of the interviewee. The interviewer creates a stimulus, a narrative-generating question, which should specify and limit the research topic and interest (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2014, 85). The stimulus used in this research is the following question:

*"I would like to ask you to tell me about how it happened that you left the party, what did you experience and how did you decide to leave. Do not hesitate to go into detail of all the events that were relevant to you. You decide where the story begins. Please start your story there and continue until you arrive in the present."*

Of course, this approach requires trust and openness between the interviewer and the interviewee. The assurance of the interviewees' anonymity therefore constitutes an integral part of the interview preparation. Also, I tried to create a trustful environment between the researcher and subject by voicing my scepticism towards the parties and reaffirming their position and opinions. I think this approach helped the participants to open up and it gave them room for a more detailed and truthful explanation why they left the parties.

After the story telling, there is, first, a part of immanent questions, where clarifying questions regarding the story are asked (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2014, 86). Those questions are directly linked to the narrative. Secondly, exmanent questions are asked ((Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2014, 86). Those are additional questions related to the research question which might not have been answered in the story.

For this research, exmanent questions cover questions which are directly linked to the **leaving process**, the **duration** and **reasons** of their party membership, **socialization** aspects of party engagement, as well as level of **party activism** and **financial dependence** on the party. Furthermore, some questions covered **political interest**, **party effectiveness** and **political activism nowadays**. Finally, **sociodemographic data** was gathered, for example gender, education, employment status, migration background or residence. The questionnaire can be found in the Annex.

## 2. Sampling of ex-members and interviewing

In total, I interviewed 10 ex-party members of the German and Austrian social democratic parties. The recruitment of the participants took place via word of mouth and most of the contacts were eventually established through young party members who are still active and knew ex-members. Two participants were also recruited by the interviewees themselves. I contacted one ex-member myself, whose exit was made public by various newspapers and another ex-member I already knew before. The recruitment displayed here can therefore be summarized as a non-probability snowballing sampling.

The interviews were conducted either online through Skype or in person. As German is the first language of the participants and me, it seemed easiest to conduct the interviews in German. The interviewees were assured that their statements will be treated anonymously in the analysis. On average, the interviews took 29 minutes and were conducted between end of July and beginning of September 2020. I interviewed six German ex-members and four Austrian ex-members. Out of those ten, four identified themselves as male and six as female.

Moreover, the year of the party exits are nicely distributed between the participants, which allows for more variance in the analysis. More concretely, the year 2007 was one exit year and with the exception of 2015, every year between 2012 – 2020 is covered. This distribution is good, if all interviewees would have left in the same year due to the same trigger event, there would not have been much variation in the narratives and therefore, other important

	<b>Party</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Exit year</b>
1	SPD	Male	2012
2	SPD	Male	2013
3	SPD	Male	2014
4	SPD	Male	2018
5	SPD	Female	2018
6	SPD	Female	2019
7	SPÖ	Female	2007
8	SPÖ	Female	2016
9	SPÖ	Female	2017
10	SPÖ	Female	2020

*Table 2*

factors contributing to the party exit might have been omitted. As mentioned above, the timeframe

for this research is concerned with exits in the past decade. One participant left in 2007, but I still decided to include her in the analysis.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Characteristics of ex-members

As the focus of the research is on young party members, I only included ex-members under the age of 38 by the time of their party exit. The threshold was set at 38, because the age limit to belong to the party's youth organization is set at 38 (Junge Generation in der SPÖ n.d.) for the “young generation” (JG) of the Austrian Social Democratic Party and at 35 (Jusos in der SPD n.d.) for the “young Socialists in the SPD” (JUSOS) of the German Social Democratic Party. I applied the upper age limit as it is a more inclusive approach and might lead to additional insights, because the oldest participant is 37 (I4) and he is also the one with the longest party membership and the longest leaving process (see chapter V a.).

With the median age at 23.5 (average 25.3) (see Figure 5), most of the ex-members quit in their 20s. Therefore, the threshold should not pose any difficulties. The oldest participant was 37 by the time of the exit and as he also was the one who was a party member the longest (18 years). The median

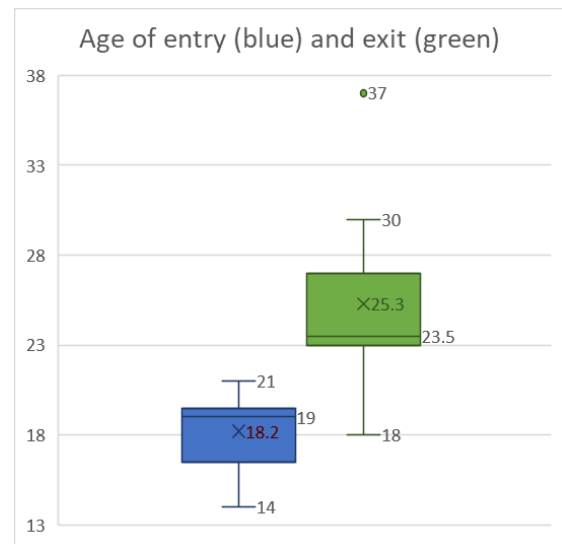


Figure 5

<sup>2</sup> This should not pose any problems, but it is also worth mentioning that this particular interview was one of the shortest and the least informative one (this could be also due to the fact that the exit dated back 13 years and it is therefore harder to reconstruct the leaving process).

age for party entries is 19 (average 18.2) and for the duration of party membership it is 5.5 years (average 7.2) (see Figure 6).



Figure 6

The majority of the participants were either students in high schools or in universities during the time of their party membership. By the time of the interviews, six participants completed their education with a university diploma and four were still enrolled at a university. That means that the sample is similar to what we know about party members: they are usually **more educated** than the average citizen (van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012; Van Haute and Gauja 2015). Also, all of them indicated that they are still **highly interested in politics**, which also aligns with what previous studies have found. (i.e. Spier 2019). Moreover, they are **all union members**, which traditionally also has been considered a predictor for party membership (van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012).

As this research studies the party disengagement process of young party members, it is also unsurprising that all of them indicated that they were **active in the party's youth organizations**.<sup>3</sup> In the case of the German interviewees, all of them were active in the JUSOS, whereas the Austrian interviewees were part of affiliated organizations.<sup>4</sup> The sample therefore does not include ex-members of the direct SPÖ youth organization, the JG. However, as the participants were members of the main party, this should not pose a problem.

<sup>3</sup> A summary of the ex-member's party activity can be found in the Annex

<sup>4</sup> Those are organizations, which are affiliated with the party, but membership in affiliated organizations is not directly connected to party membership. Often, however, affiliated organization members decide to become party members.

In sum, the characteristics of the ex-members interviewed for this study seem to resemble what previous studies confirmed about party members: highly educated and politically interested people with union memberships.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. Coding procedure

The main aim of this thesis is to generate a theory of party disengagement. Previous studies did not consider the actual process of party disengagement when studying party exits, but primarily focusing on single reasons or individual triggers (Rohrbach 2011; Wagner 2017; Barnfield and Bale 2020). This research should shed light on the disengagement process comprehensively by not solely focus on one trigger event but also by identifying underlying factors that eventually lead to the exit.

The Grounded Theory Method (GTM) is a good way to start the inductive theory-constructing analysis of the interviews, as this method serves to “systematically deriving theories of human behaviour from empirical data” (Urquhart 2017b, 2). As a rule, the researcher should not have “preconceived theoretical ideas” (Urquhart 2017b, 4) when starting the research. This is a difficult task to achieve, as I already engaged with theories of party entries and descriptions about party members. However, when approaching the material, I try to focus on the data and treat it with curiosity and an open mind. During the coding process, I constantly reflect on possible mis- or overinterpretations which might be influenced by other literature.

When analysing, conceptualizing and categorizing the data I followed the recommendation of “constant comparison, where every slice of data is compared with all the existing concepts and constructs, to see if it enriches an existing category” (Urquhart 2017b, 4). For the coding procedure,

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<sup>5</sup> A table with the characteristics of the ex-members can be found in the Annex

I used the software MAXQDA. I started with Interview 1 (I1) and constantly compared and, if necessary, updated the initial codes and categories developed with every following interview. During this process, I asked myself the question: “To what category does this incident or property relate?” (Urquhart 2017b, 11) to prevent inconsistencies in the coding procedure. I started with an open coding in the first interview, which means adding initial labels to the data without channelling the codes towards a certain direction. The open codes help to “flesh out what is important and point to directions in the analysis that you may not have thought of”. The open coding was executed line-by-line which is frequently proposed by the literature (Urquhart 2017b, 11) as it “minimises the chance of missing an important category” (Urquhart 2017a, 5).

In the following interviews, I was using a combination of selective coding and open coding. For selective coding, I allocated the subsequent codes towards the codes or categories I already established in the previous interviews. When necessary, however, I added new codes for certain incidents or topics. This first round of coding led to a total of 1.149 codes divided into 12 main categories, 15 sub-categories and 172 thematic codes related to the categories (199 categories or codes in total).

In a second round of coding, I checked if all text passages fitted into the assigned codes and rearranged or re-coded them, if deemed necessary. Some text passages related to more than one code. In this case, I used multiple codes for the same passage. Moreover, I merged codes with only one or few text passages in order to reduce the number of the final coding system. This approach led to a significant decrease of the overall number of categories (from 199 to 139) and helped to solidify the coding system. The codebook with the overview of all the codes can be found in the Annex.

In the last step, I assessed how the categories relate to each other by the process of theoretical coding (Urquhart 2017a, 17), which means to connect the categories to each other and look for a

relationship, be it similarities, disparities or no relationship. In the core of the last step also lies constant comparison which enables the construction of a theory (Urquhart 2017a, 2). More concretely, I assessed if the category system is meaningful and if necessary, shifted sub-categories or thematic codes to other categories.

In the next part, I present the main results of this analysis and propose a theory of party disengagement.

## b. A theory of disengagement

In the following chapter I present the results of the interviews and introduce the theory of disengagement. In short, I found that leaving is a process, exits can be sparked by a trigger event, but it is structural and ideological intraparty factors that are the source of the party disengagement process. In the next sections, I display the most significant quotes and put them into context.<sup>6</sup>

### 1. Leaving a party is a process

In almost all cases (9/10), the participants indicated that their party exit is not necessarily related to a single reason or event, but it is rather a **process** and the result of the **accumulation** of different factors.<sup>7</sup> Often, their exit is still connected to a trigger event, but the trigger is rarely the single cause for leaving the party. The participants used words like “crystallization point” (I7), the German

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<sup>6</sup> The interviewees are abbreviated by numbers (for example interviewee 1 is I1). It is also worth mentioning that I did not put the transcripts in the Annex, but every reader who is interested in the German transcripts can contact me and I will send it to them.

<sup>7</sup> A summary table of the leaving process can be found in the Annex



idiom “the drop that made the barrel overflow” (I4, I6) or “process” (I1, I8) to describe that there where multiple factors accumulating that then finally resulted in the party exit. I8 describes how one factor can trigger the exit, but is not necessarily the most important reason for leaving:

*“The sum of all parts, it has built up over the years and when you have experienced a lot within the party, you think to yourself at some point ‘now that’s really enough’. That [disagreement with leadership] was really just the tip of the iceberg, but not the most decisive factor. There might have been worse things before.” (I8)*

Also, participants reported that they were often thinking about leaving and at some point, they finally did it.

*“Yes, that was basically the last point, the last push, that I needed, because in my time as a SPD member I was quite often close to leaving. There would have been many opportunities.” I4*

*“For me that was just the drop that made the barrel overflow. Before that, I was about to quit for the last 2 or 3 years and always just waited for the moment when I was really ready, because that’s where I spent my entire youth.” I6*

All participants were asked if they remember, when the first doubts kicked in and their leaving process started and all of them could either tell me a specific year or the duration of their leaving process. In only two cases did the participants say that their leaving process only took two months (I7) or was a relatively spontaneous decision (I10). For all other participants, the **duration of the leaving process** ranged from 1.5 years to 10 years in the most extreme case (see Figure 7).

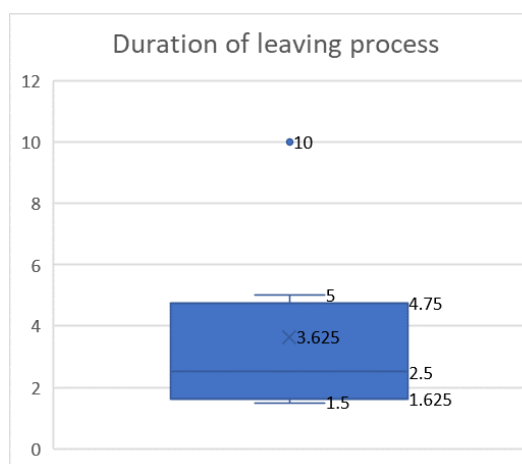


Figure 7

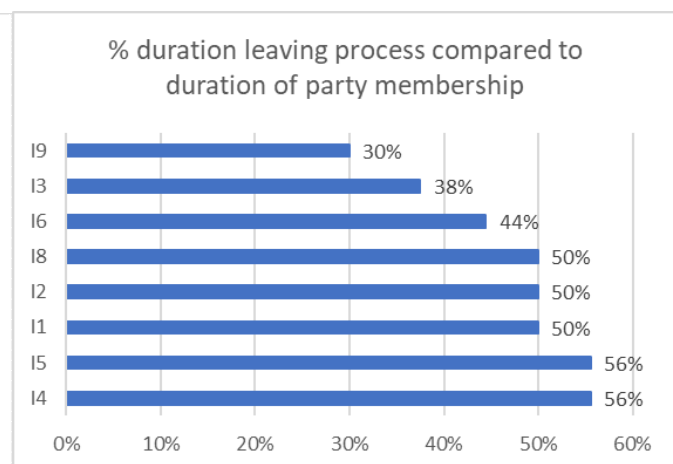


Figure 8

But the raw numbers of leaving duration might not show the full picture. When we put them in relation with the entire duration of the party membership, we can see that the leaving process takes over a large part of the party membership experience for the participants. On average, 47 % of the party membership duration consists of the leaving process (see Figure 8). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that many factors accumulated that then eventually sparked an exit.

