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(Re-)join the party! The effects of direct democracy on party membership in Europe

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Abstract. It has been argued that political parties are in decline. While they used to be responsible for connecting citizens to the state by translating their preferences into policies, they have increasingly become part of the state, acting as governors instead. While this perspective emphasises parties' representative function, it is less clear what their role is in a more direct democratic context. Parties may gain support due to such context, but they may also be seen increasingly redundant in a situation where citizens can co-decide directly. Focusing on party membership, this study tests these rival expectations on a panel of 16 West European democracies over the period 1980–2008 and finds that parties tend to have higher levels of party membership in a direct democratic context. The usage of referendums, however, does not contribute to this effect.

Keywords: political parties; direct democracy; party membership; democracy; Western Europe

Introduction

Political parties have long been seen to play a crucial part in the functioning of modern representative democracy, largely due to their capability of mobilising popular preferences and translating them into policies. The observation that parties seem to lose popular support in terms of membership and identification (see, e.g., Dalton & Wattenberg 2000; Mair 2013; Van Biezen et al. 2012) has therefore caused some concern for the current state of democracy. On the one hand, it has been argued that parties nowadays do not need to rely on members in order to function. They can appeal to the electorate at large so that they can compete in elections, and they can recruit people aspiring to a political career for political positions, instead of relying on a base of party members and supporters (discussed in, e.g., Van Biezen & Poguntke 2014). On the other hand, it is argued that parties' ability to represent crucially depends on their ability to mobilise members in order to fulfil their traditional role. Party members help connect elites to the citizenry. Put differently, while parties may not need members in order to be governors, they do need some base in civil society in order to be able to represent citizens (Mair 2009, 2013). Moreover, the recent increased inclusion of members in internal party decision-making processes (Cross & Blais 2012; Mjelde 2013; Scarrow et al. 2000), suggests that parties value such membership.

At the same time, however, democracies have seen structural changes partly in an attempt to 'democratise' democracy by introducing provisions for direct or participatory mechanisms of decision making. In this article, I will connect one such structural modification – the institutionalisation of direct democracy – to party membership. While direct democracy has been studied widely (e.g., Altman 2011; Butler & Ranney 1994; Trechsel & Sciarini 1998) and the role of political parties in such contexts has been examined

(e.g., Bowler et al. 2006; Fatke 2014; Kriesi 2006; Ladner & Braendle 1999; Scarrow 1999), it has rarely been investigated whether a direct democratic context aids or challenges party strength.[1] Moreover, few have looked at how elements of direct democracy relate to representation and the functioning of political parties in a comparative way.

On the one hand, a direct democratic context might reduce the importance of and support for political parties in terms of party membership precisely because they can now be bypassed. On the other hand, it may offer them a possibility to (re-)occupy one of their traditional roles within democracy – that of mobilising and representing citizen interests. With this, they may again place themselves more firmly between the citizens and the state. Linked to the debate about the role of the party within democracy, it is important to examine the possible effects that direct involvement structures could have on the support for political parties. I therefore study the effects of the institutions of direct democracy on levels of party membership in Western Europe.

Party involvement

Political parties have long been considered important to democracy, adopting the essential role of linking citizens to the state (see, e.g., Dalton 2000; Katz & Mair 1995: 7; Mair 2005). Parties are seen as fundamental to a representative democracy that includes both a popular component and checks and balances (Mair 2005; Montero & Gunther 2002). Because of this, the relatively recent trends of people being less involved in politics through 'conventional' channels, the increased professionalisation of parties, as well as depoliticisation and increasingly void political competition (Mair 2013), are cause for concern regarding the functioning of democracy. In this respect, the study of levels of party membership is important since members are crucial in fulfilling the party's traditional function.