The **starting point** of the leaving process can be an event, but also new knowledge attained either by their party activism or in their studies. The most common example for learning something new is that the participants learned how (intra)party politics works by the experiences they made during their party activism:

*“I had always been in contact with members of parliament through JUSOS and university groups [...] and I learned a lot, how they discuss things, how politics works.” (I5)*

*“when you see the reality of how it really works, how mandates are distributed, how decisions are made, how often comrades are ignored” (I8)*

Another source of new knowledge was their studies, especially when they studied political science:

*“I wish I hadn't studied politics, then at least I wouldn't understand why this is so incredibly stupid” (I2)*

*“to notice during my studies ‘how does the state work’, ‘what are hierarchies’, ‘what is power’ - and then I just noticed: okay, this is also a party that supports the state and does not want to fundamentally change the state” (I1)*

Participants presented a variety of events that can be regarded as the starting point of the leaving process. However, the events were usually connected to some sort of unveiled discrepancy between the member and the party, for example a gap between the member's expectation and the reality or a gap between the ideological position of the member and the party respectively. I4, for example, reported that his starting point was connected to the party's reaction to the financial crisis and the discrepancies deriving from his expectations and the reality of the party's actions:

*“Greece was diligently reprimanded and allowed to bleed to death instead of doing what they actually would have needed. And international solidarity is a basic value of the SPD. So, in their economic policy, they have completely abandoned economic rationality and abandoned what has shaped social democratic politics for decades.” (I4)*

**Trigger** events can provoke the party exit, but the accumulation of other events and emotions such as increasing dissatisfaction, disappointment or the feeling of not having efficacy are usually antecedent. Events that triggered participants to finally fill out the forms and leave the party are in most cases disagreement with the outcome of intraparty referendums or with the party’s policy positions. Regarding the disagreement with the outcome of intraparty referendums, it was specifically the referendum of the coalition between SPD and CDU/CSU, which triggered the exit of three ex-SPD members (I2, I3 and I5).

*“In the end, what was decisive for the exit was the second grand coalition” (I2)*

*“And the exact point where I said ‘no, that’s not for me anymore’, was the 2013 membership vote on the coalition agreement” (I3)*

As to the disagreement with policy positions, the participants indicated that they were disagreeing with the party’s position on asylum policies (I6, I9), on tuition fees (I7) and on free-trade agreements (I8). In all those cases, a public discussion about the respective topics preceded their exit. For one participant (I4), the trigger event was the party leader’s reaction to a political scandal.

*“It was about the preliminary negotiations for the free-trade agreements TTIP and CETA and there were a few other things which were annoying me as well. And then there was one more statement which I found extremely stupid, and I thought to myself, that’s enough.” (I8)*

*“And the actual occasion – the last drop that made the barrel overflow – was the story with the former President of the Verfassungsschutz, where the former party chairman Andrea Nahles made a very unfortunate impression and simply did not manage to take a clear anti-fascist position” (I4)*

In sum, this section made clear that leaving a party is a process – and this process can be rather long. During the time of the party membership, ex-members gain new knowledge about intraparty structures and party politics which can lead to disappointments or the realization that one’s own

ideology or policy position is divergent from the party's stance. In most cases, the doubts about party membership were enduring and pervaded a big part of the membership experience. A trigger event can ignite the decision to finally leave, but it is not necessarily the cause for the member's disengagement. A trigger can rather be perceived as the last straw that breaks the camel's back. In the next section I discuss what factors can be seen as the underlying causes for young party members to disengage with party politics.

## **2. Intraparty factors are the underlying causes for exits of young party members**

364 codes were attributed to the category "intraparty factors", this means that a third of the total codes (1062) fall under this category. This alone already indicates the importance of intraparty factors in relation to party exits. In the following section, I present the most important intraparty factors that spurred the party disengagement process. They can be divided into two overriding categories: structural and ideological intraparty factors.

### *i. Structural intraparty factors*

Intraparty structures were one of the most prevalent reasons why participants were dissatisfied as party activists. Rigid party structures which do not allow for change, power imbalances between the establishment and the progressive young party faction, lacking or defective intraparty democracy, strategic differences, insufficient appreciation for members and male networks are just some of the structural factors contributing to the disengagement process.

The most frequent intraparty factor named by the participants (7/10) was the overall dissatisfaction with the **power structure, hierarchies, careerism, cronyism and party loyalists**. The

participants reported how they experienced the power structures within the party and, in the context of their party disengagement process, voiced their disagreement. I1 mentioned that he learned that power and hierarchies are more important than discussing substantively:

*“I noticed that it's about power within the party, it's about hierarchies, about advancement, and not so much about substance if you will.” (I1)*

Others put emphasis on the fight for mandates and positions and how the party leadership is backed up:

*“Those who had elected mandates in the Bundestag, Landtag, saw their hopes dashed and defended their place on the list tooth and nail and therefore supported the respective party leadership and the given political line all the more strongly.” (I4)*

*“this ‘staying in office and maintain power at all costs, rescue the mandates and maybe still get a few votes for the next election’” (I8)*

I6 explained how she experienced intraparty advancement and careerism:

*“You are practically expected to go through all levels once. You first do five years of local politics and then do the next one. That's what we call ‘ox tour’. I had the feeling that it was assumed that you had certain experiences, and, in this chain, there would have been always five men before me who would had the right to get a position.” (I6)*

Another common factor was dissent with the **party's political strategy**, especially with the decision to form grand coalitions instead of “recovering” (I5) in the opposition or with the lacking ties with or influence on society. Interestingly, the first factor was only mentioned by ex-SPD members and the second only by ex-SPÖ members. For I2, the ongoing grand coalitions was the biggest “red flag” (I2) for him and also the dominant trigger and reason to leave the SPD:

*“And it is precisely this commitment by the SPD to repeatedly form the grand coalition that does not play into the hands of anyone except the right wing and [...] yet, there are still a few party bigwigs who keep believing they thus get a few important positions and power and that's enough for them.” (I2)*

I3 also struggled a lot with the outcome of the coalition referendum and reported that he did not expect that the lion's share of the SPD is actually in favour of the coalition:

*"I think 80 percent voted for the coalition agreement and I thought I can bear when people say 'I would like to have a grand coalition'. This I could have handled. But when it turned out that this opinion really was so prevalent, I couldn't go on any longer." (I3)*

I5 most notably criticized the strategy, saying that the grand coalition does not play into the SPD's cards:

*"Because the problem is that we obviously cannot implement what the SPD really stands for. [...] Because the coalition is seen as a whole, and Merkel is at the forefront. [...] So, for people who are not concerned with politics, for them it's Merkel politics. For better and for worse. But nobody would come up with the idea of 'yes, I owe part of the results to the SPD'. Because the SPD is simply no longer present." (I5)*

Regarding the lacking ties to the electorate and the voters, I10 says that the SPÖ does not address the needs of its clientele in context of the corona crisis:

*"The SPÖ doesn't manage to lead the discourse so that they simply address the people, not only those who suffer from health issues, but also those whose living conditions are affected. Especially the SPÖ clientele, which they should address and support. Once again they proved that this doesn't work at all." (I10)*

I9 criticizes that the SPÖ is not able to profit from political opportunities:

*"They just miss a lot of opportunities to usurp any social problems or turn around or influence social issues and prevailing opinions." (I9)*

Another factor which contributes to the overall disengagement process were problems and disappointments with **intraparty democratic processes**. Participants reported on biased intraparty referendums, a lack of participatory possibilities, excuses why more intraparty democracy would be bad for the party and not taking formal rules and procedures seriously. Interestingly, poor intraparty democracy was mainly discussed by ex-SPÖ members. Yet, this is not very surprising, as the SPÖ has a less inclusive intraparty democracy. The SPD implemented regular participation

processes which include all party members such as referendums over coalitions. One ex-SPD member, however, claimed that the referendum documents were heavily biased:

*“And then they just make such flimsy referendums and send out documents to all members saying ‘you can vote whether we should do it or not’ [the grand coalition], but enclose a letter explaining the advantages of the whole thing.” (I5)*

Ex-SPÖ members, on the other hand, just would like to have more intraparty democracy and more possibilities to participate and make decisions:

*“It would be cool if the party would function more democratically and, for example by selecting the party leader democratically. This is not a world-shaking demand. This is not a super-revolutionary and new demand. It already exists in many countries.” (I9)*

*“I thought that Section 8 was cool, because they always called for strike ballots. Because I think that's extremely important. But then the argument coming from the one's above [party elite] is ‘but [...] we could end up with a stupid party line’ – so at least that's what they tell some youth organizations – ‘because if everyone would have a say, we would open the door for the party moving to the right’” (I10)*

One ex-SPÖ member also noted that existing formal rules for participation are not taken seriously, such as ignoring or forgetting about motions which were accepted at the party convention:

*“But motions just disappear in drawers and everyone knows it. And then a lot of the motions are being forgotten or just not taken seriously. Or they prefer to vote for the motion, so they then no longer have to deal with it.” (I9)*

There are some cases of member surveys conducted by the SPÖ, but according to I8, this is a sham survey rather than a deliberate tool for intraparty democracy:

*“These internal issues ... they conduct a member survey several times every few years or even once a year, and then nothing happens and nobody cares about what the members or the long-term party members have to say. And it's just a pro forma thing, so they can say ‘oh, now we've done something’ and then it probably ends up in the shredder.” (I8)*

But ex-SPD members were also dissatisfied with the way how formal rules were disregarded or not implemented. I6 said that although the youth organization was able to push motions through at party conventions, they did not see any results afterwards:

*“We as JUSOS have always been able to get motions through at party conventions. We discussed a lot at the party congresses, and we had successes, but you just don't see the result. Nothing has been implemented.” (I6)*

The dissatisfaction with intraparty democracy is also related to **deficient appreciation of members**, which some participants reported. In the context of her exit, I6 said that although she wrote a long letter to the party organization, she did not get an answer, which was disappointing for her:

*“But I never heard back from them. And this was tough for me, because I've done so much for such a long time. I spent all my youth in this party and in those stuffy back rooms and somehow I don't get anything back.” (I6)*

Two participants (I5, I6) were also very dissatisfied with the fact that there is **no change** within the party.

*“What was most decisive for me was this stark difference between what the party promises to change and [...] when it came to the ballot, it didn't count anymore. There were just so many empty promises that I had the feeling that everything we worked for months ultimately leads nowhere. And I just came to a point where I realized that there is a majority within the party who is not necessarily politically active, but who simply prevents the party from changing.” (I6)*

Moreover, the very same participants (I5, I6), both female ex-SPD members, experienced that there were **strong male networks** which made it hard to participate for young, female members:

*“because there [in Berlin] were such strong male circles that I had no chance of getting in as a young woman” (I6)*

*“The problem was that - this was ultimately also a reason for leaving - in the place where I studied [...] the SPD mainly consisted of a bunch of old, mostly gray-haired, tie-wearing men, who were sitting at their regulars' table – so to speak – and I was the only woman and also the only one under 50.” (I5)*

Finally, the last structural feature that was also quite prevalent in the interviews was **pushback against young members** and their organization and a kind of **polarization between the youth and the left on the one side and the establishment** on the other. All participants were part of



a youth organization and six out of ten explicitly mentioned a pushback, polarization or power imbalanced between the youth and the establishment. This is certainly a characteristic which is unique to the disengagement process of the population studied in this research – the young members. I4 finds clear words for how he perceives the division of the party factions:

*“Due to the structure, it [the party] has become more and more polarized. Simply put: this middle level of functionaries and MPs versus youth organizations and progressive parts” (I4)*

Moreover, I10 describes that youth organizations were deprived of financial support:

*“And then they [party leadership] said that the youth organizations had to get out of their offices and I thought ‘okay, you don’t even take care of your youth organizations anymore, don’t give them any infrastructure’” (I10)*

The polarization between establishment and youth organization can also be observed in an example where the party’s establishment did not put the youth organization’s candidate on a promising place on the party list for the elections, although they promised to do so:

*“It was about her [the youth candidate’s] list placement and some people assured her beforehand that she would get a reasonably promising place and when the nomination came up, everyone placed her to the bottom places. There was practically no chance for her anymore. Amongst others, it was those people who we actually trusted. The federal state board [of the youth organization] was so angry that we said that we are stepping down completely.” (I5)*

In sum, structural intraparty factors that contributed to the participants leaving process were manifold. The most prevalent factors were disagreements with the way the party functions in terms of power imbalances, careerism or the rigidity of the hierarchies. Moreover, participants reported that they were dissatisfied with the strategic choices made by the party and that they are not able to connect with their electorate or clientele. Another source of dissatisfaction was insufficient or malfunctioning intraparty democracy. Some participants also mentioned that they disapprove that the party does not appreciate their members and that the party is resistant to change. Two female participants also commented on gender divisions within the party, stating that as a young, female

member it is hard to integrate as there are strong male networks. Finally, the participants pointed out that young members and youth organizations experience pushbacks and addressed the issue of polarization between the young and left party faction and the party establishment. These structural factors contributed to the dissatisfaction of the participants and are part of the reasons why young members disengage with party politics. In the next section, I turn to another category of intraparty factors: ideology.

## *ii. Ideological intraparty factors*

Ideological discrepancies between the members' ideology and their perceptions of the party's ideology was another important factor alongside the structural intraparty factors which contributed to the disengagement process. Participants reported that the party either differed from their ideological views in terms of not being left enough, ignoring fundamental values or not having substantive ideas.

Some participant criticized explicitly that the party is disconnected from their fundamental social democratic values:

*"They helped to pass laws in the grand coalition that had nothing to do with social democratic politics anymore." (I6)*

*"I have to say, a lot has happened in the domestic policy realm that is not really social democratic." (I4)*

*"I'm just conflicted, the values would be something I could fully live with, but not the way how they do it right now" (I10)*

Other participants think that the party does not express any substantive positions or discuss substantive issues anymore:

*"For me it's important to do substantive work and something more action-oriented and they sit in their back rooms and discuss." (I1)*

*“My main problem was that Christian Kern and his cabinet did nothing substantive, especially when it came to socio-political issues or economic policy, there was simply no argumentation.” (I8)*

I2 notes that a clear political position gets lost for the sake of appealing to the masses:

*“It is absolute nonsense saying to represent the interests of everyone, because then you basically don’t represent the interests of anyone. Unfortunately, that’s exactly what the SPD and the CDU are doing and when the two then coalize, they sink into a swamp of arbitrariness and ‘everything is the same’” (I2)*

In contrast, I7 said that the problem is that the party is not able to address the masses’ interest:

*“The SPÖ as well as social democracy in all of Europe struggled for a long time now to formulate something that reaches some level of attractiveness and appeal to the masses.” (I7)*

Moreover, participants criticize that the party’s pragmatic or right wing dominate the party, because they would like to have a more leftist position:

*“The problem was that the more pragmatic wing, which presumably acted without any serious ideology, simply had the upper hand and then defeated everything which came from the very weakened left wing.” (I4)*

*“If I could choose [what to change within the party], it would be a change of course from this right-wing politics that is being pursued, or the center-right party the SPÖ has become, back to the origins and dealing with issue like labor and fair wages.” (I8)*

In sum, ideological factors also play a role in the disengagement process. Sometimes it is not easy to differentiate between ideological or structural intraparty factors, therefore this classification should not be considered mutually exclusive. Intraparty factions (structural) can compete against each other on the basis of different ideological perspectives. Also, the outcome of intraparty democracy is not detached from any ideological positions or policies. Therefore, it is not possible to draw the conclusion that one or the other factor is more important for the dissatisfaction with intraparty processes.

### 3. The social environment can extend the leaving process & young members are more satisfied with and active in youth organizations

The majority of the young party members (6/10) reported that they were recruited by and entered the party through their friends and their first contact point usually was the party's youth organizations or affiliated youth organizations. Although party membership is not a prerequisite for being an active member in the youth organizations, they often joined the main party simultaneously or shortly afterwards.

8 out of 10 interviewees reported that they enjoy the activities and people in the youth organizations more than in the main party, that they were very active in the youth organization and that they held an office within the youth organization.<sup>8</sup> Two former party members are even still members of the youth organizations. I3 explains, how he perceived its relationship with the main party and the youth organization:

*"I didn't feel at home in all [party] committees, the local SPD branch, for example, was not for me. I was rather at JUSOS meetings and quite a lot at the student meetings and it became apparent that I didn't have that connection with the SPD, but rather with the JUSOS and really felt at home there." (I3)*

As most of the participants joined the party in formative years - as teenagers or young adults - some of them were deeply integrated in the youth organization and build up friendships there. Often, the feeling of not leaving friends or the idea of fighting together against the party's establishment is a reason why they did not leave the party instantly when the first doubts came up. This was one major factor that prolonged the leaving process. I4, who was a JUSOS member, puts the feeling or obligation to fight together against the establishment that way:

*"We were often discussing it [exiting the party], because there have always been doubts. But the essence always was that it is better to stay and fight the fight from within and try to change something*

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<sup>8</sup> See Annex for a summary table

*than simply jack it all in. The argument always was ‘well, help us, stay inside’. That was somewhat the perceived obligation.” (I4)*

The aim to change the party from the inside was also prevalent in the Austrian SJ:

*“The SJ still claims to change the SPÖ from the inside out, make it more left-wing and bring it back to its core values.” (I9)*

I6 describes how the doubts of how friendships will change after leaving the party affects the leaving process:

*“I did not leave earlier, because I have been a member for so long and that really constituted my social life. I moved to Berlin and I’ve already known JUSOS in Berlin and leaving meant that ... I wasn’t sure whether I would lose this large part of my circle of friends or whether it is only about the regular meetings which would then no longer exist.” (I6)*

In sum, the ex-members were more satisfied with and more active in the youth organizations. They are often recruited by friends and as they build up more friendships within the party in their formative years, it makes it hard for them to distance themselves from the party, because it feels like they are distancing themselves from their friends as well. Also, the narrative of the youth organizations of fighting together to change the party from within influences the leaving process of young members as well.

#### **4. Not having efficacy is a decisive emotion for leaving**

Finally, the feeling of not having efficacy was a decisive emotion for the leaving process. As discussed above, previous studies on party exits (Rohrbach 2011; Wagner 2017) found that a lack of external efficacy – the feeling of being able to change something with one’s party activism – is contributing to party exits. Rohrbach (2011) or Wagner (2017) could not put the feeling in context, though. This is where qualitative interviews are an advantage. 7 out of 10 interviewees reported that they did not feel like they can achieve something with their activism. The interviewees often linked the feeling of not having efficacy to structural factors, both directly and indirectly.

*“I noticed that I couldn't get through with my ideas within the JUSOS Berlin and within the local party” (I1)*

*“I was often annoyed that the structures are so indurated so you don't have any scope for action.” (I8)*

*“Activism for me - if I would start again - would not be in a party, but in a local community where you can really make a difference on a small scale. Because, on a large scale, you move things very slowly and very tentatively and that's not the way to go.” (I2)*

The concept of efficacy is not clear-cut and also overlaps with disappointment, like in this statement of I6:

*“I had the feeling that everything you work for months will ultimately lead to nowhere.” (I6)*

The participants also used to describe their feeling like “not paying off”, like I5 did:

*“And then I more and more thought ‘it really doesn't pay off anymore’”(I5)*

If we work with a broad definition of efficacy, these examples above show that the feeling of not being able to achieve something or to bring forward an idea, of not making progress or not be able to change anything within a party are all strong feelings connected to a lack of efficacy. These feelings surely contribute to the exit, but I do not consider them to be the reason, rather the outcome of the real reasons such as structural factors. If the structures are not permitting new ideas or change and if they do not appreciate the work of activists, so that they have the feeling that their activism does not lead anywhere and does not pay off anymore, then the structural factors are the cause for the exit, not the lack of efficacy.

## 5. Discussion of results and theory of party disengagement

The first finding of the interviews was that leaving a party is a rather long process and took over a large part of the membership experience. All participants were able to identify the starting point of their leaving process, be it a particular year or event. Often, they also learned something new about the party, which then led to the first doubts about their party engagement. Events that initiated the leaving process are often connected to some sort of unveiled discrepancy between the member and the party, such as an ideological gap between the member and the party or a gap between the expectations and reality. When it comes to the actual exit, it can be sparked by trigger events such as an intraparty referendum, a party's policy position or a political scandal.

However, the trigger events are rarely the (only) reason for the exit. Structural and ideological intraparty factors were the prevalent two categories in which the exit reasons fall. This is where the thick description and the openness of the narrative interview style paid off. In addition, ideological and structural exit reasons are often not a clear-cut distinction, because the ideological position the party decides to take on is often conditional on the intraparty structure. Structural intraparty processes that were often mentioned were, for example, power structures and rigid hierarchies that did not allow for change, the focus on political careers instead of substantial political output, dissent with the party's political strategies, lacking or malfunctioning intraparty democracy, strong male networks that made political participation hard for female members, pushbacks against the ideas or demands of young members or polarization between the youth or left party factions and the party establishment. Ideological factors were mainly related to perceived discrepancies between the member's and the party's ideological views. The parties were criticised for differing from their core values, this often meant that the ex-members perceived them as not being left enough, or for not having substantive political ideas.

The accumulation of these factors then resulted in the exit, either triggered by another event or not. The in-depth interviews also led me to identify one factor that extends the leaving process, the social environment. Many reported that the reason why they did not leave immediately after the first doubts kicked in were the friends they made during their time as a party member and an activist in the youth organization.

Finally, the above mentioned structural intraparty factors led to one decisive emotion: the feeling of not having efficacy. The participants described this feeling as not being able to achieve something or implementing an idea or as feeling like not being able to change anything. I consider the emotion of not having efficacy as an outcome of the structural factors and therefore not the cause for the exit, but it still contributes to the whole leaving process. In Figure 9, I visualize the theory of party disengagement<sup>9</sup>. In the next part of the thesis, I expand the theory to other data and cases to see if a similar pattern can be found elsewhere.

## Party membership

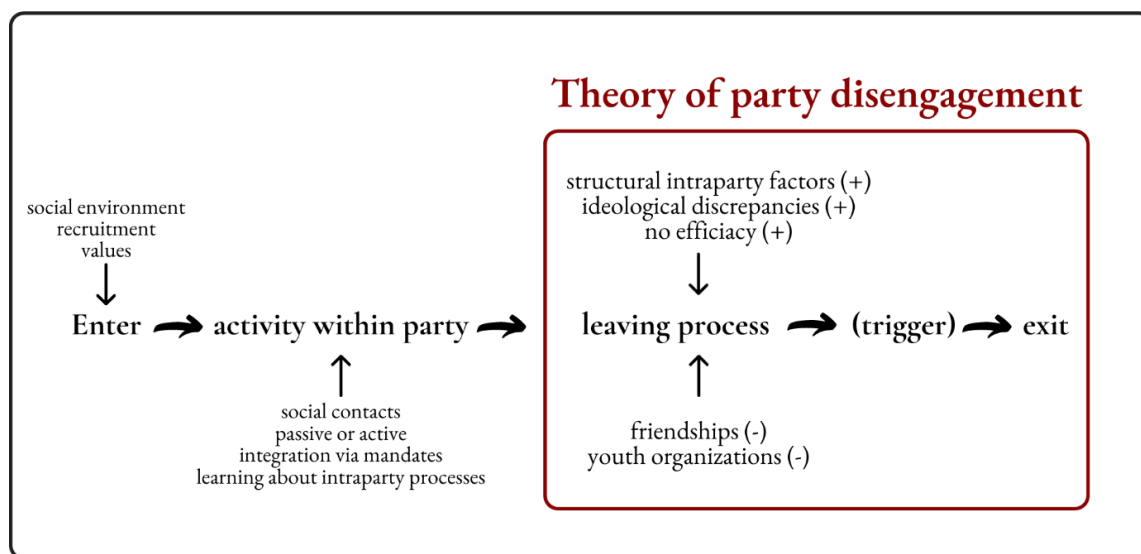


Figure 9

<sup>9</sup> Although I gathered a lot of data about recruitment and entering the party, about their integration in the party (if they took over a political office or a mandate) and about the level of activism, my analysis and the theory focuses on the disengagement process (see red box), as I did not identify a pattern between the different exit reasons and the overall integration or level of activism. The additional data I did not discuss can be found in a table in the Annex.



## IV. Part II: Expanding the theory of party disengagement

The first part of this thesis dealt with the question of why members are leaving parties. I dedicate this part of the thesis to extending the scope of the theory. As I only used ex-members of social-democratic parties, it is likely that the theory I established in the first part is not applicable to other contexts, countries, party families and party types.

As explained above, structural and ideological intraparty factors were the main reasons for party exits. Ideological intraparty factors mostly relate to the (perceived) ideological discrepancy between the member and the party and is harder to test quantitatively, as there is no dataset (yet) on ex-members and their ideological views. For structural intra-party factors, however, it is easier to find data and that is why I focus on structural intraparty factors here. As amplified in the next section, I use the change in membership numbers over time as an indicator for party exits. A direct measurement of exit reasons in relation to structural intra-party factors is unfortunately not possible, because data on ex-members is rare if not even absent. This part of the thesis deals with the research question:

**Can structural intraparty factors that were identified as exit reasons explain the general decline of party membership?**

I look at data including 83 parties from 17 European countries, Australia, Brazil and Israel. The method of analysis is purely descriptive, and I do not assume strong causal linkages. However, I try to find and describe patterns which could possibly support or contradict the initial theory set up in the first part of the thesis.

Section a. deals with the data and variables I use for the descriptive analysis in section b. In section c., I discuss additional limitations of the descriptive analysis.

## a. Data & variables

### 1. Dependent variable: Decline of membership numbers

Unfortunately, there is no data of ex-members available I could use to see if the theory could also be applicable in other contexts. Parties do not disclose how many members are exiting the parties and there are no surveys with ex-party members. However, there is an indirect approach: membership numbers. This is by far not the ideal measurement, but the only available data which can indicate how many members a party is losing.

A decline of membership numbers can show that members left a party or that members died, and the party was not able to recruit enough new members as a replacement for the parting members. Looking at ISSP data from 2004, Whiteley (2011) shows that the percentage of ex-party members in relation to the total population ranges between 3.9 % (Ireland) and 16 % (Israel), with a mean of 8.6 % for all 36 countries. Therefore, I think overall membership numbers are not only a representation of dying members and poor recruiting but can also be an indicator for the engagement or disengagement of its members. I assume that parties that gain members over certain years deal with less party exits than parties that with decreasing membership numbers.

With these considerations in mind, I use the change in party membership numbers as the dependent variable. Membership numbers are extracted from the Members and Activists of Political Parties (MAPP) dataset, which works with membership numbers from 397 parties in 31 countries from 1945 – 2014 (van Haute and Paulis 2016). A major limitation of this dataset are the missing values. For most of the parties, only a few years and membership numbers are covered. The original plan was to look at membership decline or increase in the past 20 years (2000 – 2020), but as the dataset only covers membership numbers until 2014 and for some parties, the last reported year is even before 2014, I had to amend the time frame of the analysis. Moreover, for many parties, the year 2000 was not reported, but the numbers from a few years before or after, so

I implemented the rule to take the membership number for the year closest to 2000. I therefore took either the year 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001 or 2002 to compare with the last reported year in the MAPP dataset. In six cases, I decided to amend this rule slightly. The considerations for that can be found in the Annex.

Regarding the last reported year, I decided to set the threshold at the year 2010. Therefore, I only take parties into account that reported membership numbers around 2000 and after 2010. This approach also eliminated parties that were only existing for a few years in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century or were only founded recently.

Membership change was calculated by dividing the most recent membership numbers (2010 – 2014) by the membership numbers around 2000 (1998 – 2002). A number below 1 indicates a membership decline while a number above 1 indicates a membership increase. The membership change variable ranges from 0.26 (the Israeli Meretz Party) to 14.6 (Polish Law and Justice Party). With a 14-fold increase, the latter is a clear outlier. This might be due to the young age of the party (1 500 members in the founding year of 2001 and 22 000 members in 2013).

As described in more detail in the next section, I merged the MAPP dataset with the Political Party Database Project (PPBD), which includes various intraparty factors. As the two datasets do not cover the same parties, the numbers of parties

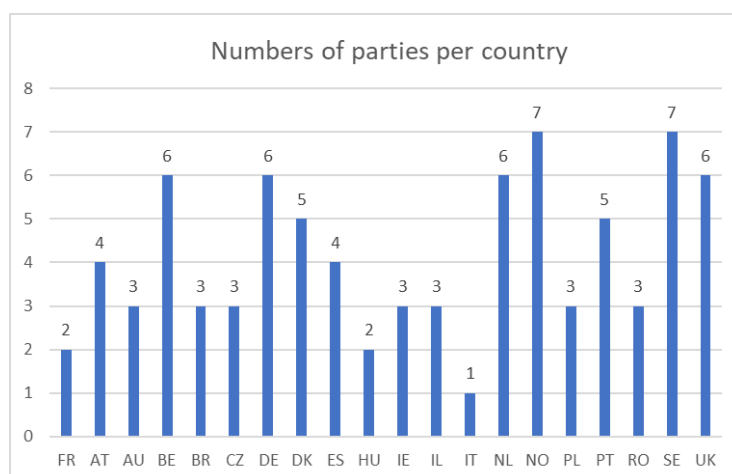


Figure 10

I work with decreased to 82 parties.

This is a limitation of this analysis as well, though I still think a descriptive quantitative analysis is feasible. Parties come from 20 different countries: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Czech

Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The parties per country range from one in Italy to seven in Norway and Sweden (see Figure 10).

Figure 11 shows the distribution of the dependent variable. The median of membership change is at 0.95, which means that overall, membership numbers slightly declined, but not significantly. The average membership change is at 1.53, which would indicate a membership increase, but this

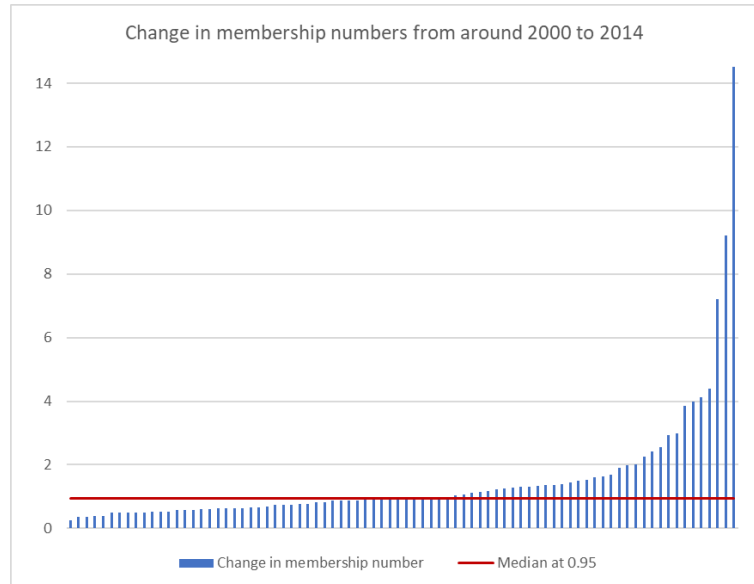


Figure 11

result is mostly driven by just a few extreme outliers (Polish Law and Justice Party with 14.6, the SNP in the UK with 9.2 or the Brazilian PT with 7.2 amongst others).