With their increasing (financial) dependence on the state, parties may not necessarily need members. However, when parties cannot connect citizens meaningfully to the state, their representative function suffers – having a membership base allows parties to translate preferences to the state. Political parties also appear somewhat concerned with their (lack of) members. While Van Biezen and Poguntke (2014) mention that party structures have become more 'top-down', making party elites more important, there have also been changes related to the explicit inclusion of members. Cross and Blais (2012), for example, show that members have increasing influence over the selection of party leaders, and Scarrow et al. (2000) find that intraparty decision making has become more inclusive. One example of this is the inclusion of SPD members in the recent coalition agreement between the CDU/CSU and the SPD in Germany. In this case, the SPD asked its members to ratify the coalition agreement after government negotiations. Furthermore, Adams and Ezrow (2009) show that parties are specifically responsive to 'opinion-leaders' (i.e., those who are also more likely to be a party member) in terms of their policy programmes. These findings suggest that there are some benefits to being a member of a party, that people could use parties to voice their preferences and that parties have attempted to create some incentives for people to become members, despite their changed form. Direct democratic contexts may alter the incentive structures for people to become members, and with that, these contexts may alter the role of the party within democracy.

Party membership and direct democracy

The debate concerning the role of the party and its place in democracy has focused specifically on the representative characteristics of democracy. Indeed, contemporary democracies mostly rely on representation, though studies have also emphasised the additional direct involvement mechanisms in decision-making processes (e.g., Butler & Ranney 1994; Gallagher 1996; Scarrow 2003). Even though the role of parties within such a direct democratic context has been examined (e.g., Bowler et al. 2006; Fatke 2014; Kriesi 2006; Ladner & Braendle 1999; Scarrow 1999; Sinnott 2002), few studies have focused on the effect of direct democracy on the strength of political parties. There are two opposing views of the party's role in more direct contexts and these will be discussed below.

Direct democracy as opportunity structures for parties

One view is that direct democracy could have a *positive* effect on parties. Here, the idea is that elements of direct democracy extend parties' repertoires. Political parties can use referendums to promote their ideas more frequently, and referendums give parties a more continuous platform (Fatke 2014; Ladner & Braendle 1999). Indeed, Trechsel and Sciarini (1998) find that, at least at the aggregate level, political elites are still important in the direct democratic context of Switzerland, and Kriesi (2006) argues that parties' positions and behaviour are crucial in determining the outcome of a referendum. Sinnott (2002) shows that the involvement of parties in referendums is important in Ireland, specifically for the well-functioning of direct democracy. Furthermore, referendums can give opportunities to smaller political parties as well as to interest groups, increasing political competition. Ladner and Braendle (1999) argue that while it is difficult for small parties to gain seats in parliament, they are able to promote their ideas and put new issues on the political agenda because of a direct democratic context.

This political competition forces parties to be more attentive to voters' preferences, and it widens the scope of politics. More specifically, a direct democratic context provides more incentives in terms of membership for both individuals to become, and parties to recruit, members. In their discussion of interest group membership in direct democratic contexts, Boehmke and Bowen (2010) argue that this altered incentive structure causes membership to be higher. Moreover, these incentives can be at work simply due to the existence of a direct democratic institutional framework (see, e.g., Bauer & Fatke 2014; Hug 2004) – its effect is not necessarily dependent on the actual usage of the institutions. The *anticipation* of a possible referendum will motivate the government to move their position to that of the majority. Party members are a good source of information about people's preferences. At the same time, being a member of a party gives people increased influence over that party's policy positions.

The possibility to hold referendums signals how political parties can be important. Parties can trigger or aim to avoid referendums, making their policies or policy positions increasingly important. They can thus be involved in the triggering and blocking of referendums, as well as in formulating policy positions. Being a member can now appear more appealing as members can have influence on what the party pursues politically. Moreover, political parties are encouraged to rely more on their members so that they can be

successful, and will therefore try to recruit more people to become members. Parties would thus be more tempted to ask citizens to be involved in the party, and to more actively involve them in the policies that they pursue. Together with the highlighted importance of the party, this provides more incentives for people to become party members, even if referendums are never or rarely held.