## 2. Independent variables: structural intraparty factors

When it comes to the independent variables, I focus on structural intraparty factors which I identified in the previous part of the thesis to be able to spark party exits. As explained above in the theory section, trigger events can be the last straw that breaks the camel's back, but the main reason for exits are usually the accumulation of various structural intraparty factors such as insufficient or malfunctioning intraparty democracy, power imbalances between the base and the party establishment or polarization between party factions. Ideological discrepancies between the member and the party also play a role, but this would be more difficult to analyse, because there is

no cross-national dataset covering the ideological differences between ex-members and the parties they belonged to.

I use all structural intraparty factors that are reasonable and possible to analyse by using data from the Political Party Database Project (PPBD), a dataset covering 140 parties from 25 countries in the first round (Poguntke et al. 2016). As the PPBD does not cover all structural factors I identified as contributing to party exits, I focus on the available variables and therefore covering intraparty democracy, hierarchies, and influence of the party factions. Although it is only a descriptive analysis, I think it helps to formulate concrete hypotheses:

*H1: The more intraparty democracy, the less decline in membership numbers.*

*H2: The less hierarchies within a party, the less decline in membership numbers.*

*H3: The more influence party factions have, the less decline in membership numbers.*

Of course, a descriptive analysis is not able to reject or confirm these hypotheses, but it makes it clearer which patterns in the data I am interested in.

There are several variables in the PPBD dataset, which can be linked to the theory. However, I decided against some of them due to too many missing values, one major disadvantage of the PPBD dataset. I used the following two variables as indicators for **intraparty democracy**, which I am also treating as separate variables:

1. Party statutes provide for the possibility of holding an intra-party ballot of members to decide a policy issue (i.e., an issue other than personnel selection)? *Yes/No*
2. Were all party members eligible to vote for the party leader in a particular year with leadership selections? *Yes/No*

The first question refers to the party statutes and the possibility to hold a ballot on a policy issue. I assume that intraparty democracy is lower in a party that does not give its members the possibility to decide on policy issues. 27 party statutes allowed for ballots, whereas 37 party statutes did not.

The variable contains 18 missing values. The second question refers to the right to vote for the party leader in leadership selections. If all members are allowed to vote in leadership selections, the level of intraparty democracy is higher. The PPDB asks the coder to indicate if there were leadership selections in a particular year (from 2011 – 2014). If a certain party had leadership selections in one or more years from 2011 to 2014, I recoded the variable as yes. If they had leadership selections and the members were not allowed to vote, I coded them as a no. This variable therefore has 24 missing values, 36 cases where members were not allowed to vote and 22 cases where members could vote. Both variables contain a fair amount of missing values, this is another limitation that has to be kept in mind when discussing the results.

The **hierarchy** within a party is measured by this variable:

Number of layers between the party congress and the party's highest executive body. If the highest executive reports directly to/is elected by the party congress, the answer is 1.

This variable is linked to the assumption that the more hierarchies there are between the highest executive body and the party congress, the more rigid intraparty structures are, and intraparty change is less feasible. This variable could therefore also be seen as an indicator of how much change is possible and how much barriers the demands of the party base have to overcome in order to be heard. I recoded the numeric values (ranging from 1 to 4) into four categories: extremely high, high, medium and low. Figure 12 shows the distribution of the variable. There are only few cases with a high or extremely high hierarchical structure. As the analysis is purely descriptive, this should, however, not pose any problems.

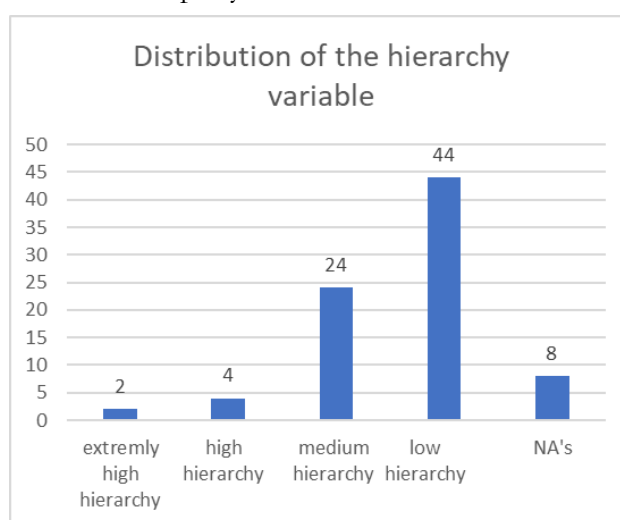


Figure 12

The most difficult variables to deal with are the ones capturing the **influence of party factions**.

The dataset provides three questions dealing with party factions:

1. Factions have statutory guarantees of seats at party congress. *Yes/No*
2. Are there statutory provisions for an official faction to either nominate or endorse a leadership candidate? *Yes/No*
3. Factions have an official mechanism for nominating and/or endorsing one or more candidates for intra-party offices, such as the party chair or party list leader. *Yes/No*

As outlined in the theory section, the polarization between party factions and the party's establishment is one of the reasons for party exits. These variables should capture the influence of party factions, assuming that if there are institutionalized ways for party factions to advocate for their ideas and positions, polarization might be less of a problem, because there are official ways for the factions to be heard.

I excluded the third variable, as it contained 21 missing values and there was only one party that had an official mechanism for factions to nominate or endorse candidates. The first and second variable both contain 12 missing values. Only two parties allow their factions to nominate or endorse a leadership

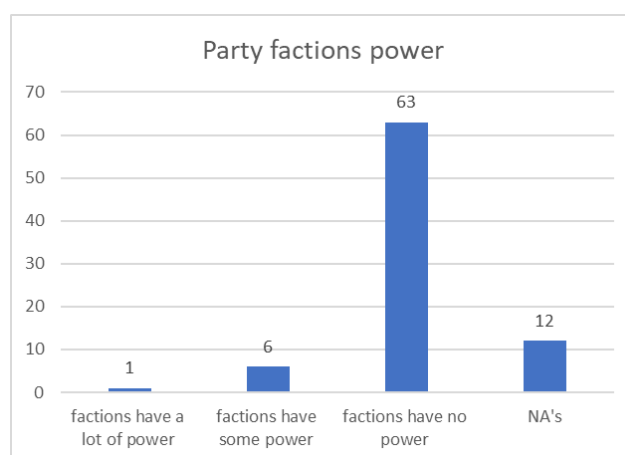


Figure 13

candidate and only in six parties, factions have a statutory guarantee of seats at the party congress. The distribution of the variable is already an indication for the little statutory influence party factions usually have. I decided to combine the two variables to make one comprehensive. If the answer for both questions is “yes”, I put the party into the category “factions have a lot of power”. If the answer for one of the two questions is “yes”, I recoded it to “factions have some power” and if the answer for both questions is “no”, I put the party in to the category “factions have no power”. Figure 13 shows the distribution of the party faction power variable.

In a nutshell, the independent variables I work with in the analysis are first, the possibility of holding an intra-party ballot of members to decide on a policy issue, second, the eligibility of members to vote for the party leader, third, the hierarchical structure and fourth, the official influence party factions can have. I analyse the relationship between the dependent and the independent variables descriptively to see, if I find a pattern in the data that could support or contradict the theory in the first part of the thesis.

### 3. Control variables

Apart from the four independent variables that are connected to the theory, I add two control variables to the model. As my theory is based on interviews with ex-members from social-democratic parties, I use the **party family** as a control variable, as it is possible that the ideology of the party is a confounding factor. The MAPP dataset includes a party family variable, distinguishing between national, ethnic and regional, (former) communist, ecology, conservative, liberal, Christian-democrat/religious and social-democratic.

As Figure 14 shows, most parties fall into the social-democratic category, followed by Christian-democratic or religious parties and liberal parties. The dominance of social-democratic parties might be because there is no distinction between left and social-democratic parties. This should, however, not be problematic for the descriptive analysis.

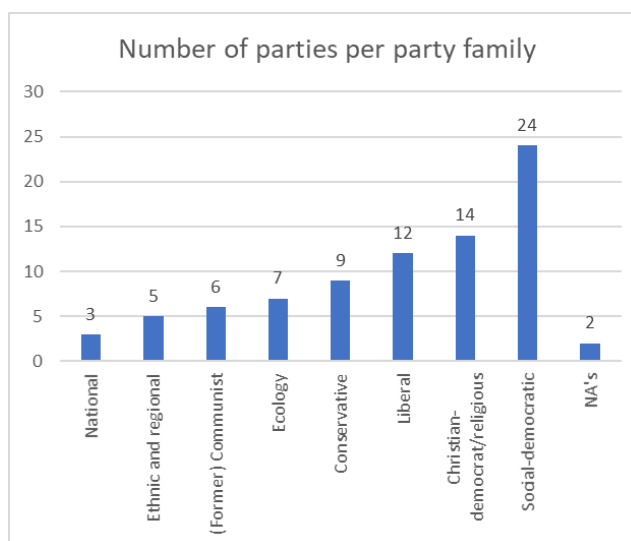


Figure 14



The second control variable I use is **party age**. In a study about party membership decline, Kölln (2016) tests the life-cycle approach, the idea that there are similarities between parties at different stages of their development. The four stages – legitimization, incorporation, representation and executive power – are applicable to party development in the older Western European democracies, but not in newer democracies, van Biezen (2005) argues. Studying six Western European democracies, Kölln (2016) found that party age as a proxy for the developmental stage of a party is negatively correlated to membership size, meaning that the older a party is, the more it declines in membership numbers. Furthermore, she found that the correlation is positive for newer parties, “which suggests that new parties grow in membership size during their first life-cycle phase of representation” (Kölln 2016, 472). With these consideration in mind, it makes sense to include party age as a control variable.

I recoded the variable into four tiers, parties founded before 1945, between 1945 and 1972, between 1973 and 1990 and parties founded after 1991. Turning the variable from a continuous into a discrete variable to make it easier to combine with other categorical variables. I consider the four

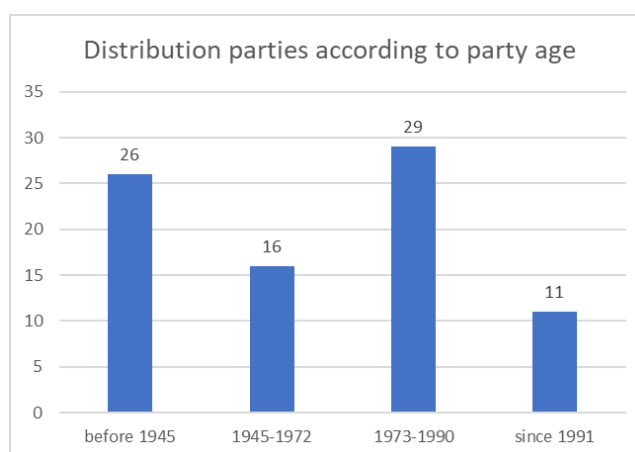


Figure 15

categories to be meaningful for the analysis, as they represent both old (before 1945) and young (after 1991) parties, but also differentiate between parties founded before (1945-1972) and in the third democratic wave in the Iberian and Central and Eastern European countries (1973-1990). Figure 15 shows that most of the 82 parties were founded in the third wave and before 1945.

This sub-section dealt with the variables used in the analysis in Chapter IV.b. In sum, I calculated the dependent variable, membership change, by using the difference in membership data between

around 2000 to around 2014. All independent variables I use are categorical variables. Two variables should reflect the level of intraparty democracy, one is an indicator for the hierarchical structure of the party and one deals with the power party factions have. The party family and party age are serving as control variables.

## b. Descriptive analysis & results

At first, I wanted to conduct an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to see if the difference in means of membership change is a statistically significant variation or not. However, I decided against a statistical analysis. Due to the structure of the data (many missing values) and the fact that the dependent variable does not measure exactly what I want to find out (membership change instead of exit numbers or a survey with ex-members), there are just too many limitations to make a meaningful statistical analysis.

However, by comparing variation between different groups descriptively, I still expect to find interesting patterns that might indicate if the theory of party disengagement can travel to other contexts as well. In this section, I present the different means or medians in membership change for different groups, first by looking at the single independent variables, but then also by combining two independent variables. For variables where I have no or few missing values, such as party family or party age, it makes sense to compare the medians, as there are some outliers that could distort the membership change numbers. For variables with plenty of missing values and only few observations per category, I compare the differences between the median and mean values and look which results are more meaningful to display here. The detailed values for both, median and mean, can be found in the Annex.

## 1. Precedent cases: Austria & Germany

Looking at the two precedent cases first, the Austrian SPÖ and the German SPD, we can see that they both declined in their membership numbers. Figure 16 shows that although all social-democratic parties declined since the turn of the millennium (0.88),

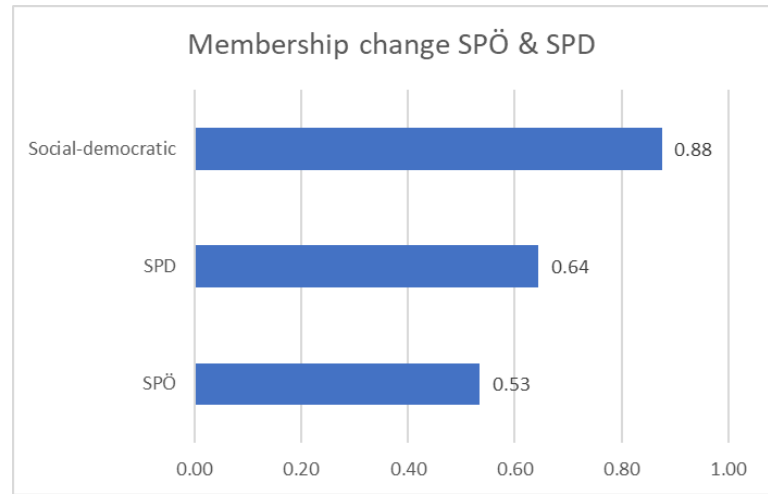


Figure 16

the decline was more pronounced for the German (0.64) and Austrian (0.53) social-democratic parties.

According to Table 3, both parties have no official mechanism for party factions to influence the intra-party decision-making process and do not allow all members to participate in leadership selections.