When it comes to the actual *usage* of referendums, a positive effect of direct democracy on party membership can also be expected. Here, parties would more directly compete with other parties and interest groups in the referendum election campaign. As a consequence, the election would be more competitive and thus the role of the party becomes more important. Moreover, the 'all-or-nothing'[2] character of referendums (Boehmke & Bowen 2010) highlights the competitive and relevant topical elements of the referendum, increasing the importance of parties. Accordingly, it puts parties in a position to mobilise voters, getting them more involved in politics (see also Kriesi (2008)). Because referendums require more frequent campaigning on individual issues, they provide citizens with political information so that the costs for people to participate are reduced. Political parties can help guide citizens by providing shortcuts, reducing the costs of participation. Kriesi's claim that parties are crucial in determining the outcome of the referendum underlines this guiding function. In addition, it emphasises the fact that parties would benefit from support and members in terms of electoral gain – again giving them an additional reason to mobilise people to become a member. Thus, the usage of referendums further encourages people to be party members. They can have a bigger role within the party, co-determining its position on issues in highly contested elections, but also by contributing to the election campaigns.

All in all, these arguments about the role of the party within elements of direct democracy lead to the expectation that levels of party membership would be higher. Depending on whether parties can exploit the opportunities, they could become stronger actors on the political stage. Parties are likely to put more effort into recruiting members, and people have more incentives to become members in a direct democratic context due to the increased role of parties, their own likely increased influence within the party, the highly contested elections of referendums, as well as the crucial role parties play in determining the outcome of these elections. Citizens would have more to gain from being a member, while at the same time parties help to reduce the costs of being involved and having a say in actual policies. The expectation largely follows what Fatke (2014) calls the 'allure hypothesis': the expectation that a direct democratic context strengthens political parties. Additionally, this effect would be stronger in contexts where referendums are used more frequently since the usage would further emphasise the role of the parties in the direct democratic context.

Direct democracy: Political parties caught offside

On the other hand, one might expect that direct democracy reduces the importance of political parties. Since direct democratic mechanisms allow people to be directly involved in the decision-making process, political parties may be less necessary in terms of representation. As it is easier for smaller parties to enter electoral competition, direct democratic processes are more open to single-issue and interest groups, which is also the case when referendums are not actually held. These single-issue and interest groups have some

advantages over regular political parties. These advantages put parties under pressure with increased competition (Ladner & Braendle 1999), and reduce their importance to citizens. In fact, the sheer involvement of these additional groups in the political arena could suggest that political parties need members *less* because they can get information of what people want through the positioning of these groups. Parties would thus be less likely to ask citizens to join, and might not offer further internal involvement structures to their members. In turn, this may alienate some party members, providing them with fewer incentives to become – or stay – a member.

Furthermore, the increased frequency of campaigns that comes with multiple referendums presents parties with extra work for which they may not always have enough capacity. Consequently, parties may find it increasingly difficult to compete successfully with other groups that have fewer responsibilities (Fatke 2014; Ladner & Braendle 1999). In addition, referendums are issue-based. While political parties can of course provide standpoints on individual issues, they generally provide a more overall and overarching ideological framework. This means that in competition with interest groups who have specialised expertise on specific issues, parties may not compete so well. Furthermore, in a direct democratic context, people do not need to commit to a package of policy positions that parties offer: they can pick and choose with each separate referendum. This means that parties can be seen as less successful and less relevant in the direct democratic context – again lowering the incentives for people to be a member.

Concerning the effects of institutions of direct democracy and their usage, it has been argued that they help to educate citizens. When given the opportunity to participate directly, citizens can increase their political efficacy as well as become 'better citizens' (Dyck 2009; Smith & Tolbert 2004). People thus become more involved, more knowledgeable and better informed through a direct democratic context. People may thus not need parties to either encourage or guide their participation behaviour. In fact, it has been shown that citizens may become less trusting towards their government due to (the use of) direct democracy (Bauer & Fatke 2014; Dyck 2009). Hence, voters may not need parties anymore and might even develop a negative attitude towards them, further reducing incentives to be a member of a party. Simply put, people may not benefit enough from being a party member.