	Membership change	Hierarchy	Factions	Intra-party ballot possible	All members eligible for leadership selections
SPÖ	0.53	High	no power	NA	no
SPD	0.64	Low	no power	yes	no

Table 3

However, the SPD has low hierarchies and intra-party ballots are possible. This was already confirmed by the interviews. What this data does not show, however, is how the intraparty ballots really function. As I showed in the first part of the thesis, I5, for example, criticised that the coalition referendum in 2013 was heavily biased. The dataset therefore does not show the quality of such intra-party referendums. Nevertheless, the SPD seems to suffer less from membership

decline than the SPÖ. The low hierarchies and the at least formal possibility to participate in intra-party ballots could be a reason for that. The data therefore reflects to some extent what has been pointed out as problematic by the interviewees.

In the next sub-section, I look at the data for all parties in the dataset and see if a more universal pattern can be found.

## 2. Univariate descriptive analysis

I start by looking at the membership change for the single variables. Looking at the median membership change for the party families, it aligns with what previous studies have found: the former mass-membership parties such as social-democratic, Christian-democratic and conservative parties are affected the most by membership decline, whereas all other party families (often rather new ones such as the ecological parties for example) increased in membership numbers (see Figure 17).

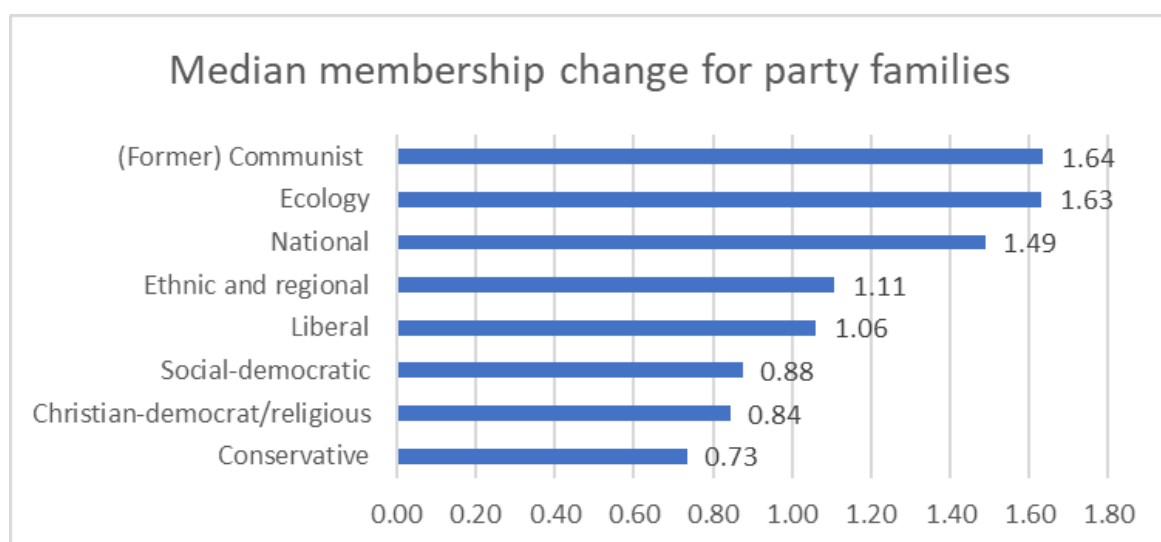


Figure 17

Regarding the median membership change by party age (see Figure 18) the results are also not surprising and align with what Kölln (2016) and others found: party age is negatively correlated with membership numbers and older parties therefore suffer more from membership decline, whereas younger parties increase their membership numbers.

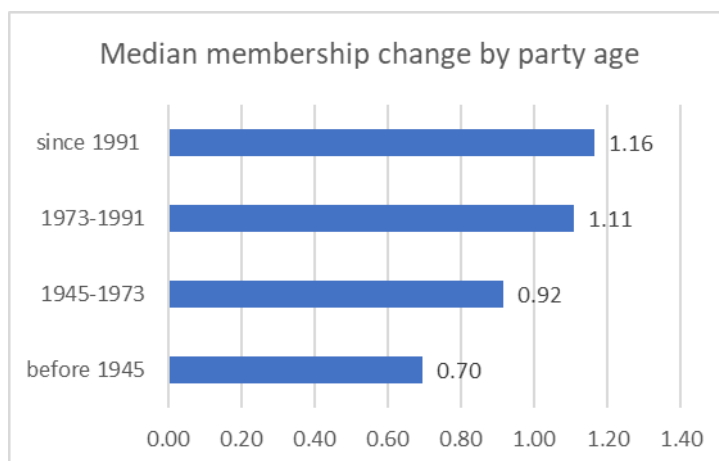


Figure 18

Turning to the structural intra-party variables, Figure 19 shows that the four parties with a high hierarchical structure increased their membership numbers. This category also includes the Polish Law & Order party which is an extreme outlier. But even when considering the median value (2.1), it seems like that a high hierarchical structure is not necessarily associated with decreasing membership numbers. But it still needs to be kept in mind that there are only few observations for this and the “extremely high” category. The categories low and medium are more representative as they contain more observations and they both show that on average, parties with a low or medium hierarchical structure increase in membership numbers.

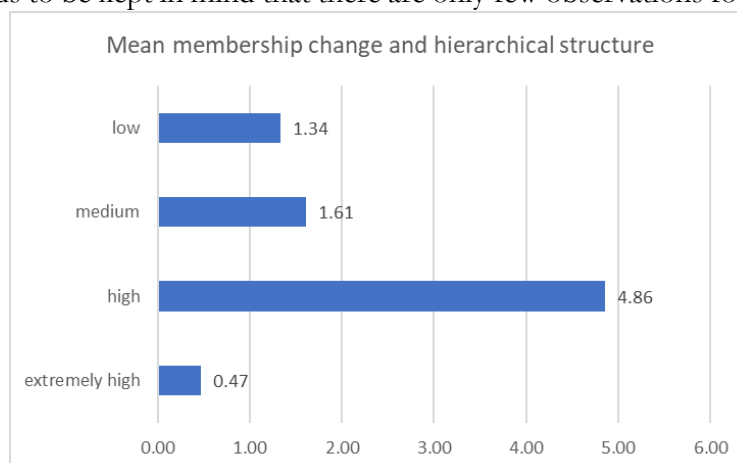


Figure 19

Figure 20 shows the median values for the faction power variable. The results are in line with the expectations that the more influence party factions have in the intra-party decision-making, the less they decline in membership numbers (H3). But as before, I need to reiterate that there are only few observations for the categories “some” and “a lot of” power.

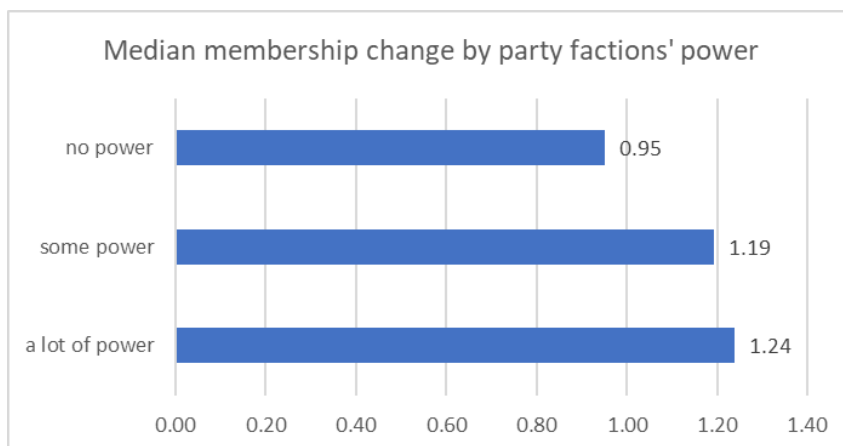


Figure 20

Regarding if an intra-party ballot is possible, it seems like parties that allow for intra-party ballots have higher membership numbers than the ones that do not. Figure 21 shows both mean and median. According to the median, there is an overall decrease in membership numbers and according to the mean, there is an overall increase. However, in both cases, parties that allow for a ballot seem to have higher membership numbers than the ones without this possibility. This is in line with the assumption that more intra-party democracy leads to less decline in membership numbers (H1).

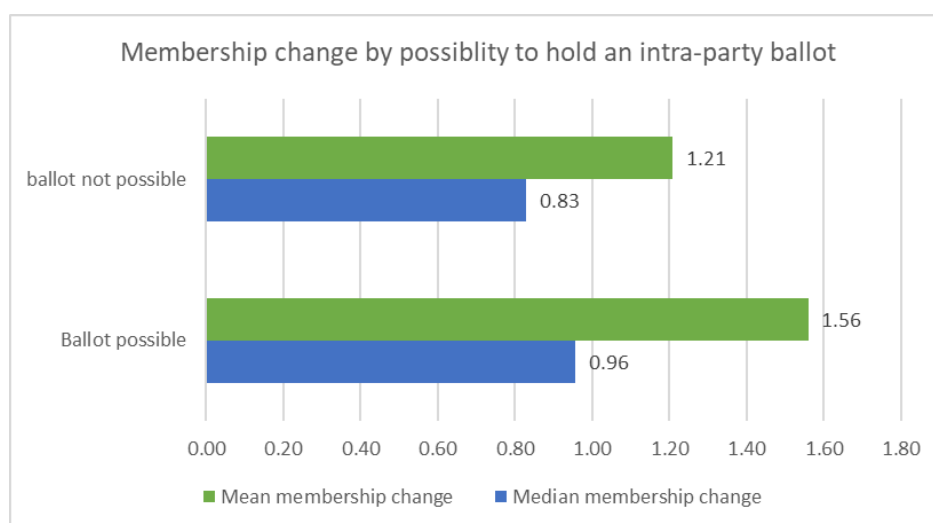


Figure 21

Finally, the variable if all members are allowed to vote for a new party leader seems to contradict the assumption that more intra-party democracy leads to less membership decline (H1). As displayed in Figure 22, parties that do not allow all members to participate in leadership selections tend to have higher membership numbers than parties that do.

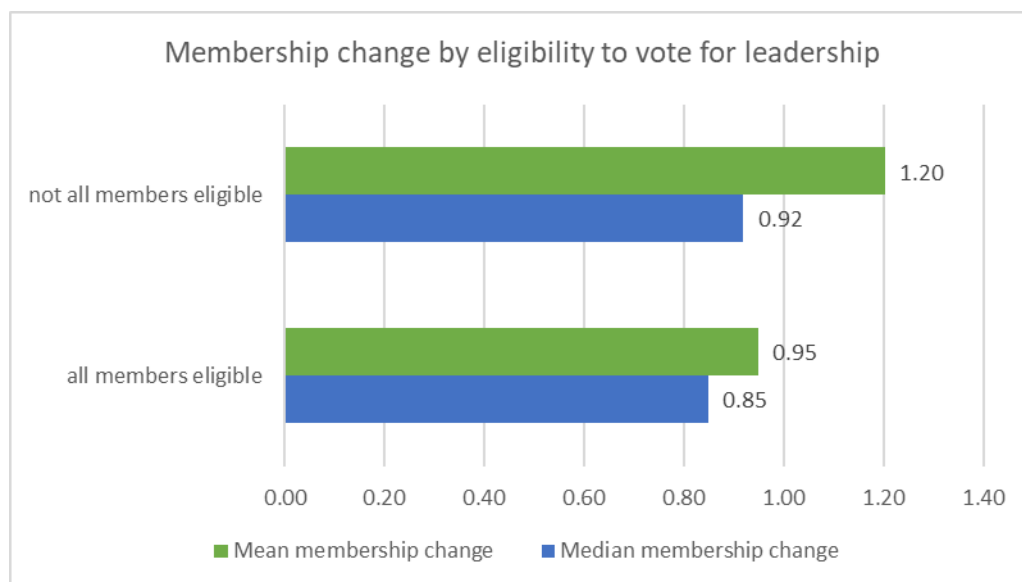


Figure 22

In sum, the single variables already show some interesting results. In the next section, I now combine the variables to see what kind of interactions there are.

### 3. Interactions between the variables

In this sub-section, I display the most interesting results of combining the variables. I do not go into detail of all the combinations if I did not find them very fruitful. This is especially the case if I did not have observations for all the different category combinations. I start by looking at the interactions between the two control variables party family and party age. They both are easier to combine with the intra-party variables because they do not have any missing values. Combining the intra-party variables is trickier because there are not many cases where the four variables overlap.

### *i. Party families*

I start with comparing the average membership change by party family and hierarchies. The only party families that were represented in all categories were social-democratic and conservative parties. Figure 23 displays the means for social-democratic parties, Figure 24 for conservative parties. In case of social-democratic parties, the results seem to be in line what has been found in the interviews with the ex-members of social-democratic parties.

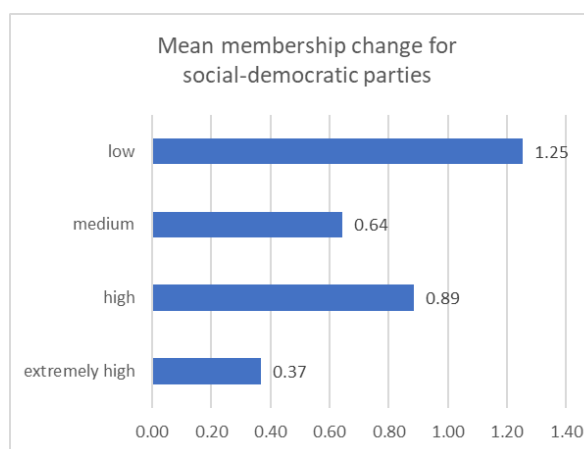


Figure 23

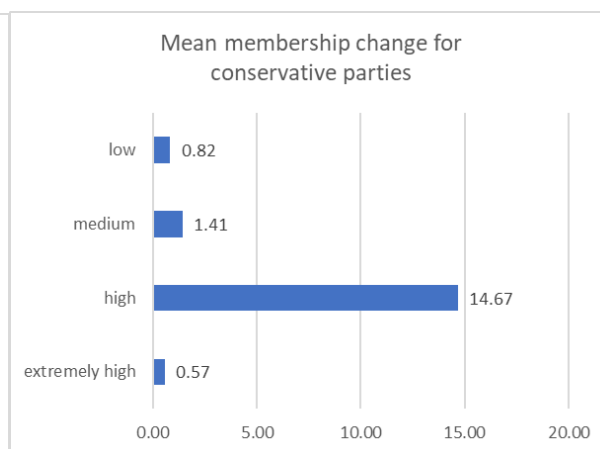


Figure 24

If social-democratic parties have low hierarchies, they, on average, have increasing membership numbers, while parties with medium, high or extremely high hierarchies decrease. For conservative parties, it seems to be the other way around. Parties with low and extremely high hierarchies decrease in membership numbers, while parties with medium and high<sup>10</sup> hierarchies increase. We have to keep in mind, however, that the categories “high” and “extremely high” only have a few observations.