These arguments suggest that political parties would suffer from a more direct democratic context. They would experience more competition and an increased strain on their capacity to mobilise voters; they may be bypassed through the explicit direct links between citizens and policy; and they would be made further redundant due to a more sophisticated citizenry. The existence of direct democracy would thus reduce the incentives people may have to be a part of a political party. From this perspective, parties in a direct democratic context would suffer from lower membership. This 'alternative expectation' (Fatke 2014) would be further reinforced through higher levels of usage of direct democratic mechanisms, since, as mentioned above, the direct democratic context is increasingly emphasised: effects would be stronger when these mechanisms are more frequently used.

In sum, I pose two rivalling propositions concerning the effect of a direct democratic context on party membership, each additionally specified according to the conditional effect of the usage of direct democracy:

Proposition 1a: The more mechanisms of direct democracy a political system has, the higher the level of party membership.

Proposition 1b: The positive effect of the direct democratic context on levels of party membership is likely to be reinforced (stronger) in contexts where the use of direct democracy is more frequent.

Proposition 2a: The more mechanisms of direct democracy a political system has, the lower the level of party membership.

Proposition 2b: The negative effect of the direct democratic context on levels of party membership is likely to be reinforced (stronger) in contexts where the use of direct democracy is more frequent.

In his examination of the effect of direct democratic institutions on congruence between policies and people's preferences, Hug (2004) argues that the effect is conditional upon *who* can call for the referendums – the political elite and/or the opposition (including citizens). While this argument is not included here, I make the empirical distinction between 'top-down' (including the possible call by the government, parliament and/or the constitution) and 'bottom-up' (allowing for citizen initiatives) institutions in order to see whether there is also a differential effect on membership before examining the more general measure of direct democratic institutions.

Research approach

In order to find whether institutions of direct democracy have an impact on levels of party membership, I analyse a newly constructed dataset that combines data from various sources. The data on the level of party membership (the dependent variable in my study) is based on Van Biezen et al. (2012). The aggregate data they provide is based on the membership numbers that individual political parties reported, in percentages of the electorate. While this self-reporting may also entail a number of problems, it nonetheless gives a relatively good indication of the membership levels within these countries (see, for a discussion on the validity of the indicator, Mair & Van Biezen 2001; Van Biezen et al. 2012). Van Biezen et al. show that this indicator is relatively highly correlated with a survey-based measure of individual membership; their data shows that, in general, membership levels may be somewhat under-estimated by party-reported membership and/or somewhat over-estimated by individual-reported membership.

Data is available for 16 West-European countries, for four moments in time. Table 1 illustrates the variation between and within countries, ranging between 1.20 per cent in Spain in 1980 and 28.48 per cent in Austria in 1980. It also shows that Spain and Greece are the only two countries that experienced an overall increase in membership between 1980 and 2008. This data results in a database of 64 country-year cases with a cross-sectional time-series structure. It needs to be emphasised that although the timespan is relatively long (i.e., 1980–2008), the time structure of the data is limited to just four measurement points in time. The countries included are: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Table 1. Party membership, 1980–2008 (%)

	1980	1989	1999	2008	Net change
Austria	28.48	23.71	17.66	17.27	–11.21
Belgium	8.97	9.15	6.55	5.52	–3.45
Denmark	7.30	5.88	5.14	4.13	–3.17
Finland	15.74	13.52	9.65	8.08	–7.66
France	5.05	2.98	1.57	1.85	–3.20
Germany	4.52	3.89	2.93	2.30	–2.22
Greece	3.19	6.33	6.77	6.59	3.40
Ireland	5.00	4.86	3.14	2.03	–2.97
Italy	9.66	9.10	4.05	5.57	–4.09
Netherlands	4.29	3.19	2.51	2.48	–1.81
Norway	15.35	13.13	7.31	5.04	–10.31
Portugal	4.87	5.08	4.43	3.82	–1.05
Spain	1.20	2.07	3.42	4.36	3.16
Sweden	8.41	8.00	5.54	3.87	–4.54
Switzerland	10.66	7.98	6.38	4.76	–5.90
United Kingdom	4.12	2.63	1.92	1.21	–2.91

Notes: Figures indicate party members as a percentage of the electorate.
Source: Van Biezen et al. (2012).

Independent variables

The main independent variables relate to the institutions and use of referendums. While my main aim is to test what effect direct democracy generally has on membership, it is also important to make a distinction between two types of institutions of direct democracy to check whether they indeed have similar effects (see Altman 2011; Hug 2004). This distinction is based on who is responsible for calling the referendum. On the one hand, *top-down* institutions of direct democracy leave the decision to include the voters to the political elite or constitution, and the topic is set by the elite. On the other hand, *bottom-up* institutions of direct democracy leave much of the decision making to civil society, where citizens or societal groups can place new issues on the political agenda and sometimes also trigger a vote on that topic.

I initially use two indicators for the institutional structure of direct democracy. The first relates to top-down referendums: the institutional arrangement that the constitution, legislature, government and/or head of state can call for a popular vote. The five-point index for this top-down direct democracy indicator ranges from 0 to 1.5, where 0 implies that there are no top-down structures and 1.5 means that there are provisions for both constitutional and binding legislative referendums. The second indicator for institutions of direct democracy involves existing provisions that allow citizens and civil society to call for a referendum, or to place an issue on the political agenda. The idea here is that citizens themselves can organise the collection of signatures in order to either force a referendum to be held, or to force the legislature or government to address an issue they put forward. The

indicator for the bottom-up direct democracy variable is a three-point index, also ranging between 0 and 1.5, where 0 implies that there are no provisions for either an agenda or citizen initiative and 1.5 means that there are provisions for both.

The general measure of direct democratic institutions is simply a combination of the latter two measures; it is an eight-point index ranging from 0 (no institutions) to 1.5 (constitutional, legislative and popular referendum institutions).

Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between the institutional opportunities for direct democracy and its actual use. The third indicator of direct democracy is thus the frequency of referendums. Based on data provided by the Centre for Research on Direct Democracy, I counted the number of referendums held for each decade preceding the measurement of membership (including that measurement year). Since this is a count variable, I included the logged version of this variable. The Appendix at the end of this article details the coding and data sources, and provides a description of the data, while Table A in the Online Appendix provides further information on direct democratic context and usage in each country.

Controls

Although my interest is specifically in understanding the relationship between direct democracy and party membership, I also include a number of alternative explanations which are briefly outlined here. The results of these are not discussed, but are available in Tables B and C of the Online Appendix. A more detailed description of the data and the various measures is provided in the regular Appendix at the end of the article. First, the *structure of the political system* is included as institutions can determine some of the conditions for people's behaviour, outlining possibilities and limitations (see, e.g., Hall & Taylor 1996; Immergut 1998; Peters 1999). In order to indicate such differences in political systems, I include the executive system and the legislative system in the analyses in order to account for some of the more structural country variation.

Another aspect to consider is *societal fractionalisation*. The notion that parties are especially important in mobilising people along certain political cleavages suggests that when there is some form of societal heterogeneity or conflict, people might feel they have a reason for being involved (Lipset & Rokkan 1967). I therefore include a variable indicating religious and ethnic fractionalisation as the probability that two randomly selected people will belong to a different religious/ethnic group (Alesina et al. 2003).

Third, *economic resources* may be important to account for levels of membership, as previous studies have also shown (e.g., Inglehart & Catterberg 2002). I therefore include power purchasing parity (PPP) per capita in 1000s US dollars.

Furthermore, the size of the country may play a role in the likelihood that people are members or not, partly due to the idea that it has an effect on the likelihood of people taking part in collective action (Weldon 2006). I thus include the size of the population (in millions).

Finally, the *effective number of parties* (Laakso & Taagepera 1979) is included as a control. A higher number of such parties would indicate political fractionalisation, suggesting a higher level of competition in elections that could promote party membership.