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<sup>10</sup> This is the outlier case, the Polish Law & Order party



Looking at the interaction between party families and the possibility to have an intra-party referendum (Figure 25), we can see that social-democratic and liberal parties that allow for intra-party ballots are increasing in membership numbers, whereas the social-democratic and liberal parties that do not, decrease. Also, there was no case of a Green party that does not allow for intra-party ballots. When turning to Christian-democratic parties, there is not much difference if the parties allow for ballots or not, they show decreasing membership figures either way. Interestingly, conservative parties that do not allow for intra-party ballots decrease less than those that have that option.

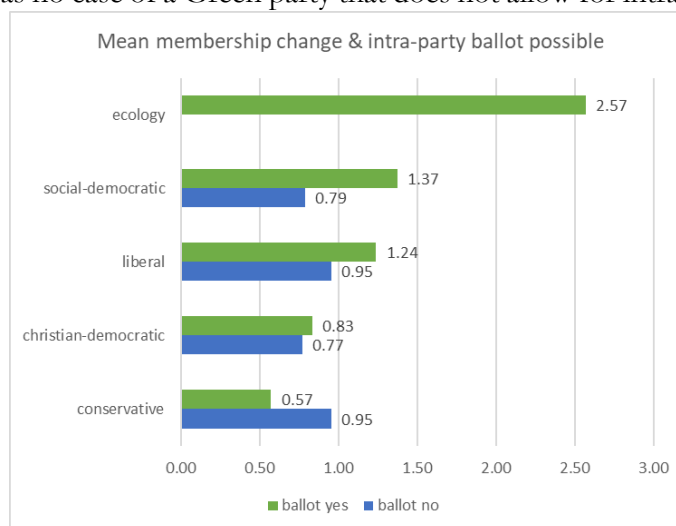


Figure 25

For the other intra-party democracy indicator, if all members are eligible to vote or not, there is also no universal pattern across all party families (see Figure 26). As shown in the last section, the parties that do not offer that option tend to increase more or decrease less than parties that allow all their members

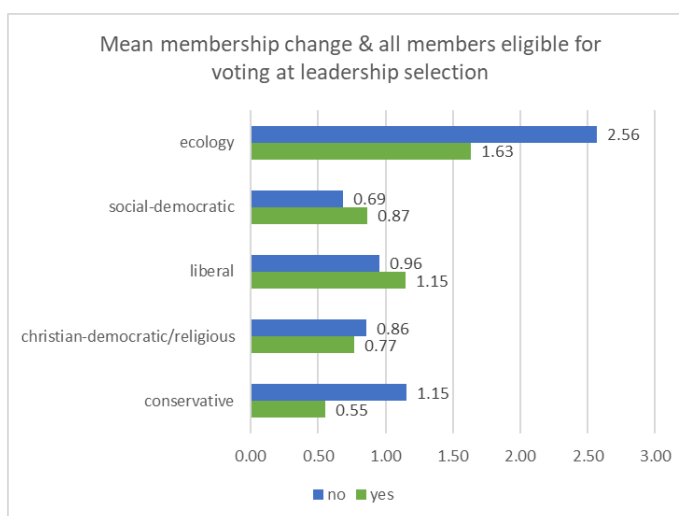


Figure 26

to vote. However, when breaking up into party families, the pattern is different for social-democratic and liberal parties. Parties that offer all members to participate in the leadership selection, tend to decrease less (in case of social-democratic parties) or increase more (in case of liberal parties). Surprisingly, Green parties that let all members vote perform worse than those that do not.

Summing up the variables indicating the level of intra-party democracy, I find mixed results for Hypothesis 1 when splitting the parties up according to party family. For social-democratic and liberal parties, it seems to be beneficial to have intra-party ballots and allowing all members to participate in the leadership selection. Christian-democratic and conservative parties rather show the opposite, especially conservative parties that offer more intra-party democracies are associated with a stronger decline in membership numbers. Finally, the results for Green parties are diverging, suggesting, though, that intra-party ballots are more important for membership increase than universal leadership selections.

Turning to the interaction between party family and power of party factions, I compare the median membership numbers of three party families. Again, this description might not show the full picture though, because the categories “some” and “a lot of power” only deal with few observations. Figure 27 shows that in the case of the few liberal and conservative parties that give party factions some power, they increase more in their membership numbers than liberal or conservative parties that do not give their factions power. Only one party, the French socialist party, gives their factions a lot of power and increases in membership numbers, whereas social-democratic parties with no or some power for factions decrease.

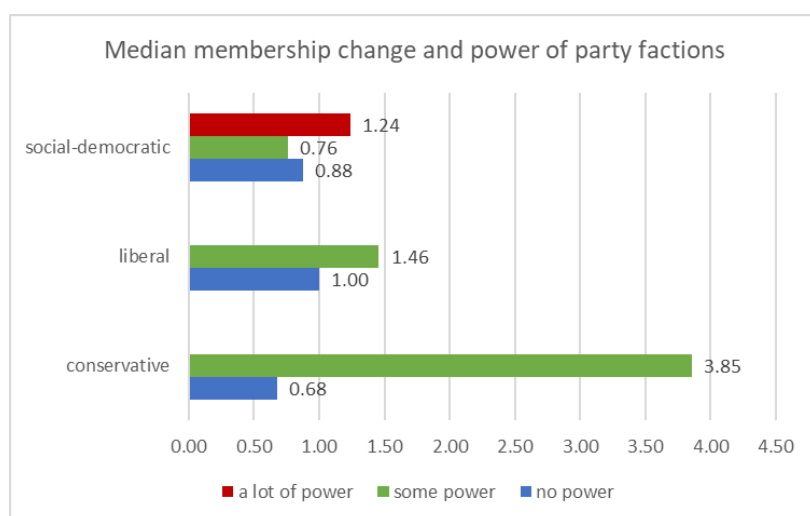


Figure 27

Overall, it seems like parties that give their party factions more power seem to increase their membership figures. One explanation might be that then, party members with diverging views forming a faction feel like they have more influence. As discussed in the first part, the feeling of not having efficacy and not being able to change anything is a major emotion connected to party exits. But if party factions have some power, they are better able to influence outcomes.

This sub-section was looking at the interaction between party families and the other variables. Party family does play a role. The theoretical assumptions that low hierarchies, more intra-party democracy and more power for factions lead to less membership decline or even increases membership numbers seems to be true for social-democratic parties. This is not surprising, as the theory was developed by interviewing social-democratic ex-members. There is also some evidence that those factors are rather important for liberal and ecological parties as well. When it comes to conservative and Christian-democratic parties, low hierarchies and more intra-party democracy does rather show the opposite pattern. This difference between left-centrist and right-centrist parties could be due to their ideology, the first promoting equality and freedom, the latter focusing more on traditions or hierarchy. It would certainly be very interesting to analyse these differences in relation to membership changes more.

## *ii. Interaction with age*

Regarding the second control variable, age, we already know that older parties tend to decrease in membership numbers, whereas newer parties increase. In the following graphs, for each age group, I show membership changes for the various categories (see Figure 28). The median membership change for parties founded before 1945 is at 0.7, but especially parties that allow for intra-party ballots seem to decrease less than others. The French socialist party (1.24) is the one case with high

hierarchy, but also the case which gives factions a lot of power. Also, the parties that indicate that their factions do not have power seem to have less membership decline than the average old party.

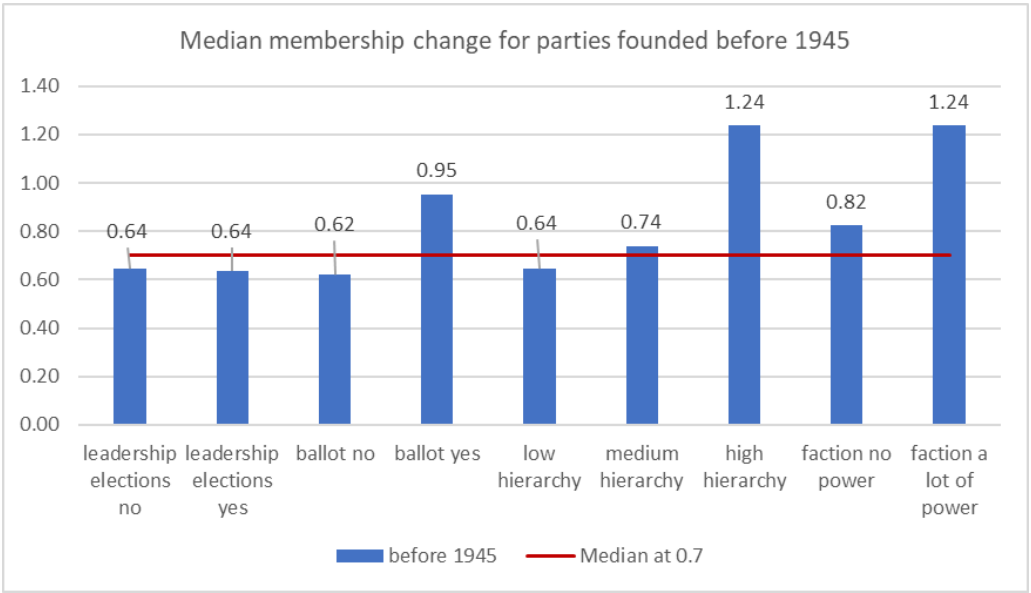


Figure 28

Looking at the parties founded between 1945 and 1972 (Figure 29), parties with low and high hierarchies, with powerless factions, and the ones that do not allow for intra-party ballots tend to perform worse. The parties that give their factions some power, and to a lesser extend those with medium hierarchies, tend to increase their membership numbers in this age group.

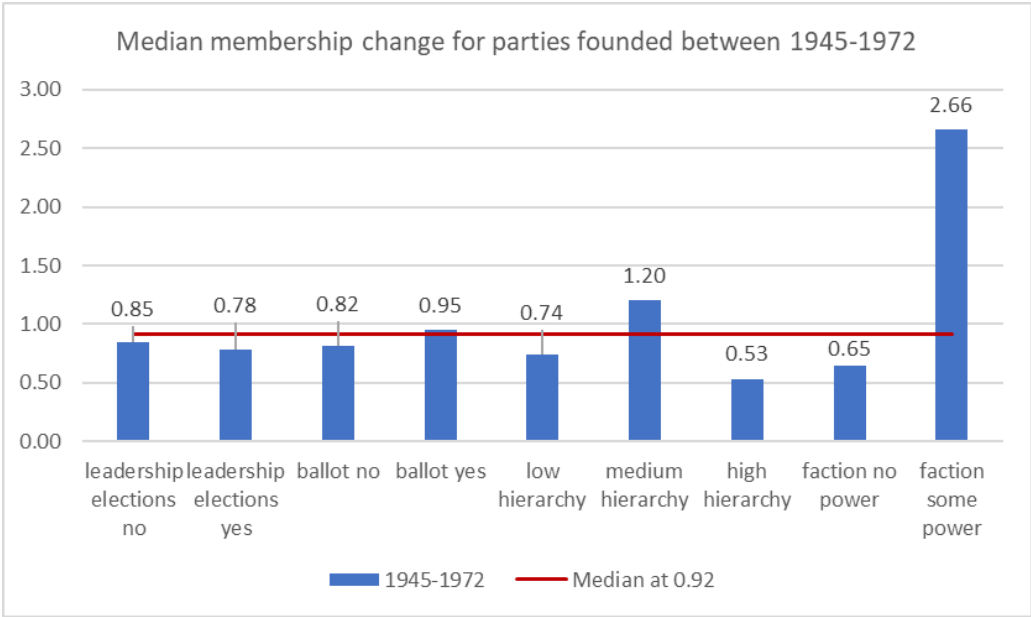


Figure 29

Turning to parties founded between 1973 and 1990 (Figure 30), parties with low hierarchies tend to increase more in membership numbers than the median party. But so do parties with no leadership selection and no power for factions. It is also the only age group where the possibility to hold an intra-party ballot does not seem to be very beneficial for increasing the membership numbers.

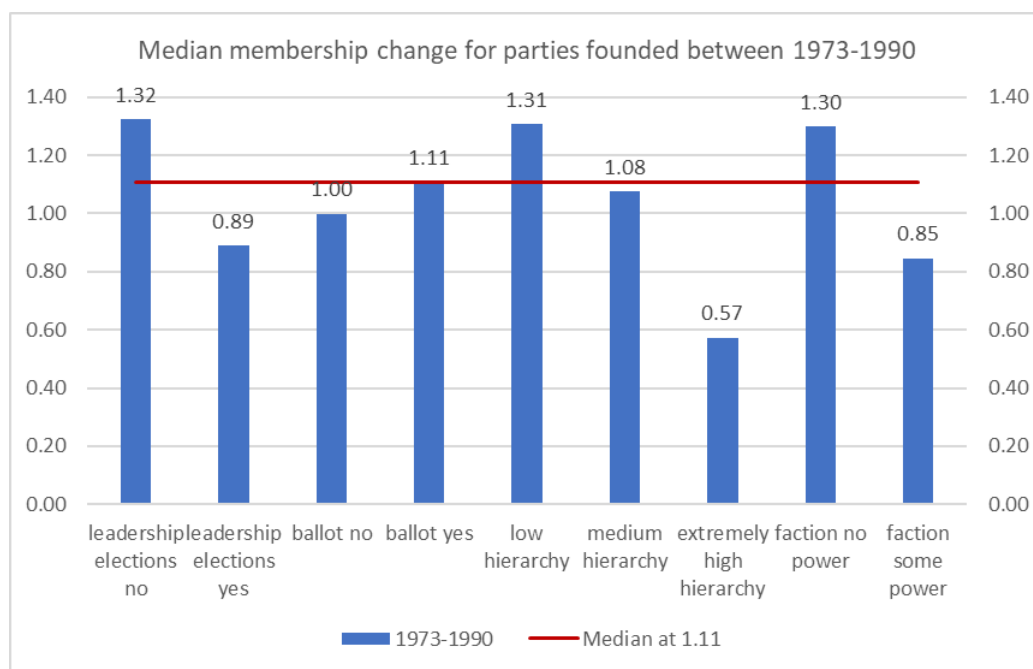


Figure 30

Finally, the youngest parties founded since 1991 show that apart from the cases with high hierarchies, parties with low hierarchies seem to perform best (see Figure 31). Also, parties that have the possibility to hold intra-party ballots have a higher increase in membership numbers, but even the parties that indicate that they do not have this possibility have a higher membership increase than the median young party. For the leadership selection variable, parties that do not offer the option for all members to vote also have increasing membership numbers, whereas parties that let all members vote for the leader have decreasing membership numbers. This pattern was similar in the previous age group (1973 – 1990).