Analysis

The data on the dependent variable is available for 16 countries and four moments in time. Further, the aim of this study is to partly explain variation in membership over time and across countries since the effects of direct democracy are thought to hold over both levels. This aim and type of data requires a pooled time-series strategy. As a first step, I analysed the data using regular regression analyses (ordinary least squares, OLS) and tested to what extent its assumptions hold.[3] To deal with panel heteroskedasticity in the models, regression analysis with panel corrected standard errors (Beck & Katz 1995) are used to analyse the data. Furthermore, the tests showed that the effects of the institutions of direct democracy can be better modelled as a quadratic effect, and therefore I include an additional squared term for the institutional variable. Moreover, in order to specify the initial results and to track where the effects of the independent variables come from – over time or across countries – I include two additional models that control for time and countries, respectively. In line with much research concerning the effects of institutions (e.g., Brooks & Manza 2006), all independent variables are lagged with one year since it can be expected that it takes some time before changes translate into a hypothetical change in levels of party membership.

As further robustness checks, the Online Appendix also gives the results for regular *linear* models (Table D), of which the results point in the same direction as the ones discussed here. The effects of the separate institutions are also reported and illustrated in the Online Appendix, in Table E and Figure A. While these interesting results do not take account of the existence of any of the other direct institutions, suggesting that the models may be underspecified, they do illustrate that the separate institutions are in line with the general findings in this study. Finally, all main models have additionally been run excluding Switzerland – although this country did not appear as an outlier within the model, it does present a relatively exceptional case within Europe in terms of direct democracy. The results are not shown, but are identical to the ones presented here in terms of direction and significance levels.

Results

Table 2 reflects the results of the analysis testing the effect of direct democracy on party membership. Model 1 shows that there is a relationship between direct democracy and party membership, and that – in terms of the effect of the institutions of direct democracy – they support *Proposition 1a*. Both the institutions of top-down and bottom-up direct democracy appear to have a significant and overall positive effect on levels of party membership, suggesting that membership is higher in systems where such institutions are present. Since the results in Table 2 are somewhat difficult to interpret due to the quadratic effect of the institutions on membership, Figures 1–3 illustrate the effects more precisely. Figure 1 shows that the effect of top-down institutions on membership is initially strong and positive, gradually becoming weaker towards the maximum value of 1.5 on the scale for top-down institutions. Overall, membership increases from about 4.5 per cent in places where there are no top-down institutions to almost 7 per cent in places where there is only a binding legislative referendum (a score of 0.5), and to just under 8 per cent in countries where both legislative and constitutional referendums are institutionalised (a score of 1.5).

Table 2. Levels of party membership and direct democracy in Western Europe

	Model 1
Top-down direct democracy	5.935** (2.626)
Top-down direct democracy²	–2.506* (1.448)
Bottom-up direct democracy	–7.894 (5.686)
Bottom-up direct democracy²	11.782** (5.897)
Log N referendums (by decade)	–4.309** (1.751)
Constant	11.389*** (1.458)
Controls	Yes
R^2	0.455
N countries	16
N	64

Notes: Panel corrected standard errors are reported in parentheses. All independent variables are lagged with one year; the full results are available in the Online Appendix. *p value ≤ 0.10; **p value ≤ 0.05; ***p value ≤ 0.01, two-tailed.

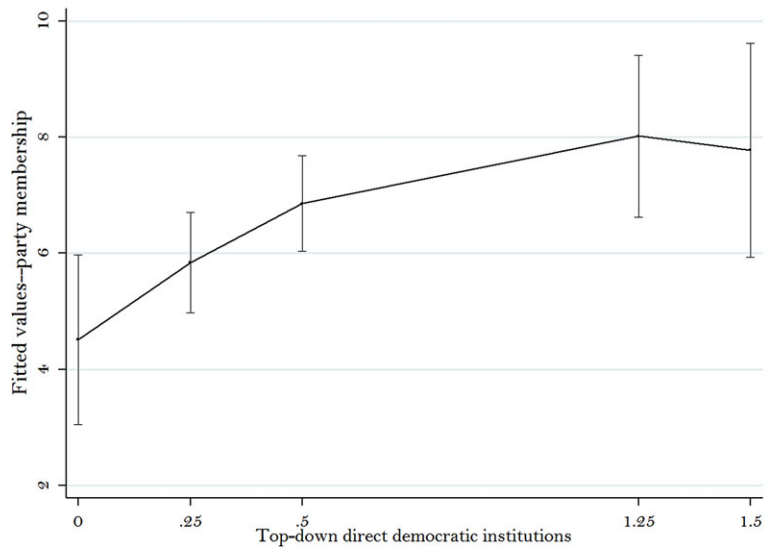

Figure 1. Top-down direct democracy institutions and varying levels of party membership (model 1). Note: Predictive margins with 90 per cent confidence intervals.

Figure 2 illustrates that in terms of initiatives, it is specifically the popular initiative (a score of 1.5) that is important for party membership. Here, membership is about an estimated 18 per cent in places where there are possibilities for a citizen initiative, compared to about 5 per cent in places where no initiatives are possible. Agenda initiatives (a score of 0.75) only marginally contribute to a higher level of membership. Furthermore, Figure 3 summarises these effects by plotting the changing B-coefficients of the two indicators in a marginal effects graph. It shows that indeed the effect of top-down institutions on membership is positive and significant, and that this effect reduces in size until it is insignificant towards

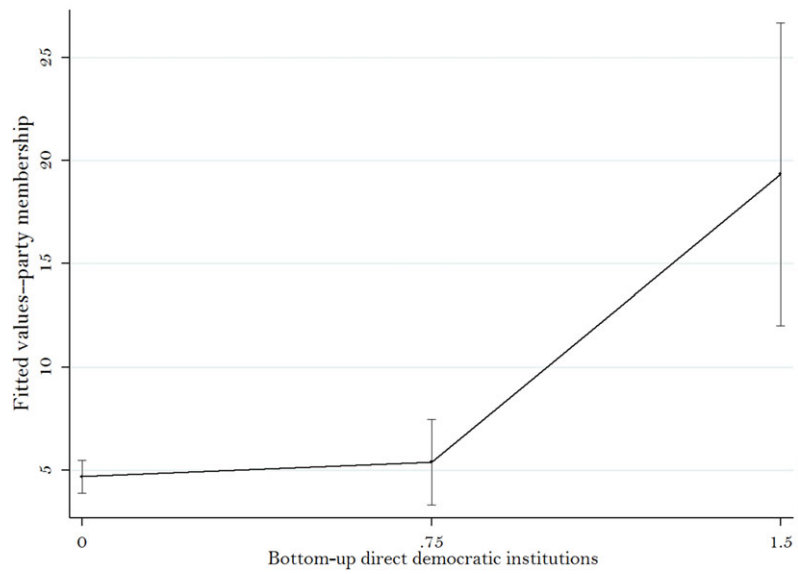

Figure 2. Bottom-up direct democracy institutions and varying levels of party membership (model 1).
Note: Predictive margins with 90 per cent confidence intervals.