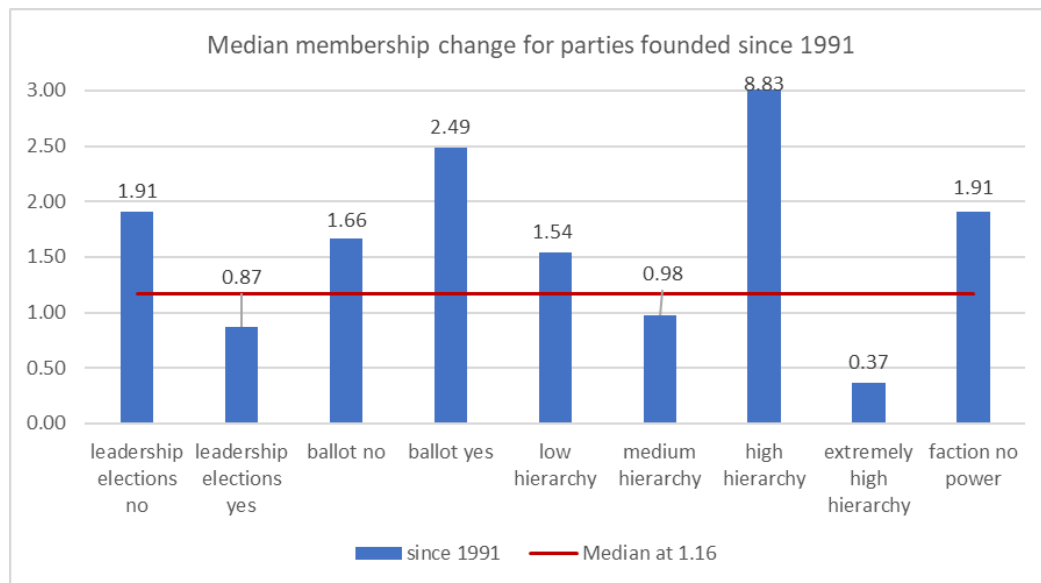


Figure 31

The interaction between the variables and party age does not deliver a uniform picture. Overall, it seems like that for younger parties (formed between 1973-1990 or since 1991), hierarchies are more important. Low hierarchies are associated with a higher increase in membership numbers, whereas the two parties with extremely high hierarchies (both founded after 1973) suffer from a great decrease compared to the other parties founded since 1973. Whether all members are allowed to vote for the leader or not does not have a particular effect for parties founded before 1972. But those parties which do not let all members vote for the leader and which were founded after 1973 seem to increase significantly, whereas those that allow for universal leadership selection have decreasing membership numbers. For the oldest category, parties that have the option for intra-party ballots seem to suffer less from party decline. Similarly, parties that do allow for an intra-party ballot among the parties founded after 1991 also have significantly higher membership increases.

### *iii. Interaction between the intra-party variables*

Combining the intra-party variables is not so easy, because the hierarchy and the faction variable both contain only few observations in some of the categories, and they do not necessarily overlap with the observations available for the two intra-party democracy variables. There are only few cases where the four variables overlap, but I nevertheless present the most meaningful results here.

Figure 32 shows that parties that allow for intra-party ballots increase in membership numbers, regardless of whether leadership selections for all members are possible or

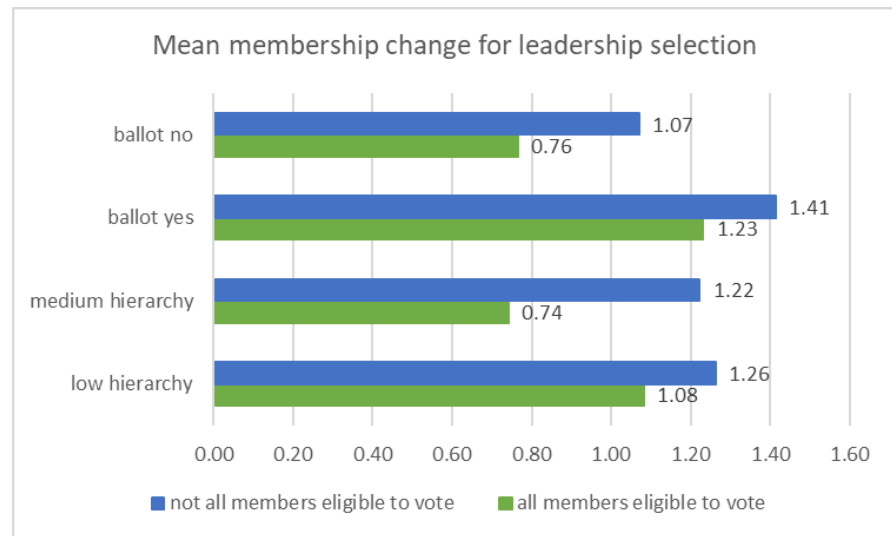


Figure 32

not. Parties that do not allow for intra-party ballots but allow all members to vote in leadership selections, on average, decrease, in membership numbers. This interaction between the two intra-party variables suggests that intra-party ballots are more significant for parties' membership numbers than taking part in leadership selection. The variable measures if intra-party ballots on policies are possible. Therefore, it could mean that the participation in a party's policy position or – in a broader sense – its ideology is more important for the development of membership numbers than choosing the party leader.

Also, parties with lower hierarchies that allow all members to vote increase, on average, in membership numbers compared to parties with medium hierarchies. But parties with low hierarchies also increase more even if they do not let all their members vote. This also suggests that the low hierarchies matter more than voting for the leader or not.

As the possibility to hold an intra-party ballot on policies is more important, it makes sense to take a closer look at its interaction with hierarchies and the power of factions (Figure 33). Here, parties with medium hierarchies perform better, but

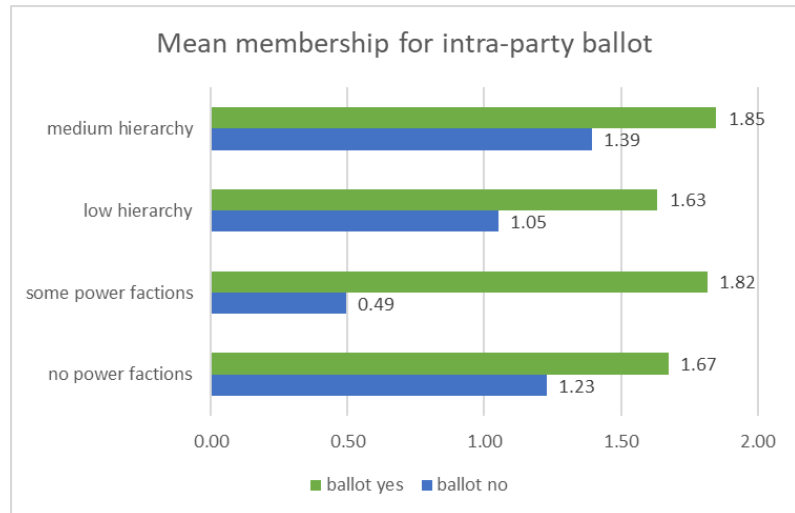


Figure 33

for all constellations, low and medium hierarchies are associated with increasing membership numbers. The party factions' power does not seem to make a big difference for parties that allow for intra-party ballots. Parties that do not have intra-party ballots and no power for factions even increased their membership numbers since 2000.

Overall, of all the intra-party factors, the possibility to hold an intra-party ballot on policies seems to be the most important one. However, its effect might be different for different party families as we could see above. But when considering all parties in the dataset, on average, parties that let their members decide on policies perform better and rather increase their membership numbers.

### c. Discussion and limitations of the descriptive analysis

Throughout Part II of the thesis, I constantly mentioned various limitations such as missing values, few observations for some categories and generally, the use of membership numbers instead of surveys with ex-members. More research on this topic is needed, especially when it comes to proper theory-testing and establishing causal links. This descriptive analysis should shed light on some of the patterns, but it also does not include if structural intra-party factors changed from the turn of



the millennial to 2014. The PPDB is just collecting data for a second round which should be released in 2021. Combined with more recent membership data, this would offer a great opportunity to see if changes in the intra-party structure occurred and have an effect on membership numbers. Therefore, re-doing this descriptive analysis or even testing statistically could provide new and interesting results in the research of party membership.

Also, I would like to mention that there are plenty other factors that can influence the development of party membership numbers (recruiting, alternative forms of political activism, ect.) or party exit reasons (i.e. membership fees, political disinterest, personal circumstances, ...). This thesis does not deliver an all-encompassing explanation for party exits and changes in party membership. However, it combines two research areas that have seldomly been combined: research on party membership and research on intra-party organization and structure. And the descriptive results show that the intra-party structure should not be omitted when asking the question why some parties increase and some decline in membership numbers.

## V. Conclusion

Parties are one of the central institutions for political science. When in power, they are able to influence societal processes by passing legislation that is in line with their ideology, they are able to amend institutional settings, for example by giving constitutional courts more or less power, and by advocating for or against democratic rules, they are also able to shape a country's political regime. Therefore, studying the party and its members is important, not only for the sake of understanding the processes within, but also to better understand other political processes and changes.

So far, research on party membership centred around the question who joins a party and why. Several theories have been established to explain party engagement and also, the social composition of party members was subject of many studies too (see II.c.). And, although studies found that party membership numbers are declining throughout Europe (see II.b.), only few studies dealt with ex-members and they did not establish convincing party exit models (see II.d.).

This is where this thesis tried to offer additional insights. By using in-depth, narrative interviews with ex-members, I aimed to go beyond a simple response to the question why someone leaves a party. This approach paid off, as I found that reasons for leaving a party are overlapping and what would have been considered as the exit reason in previous studies (a certain policy decision, a new party leader, ect.) was, for my research participants, often only a trigger to finally leave. In sum, structural and ideological intraparty factors contribute heavily to ex-members' leaving processes and they intensified the feeling of not having efficacy with one's political activism. However, social contacts such as friendships can prolong the leaving process. The final straw that breaks the camel's back can be a trigger event, but sometimes there is no particular event that eventually leads to the final exit act.

A limitation of the established theory of disengagement is that the interviews are not representative. First, I only interviewed ex-members of social-democratic parties in Austria and Germany, two examples for old mass membership parties that suffer most from party decline. Second, I wanted to focus on the experiences of young (< 38 years old) ex-members, because their party activism is, to some extent, decisive for the future development of party decline. If parties are not able to keep young members engaged, they might just decline even more, as old mass membership parties “still rely on the generation that entered both parties in the 1970s” (Spier and Klein 2015, 91). Nevertheless, I do not think that the exit experiences of older party members are particularly distinct. I can, however, imagine that with another sample, other factors that contributed to the exit could have popped up, such as changing personal circumstances or membership fees.

Although I already send in some light rays into the black box of party disengagement, I wanted to see if some of the factors I identified could also be linked to the general party decline. I conducted a descriptive analysis by looking at the relationship between the change of membership numbers (from approx. 2000-2014) and some structural intraparty variables. I found that, first, membership decline is not a general phenomenon, as many parties increase their membership numbers significantly.

Membership decline also does not affect every party family to the same extend. While some parties such as ecological or nationalistic parties increase in membership, social-democratic, Christian-democratic, and conservative parties decrease. Also, social-democratic parties with low hierarchies, more intra-party democracy and more power for factions tend to decrease less or even increase in membership numbers. This also applies, to some extent, to liberal and ecological parties. However, the pattern is reversed for conservative and Christian-democratic parties. Furthermore, the older the party the more they decline in membership numbers. But old parties that have the possibility

for intra-party ballots seem to decrease less than those that do not. Also, for parties founded after 1972, low hierarchies are generally associated with higher membership increases.

When it comes to intraparty democracy, the possibility to hold intra-party ballots on policies seems to be linked to parties that increase the most. Whether all members are allowed to vote for the party leader does, however, not play an important role and is sometimes even associated with a heavier decrease in membership numbers. This could mean that the participation in a party's policy position is more important for the development of membership numbers than choosing the party leader. Also, parties with low or medium hierarchies perform better. The association of party factions' power and membership numbers is harder to assess, as there are only a few cases where factions actually have some statutory rights. But parties that allow their factions to have more power generally increase in membership numbers.

This thesis combined two research areas that were seldomly combined: party organization and party membership. Many factors can influence the development of party membership numbers, but I am convinced that the intra-party structure should not be omitted from party membership research. Apart from ideological differences, the main reasons for ex-members to leave a party were related to internal, structural issues. Future research should take changes in the structural composition into account, such as increasing intra-party democracy. Also, when it comes to ideological factors that contribute to party exits, surveys among ex-party members and their ideological position would surely provide interesting findings. Finally, we could ask what is the difference between the ones who leave and who stay? Party members, especially when they advance in their political careers, can shape the party's policy position and ideology. Those who are leaving do not have this option and this power anymore. If there are distinct differences between the two groups, this can not only have implications for the social composition of the party and hence, the party's representativeness, but also for the future development of the party, be it the electoral

success or its ideology. Therefore, it is worth asking who has the power and who, by virtue of disengaging, does not.

Party membership is a complex topic and what you see depends on your view. I certainly looked at it from within the parties, by particularly focusing on how it works and how its construction influences the experiences of party members. But more research, and especially more data on party membership is needed to draw a full picture of party membership – from engagement to disengagement.

## VI. Annex

### Interview questions

The interviews were conducted in German, the translated questions can be found in the following table:

	English	German
<b>Narrative</b>		
<b>Stimulus</b>	“I would like to ask you to tell me about how it happened that you left the party, what did you experience and how did you decide to leave. Do not hesitate to go into detail of all the events that were relevant to you. You decide where the story, in your opinion, begins. Please start your story there and continue until you arrive in the present.”	„Ich möchte Sie bitten, mir zu erzählen, wie es dazu kam, dass Sie aus der Partei ausgetreten sind, welche Erfahrungen Sie dabei gemacht haben und wie es schließlich dazu kam, dass Sie sich für den Austritt entschieden haben. Erzählen Sie dabei ruhig ausführlich alle Ereignisse, die dazugehören. Fangen Sie dort an zu erzählen, wo die Geschichte Ihrer Meinung nach beginnt, und erzählen Sie, bis Sie in der Gegenwart angekommen sind.“
<b>Exmanent questions</b>		
<b>General information on party membership</b>		
<b>Year of party entry</b>	In which year did you join the party?	In welchem Jahr sind Sie in die Partei eingetreten?
<b>Year of party exit</b>	In which year did you leave the party?	In welchem Jahr sind Sie aus der Partei ausgetreten?
<b>Concrete reason to join party</b>	Was there a concrete reason why you joined the party?	Gab es einen konkreten Grund, warum Sie der Partei beigetreten sind?
<b>Level of party activism (general)</b>	Would you say you were very active, fairly active, less active or not active at all?	Würden Sie sagen Sie waren sehr aktiv, ziemlich aktiv, weniger aktiv oder überhaupt nicht aktiv?

<b>Level of party activism (specific)</b>	When were you the most active and for how long?	Wann waren Sie am aktivsten und für wie lange?
<b>Location of party activism</b>	In which federal state and/or city were you politically active?	In welchem Bundesland und/oder in welcher Stadt waren Sie politisch aktiv?
<b>Financial dependence and professional aspirations</b>		
<b>Financial dependence</b>	Have you ever been financially dependent on the party? I.e. were you ever employed by the party?	Waren Sie jemals finanziell von der Partei abhängig? Z.B. waren Sie jemals bei der Partei angestellt?
<b>Political mandate</b>	Did you have a political mandate or any other intraparty function?	Hatten Sie ein politisches Mandat oder eine andere parteiinterne Funktion?
<b>Professional aspirations</b>	Would you like to have had a mandate/function, but you didn't get one?	Hätten Sie gerne ein Mandat/eine Funktion gehabt, aber Sie haben keine bekommen?
<b>Process of leaving</b>		
<b>Begin of considering leaving the party</b>	When did you start considering leaving the party?	Wann haben Sie angefangen, darüber nachzudenken, die Partei zu verlassen?
<b>Duration of leaving process</b>	How long were you still a member since you considered leaving?	Wie lange waren Sie noch Mitglied, seit Sie sich überlegt haben, die Partei zu verlassen?
<b>Reasons to not leave immediately</b>	What was the reason that you did not leave immediately?	Was war der Grund, warum Sie nicht sofort gegangen sind?
<b>Concrete reason to leave party</b>	Was there a concrete reason why you left the party?	Gab es einen konkreten Grund, warum Sie aus der Partei ausgetreten sind?
<b>Policial interest and activism today</b>		
<b>Party membership (today)</b>	Today, are you a member of another party?	Sind Sie heute Mitglied einer anderen Partei?
<b>Political activism</b>	Are you politically active in another form today? If so, what do you do?	Sind Sie heute in einer anderen Form politisch aktiv? Wenn ja, was machen Sie?
<b>Political interest</b>	How interested would you say you are in politics? Are you very interested, somewhat interested, not very interested, or not at all interested?	Sind Sie an Politik sehr interessiert, ziemlich interessiert, wenig interessiert oder gar nicht interessiert?
<b>Party effectiveness</b>	Do you think that parties are influential in changing important policies or bring about societal change?	Denken Sie, dass Parteien einflussreich sind, um Gesetze und Policies zu beeinflussen oder um gesellschaftliche Veränderungen herbeizuführen?

<b>Party function</b>	As an ex-member, what do you think is the most predominant task of a party?	Als Ex-Parteimitglied, was ist Ihrer Meinung nach die vorherrschende Aufgabe einer Partei?
<b>Socialization</b>		
<b>Friendships (general)</b>	Were many of your friends party members or did you find many friends through the party?	Waren viele Ihrer Freunde Parteimitglieder bzw. haben Sie viele Freunde über die Partei gefunden?
<b>Friendships (after)</b>	How did you feel about your friendships when and after leaving the party?	Wie ging es Ihnen mit Ihren Freundschaften beim und nach dem Parteiaustritt?
<b>Family (general)</b>	Were your parents or other family members party members?	Waren Ihre Eltern oder andere Familienmitglieder Parteimitglieder?
<b>Family (after)</b>	How did your family react after you left? And how did you feel about their reaction?	Wie hat Ihre Familie nach Ihrem Austritt reagiert? Und wie haben Sie ihre Reaktion empfunden?
<b>Sociodemographic questions</b>		
<b>Age</b>	When were you born? Please tell me the year and month of your birth.	In welchem Jahr und Monat wurden Sie geboren?
<b>Citizenship</b>	Are you a German/Austrian citizen?	Sind Sie Staatsbürger*in?
<b>Level of education</b>	What is the highest level of education you have successfully completed?	Was ist das höchste Bildungsniveau, das Sie erfolgreich abgeschlossen haben?
<b>Migration background</b>	Were you or either/both of your parents born outside of Austria/Germany?	Wurden Sie oder eines/beide ihrer Elternteile außerhalb Österreichs/Deutschlands geboren?
<b>Gender</b>	Would you identify yourself as a man or a woman?	Würden Sie sich als Mann oder Frau identifizieren?
<b>Union membership</b>	Are you a member of a trade union?	Sind Sie Mitglied einer Gewerkschaft?
<b>Employment status (today)</b>	What is your employment status today?	Was ist Ihr Beschäftigungsstatus heute?
<b>Employment status (during party membership)</b>	What was your employment status during your time as a party member?	Was war Ihr Beschäftigungsstatus in der Zeit Ihrer Parteimitgliedschaft?
<b>Region of residence</b>	In which federal state do you live?	In welchem Bundesland leben Sie?



<b>Urban or rural residence</b>	Are you living in a rural area or village, in a small or middle-sized town, in the suburbs of a large town or city or in a large town or city?	Leben Sie in einer ländlichen Gegend oder einem Dorf, in einer kleinen oder mittelgroßen Stadt, in den Vororten einer großen Stadt oder in einer großen Stadt?
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## Codebook

1 exit process total	0
1.1 (no) response from party	8
1.2 other people who left	6
1.3 doubts or secure about exit?	4
1.3.1 no clear-cut separation	5
1.3.2 clear cut separation with party	1
1.4 process	0
1.4.1 leaving as process	20
1.4.2 learning something new	8
1.4.3 not paying anymore	3
1.4.4 not showing up anymore	2
1.4.5 move as part of leaving process	9
1.4.6 beginning leaving process	13
1.4.7 duration of leaving process	22
1.4.8 decisive trigger to leave	23
1.5 exit	0
1.5.1 spontaneous exit	1
1.5.2 distancing from party	8
1.5.3 incidental exit	1
1.5.4 exit document	11
1.5.5 actual exit	20
1.6 reasons exit	0
1.6.1 no single reason	15
1.6.2 exit as sign to party	2
1.6.3 reasons for not leaving earlier	13
1.6.4 no personal efficacy	22
1.6.5 substantive	15
2 Intra-party factors	0
2.1 IPF power and hierarchies	0
2.1.1 power and hierarchies	13
2.1.2 bad IPD/participation	11
2.1.3 polarization progressiv/young and establishment	12
2.1.4 establishment	13
2.1.5 party loyalists/trading offices	12
2.1.6 top-down process	7
2.2 IPF institutional factors	0
2.2.1 male dominance	5
2.2.2 no change/recovery	10
2.2.3 no left network	2
2.2.4 disagreeing with outcome of IPD	5
2.2.5 strategic differences	10
2.2.5.1 denial	4
2.2.6 inconsistency	5
2.2.7 no appreciation for members	5
2.2.8 pushback against young member	5
2.2.9 ignoring internal rules	5

2.2.10 structure	16
2.3 IPF discrepancy general	0
2.3.1 discrepancy promises and reality	3
2.3.2 left/right discrepancies	13
2.3.3 discrepancy ideal type party	7
2.3.4 discrepancy values/reality	15
2.4 IPF youth orga	0
2.4.1 youth orga (+)	16
2.4.2 youth orga more left	5
2.4.3 political education	4
2.4.4 shift party to the left	6
2.5 IPF ideological reasons	0
2.5.1 ideological gap	23
2.5.2 no substance	9
2.5.3 ignoring fundamental values	14
2.6 IPF Characteristics of party	0
2.6.1 intraparty discussions (pos/neg)	16
2.6.2 tradition	1
2.6.3 party is left	2
2.7 IPF disagreement with	0
2.7.1 how party should be	5
2.7.2 no mass party anymore	3
2.7.3 organization form	9
2.7.4 influence on society SPÖ	5
2.7.5 leadership	10
2.7.6 coalitions SPD	14
2.7.7 policies	6
2.8 IPF positive feelings towards party	0
2.8.1 support for young members	2
2.8.2 intraparty democracy	2
2.8.3 good party members or leaders	9
2.8.4 identification with party	15
2.8.5 personal efficiency	10
3 politics in general	0
3.1 ideal type and function of party	11
3.2 Party efficiency	17
3.3 disenfranchisement with politics	4
4 financial dependence on party (+)	13
5 activism	0
5.1 level of activism	29
5.2 activism youth organizations	15
5.3 activism main party	17
5.4 location of party activism	8
5.5 types of activities	16
5.6 alternative party activism	17
5.7 alternative political activism	18
5.8 satisfaction with activism	6
5.9 decreasing activism (+)	9

6 entering process	6
6.1 recruitment	11
6.2 time of entering	14
6.3 reason for party activism	18
7 personal political position	13
8 emotions	0
8.1 negative	0
8.1.1 feeling of "I cannot do it anymore"	4
(+)	
8.1.2 feeling of no change	6
8.1.3 disappointment	9
8.1.3.1 interpersonal disappointment	4
8.1.4 feeling pushback	5
8.1.5 feeling of anger	9
8.1.6 feeling of obligation	2
8.1.7 feeling of homelessness	1
8.1.8 losing trust	2
8.1.9 frustrating	2
8.2 positive	0
8.2.1 satisfaction with activism	4
8.2.2 feeling of solidarity	3
8.2.3 supportive of what others do	1
8.2.4 fun	1
8.2.5 hope	3
8.2.6 feeling liberated	1
8.3 disconnection	7
9 external (life) circumstances	0
9.1 refugee crisis	1
9.2 parents party members	11
9.3 change of residency	9
9.4 study	4
9.5 societal environment	8
9.6 personal origin	5
10 mandates and professional	0
10.1 functions or mandate	32
10.2 no professional career or mandate wanted	15
11 socialization	0
11.1 exit reaction friends	6
11.2 justify party membership for friends	1
11.3 leaving through friends	3
11.4 entering through friends	10
11.5 positive social contacts	12
11.6 party friendships	18
11.7 people convince to re-enter	5
11.8 no party friendships anymore (+)	8
12 politization and political interest	12

## Summary of interviews

	Party	Level of activism main party	Level of activism youth orga	functions in main party	functions in youth orga	level of activism (activism + functions)
1	SPD	very active	very active	yes	yes	very active member
2	SPD	hardly active		no	no	very inactive member
3	SPD	hardly active	fairly active	no	no	very inactive member
4	SPD	hardly active	very active	yes	yes	active youth orga
5	SPD	hardly active	very active	no	yes	active youth orga
6	SPD	very active	very active	yes	yes	very active member
7	SPÖ	not at all	very active	no	yes	active youth orga
8	SPÖ	very active	very active	yes	yes	very active member
9	SPÖ	fairly active	very active	no	yes	active youth orga
10	SPÖ	hardly active	very active	no	yes	active youth orga

	Party	leaving was a process/su m of many things	beginning of leaving process/fir st doubts	Exit year	duration	trigger very important	trigger	no single reason	no personal efficiacy	substantive differences member/party	reason for not leaving earlier	level of activism (activism + functions)
1	SPD	yes	2010	2012	2			True	True	True		very active member
2	SPD		2011	2013	2	yes	coalition		True			very inactive member
3	SPD	yes	2012	2014	1.5		coalition	True	True	True		very inactive member
4	SPD	yes	2008	2018	10		no clear antifascist position	True		True	people/friendships	active youth orga
5	SPD	yes	2013	2018	5		coalition	True	True		mandate/function	active youth orga
6	SPD	yes	2015	2019	4		disagreeing with asylum policy	True	True	True	people/friendships	very active member
7	SPÖ	yes	end of 2007?	2007	0.16 (2 months)	yes	tuition fees	True		True		active youth orga
8	SPÖ	yes	2013	2016	3		disagreement with TTIP and CETA negotiations	True	True	True	hope for change	very active member
9	SPÖ	yes	2015	2017	1.5		disagreeing with asylum policy	True		True	hope for change	active youth orga
10	SPÖ	yes	spontaneous exit	2020		yes	paying fees		True		people/friendships	active youth orga

	Party	No change possible	power/hierarchy/advancement/party loyalists	establishment/top-down	polarization progressive and young vs. establishment	rigid structures	disagreement leadership	ignoring intraparty rules/bad IPD	pushback against young members	no appreciation for members	strategic differences	disagreeing with IPD outcome	Male dominance /networks
1	SPD		yes (vi)			yes	yes						
2	SPD		yes	yes							yes (vi) (coalition)	yes (vi)	
3	SPD										yes (vi) (coalition)	yes (vi)	
4	SPD		yes	yes	yes	yes		yes			yes		
5	SPD	yes (vi)	yes	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes	yes	yes (mass party)	yes (vi)	yes
6	SPD	yes (vi)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes	yes	yes
7	SPÖ												
8	SPÖ		yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes			
9	SPÖ		yes		yes	yes		yes			yes		
10	SPÖ			yes	yes		yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	
													*vi means very important

## Dependent variable calculation

In a few cases, data for 1999 and 2001 was available, but not for 2000. For those cases (PPD/PSD in Portugal, Israeli Labour Party and Brazil's PT) I decided to take the average of the two values from 1999 and 2001. In order not to exclude the Austrian Green party, I also decided to take the average of the two available years closest to 2000, namely 1995 and 2004. Taking the average should not pose any particular problems, as I think they represent the membership numbers for or around the year 2000 quite well. The last two cases, where I applied a different rule were the cases PMDB in Brazil and the Polish Law & Justice Party. The PMDB reported over 6 million members in 1999, but only 2.21 million in 2002. According to the rule, I should have chosen the year 1999, but as the difference to 2002 was extraordinarily big, I decided to take the average. Considering that in the year 2014, the PMDB reported to have 2.35 million members, taking 6 million members as the baseline would have overreported the membership decline, while taking the membership numbers from 2002 would have led to a membership increase for the PMDB. I had similar considerations for the Polish Law & Justice Party. As it was founded in 2001, it then only had 400 members, while in 2002, it already had 2 600 members. Therefore, I took the average of 2001 and 2002 to calculate the membership change.

## Variable mean & median

Party family	Median membership change	Mean membership change
Conservative	0.73	2.76
Christian-democrat/religious	0.84	0.99
Social-democratic	0.88	1.08
Liberal	1.06	1.08
Ethnic and regional	1.11	2.79
National	1.49	2.15
Ecology	1.63	2.18
(Former) Communist	1.64	1.78

Party age	Median membership change	Mean membership change
before 1945	0.70	1.16
1945-1973	0.92	1.24
1973-1991	1.11	1.51
since 1991	1.16	2.93

Factions	Median membership change	Mean membership change
a lot of power	1.24	1.24
some power	1.19	1.94
no power	0.95	1.59



<b>Ballot possible</b>	<b>Median membership change</b>	<b>Mean membership change</b>
Ballot possible	0.96	1.56
ballot not possible	0.83	1.21

extremely high hierarchy and conservative	0.5728875
extremely hierarchy and social-democratic	0.3696367
high hierarchy and christian-democratic/religious	2.9916429
high hierarchy and conservative	14.6666667
high hierarchy and social-democratic	0.8865995
medium hierarchy and conservative	1.4145579
medium hierarchy and christian-democratic/religious	0.8193372
medium hierarchy and ecology	2.2766643
medium hierarchy and liberal	1.176593
medium hierarchy and social-democratic	0.6439858
low hierarchy and conservative	0.8202763
low hierarchy and christian-democratic/religious	1.3058874
low hierarchy and ecology	2.1200485
low hierarchy and liberal	1.0947011
low hierarchy and national	4
low hierarchy and social-democratic	1.2536679

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