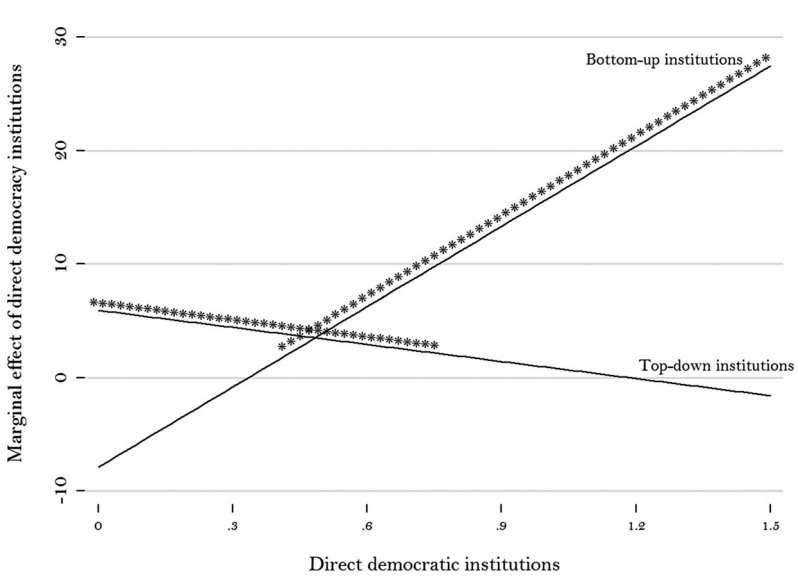

Figure 3. The marginal effects of bottom-up and top-down institutions (model 1).
Note: Asterisks indicate p-value < 0.10.

the end of the index. It also illustrates clearly the crucial effect of the popular initiative on membership: the effect is positive and significant in places where only an agenda initiative exists, and this effect increases substantially for countries with a popular initiative. These

results thus support *Proposition 1a*, and challenge the proposition pertaining to the negative effect of direct democracy.

However, the results in Table 2 also show the significant negative effect of the number of referendums on party membership: the more frequently referendums are held, the lower the membership level. This finding is not in line with *Proposition 1a*, and indicates that the use of referendums has a contradictory effect from that of the institutions, rather aligning with *Proposition 2a*. This contradictory effect echoes to some extent the findings by Bauer and Fatke (2014), who showed that the institutions of direct democracy foster higher political trust, while the actual usage depresses trust. While the institutions open up the political arena for people through parties due to the anticipation of holding a referendum, the actual usage seems to defy the increased role of parties. Referendums focus on specific issues, suggesting that people do not need to align with one political party in order to have an effect on the policies (while the institutions only emphasise parties as the main vehicle for influence). Moreover, Bauer and Fatke argue that the fact that a referendum *needs to be held* indicates a 'problem' with how government is run, leading to reduced levels of trust. The use of referendums alone seems to lower the incentives for people to be members, whereas the institutions increase them.

The second part of the contrasting propositions involves the expectation that the effects of the general direct democratic context are enhanced with a more frequent use of the mechanisms. Table 3 shows the effects of the general direct democracy context and its interaction with the usage of referendums. Moreover, it includes two models which help to isolate the effects that stem from between-country differences and within-country changes. Model 2 in Table 3 shows the separate effects of the direct democratic context and the number of referendums on party membership. The overall pattern illustrated above does not change much with the inclusion of the combined institutional indicator for direct democracy, although it seems to suggest a clearer pattern for the institutions of direct democracy.

Model 3 in Table 3 also includes the interaction terms between the direct democratic context and the usage of referendums. While this allows testing of the conditioning effect of usage (i.e., whether a more frequent use of referendums enhances the effect of the direct democratic institutions), the implications of the effects are not immediately clear from the table. Figures 4 and 5 therefore illustrate this further. Figure 4 shows the estimated membership level according to the degree of direct democracy institutionalisation, split-up to two different referendum frequencies. When the logged number of referendums is 0 (also implying 0 referendums),[4] membership initially decreases somewhat before it increases towards a substantially higher level of membership in a full direct democratic context. This pattern is similar but seems more pronounced (i.e., the effects are bigger) when the logged number of referendums equals three (about 20 actual referendums). It also shows that, on the basis of the often overlapping 90 per cent confidence intervals, there is little real difference in the level of membership between countries that have relatively little direct democracy institutionalised (0–0.375, *ceteris paribus*). However, the difference in membership levels in contexts with more institutionalised direct democracy is significantly different: contexts with direct institutions but no referendums have higher membership levels than contexts where referendums are held frequently.

Figure 5 further reflects the B-values and their significance, and shows that the pattern of the effect of direct institutions is very similar when no referendums are held, or when

Table 3. Party membership, direct democracy institutions and usage

	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Direct democracy context	–26.901*** (6.810)	–33.272*** (5.794)	–32.410*** (4.959)	–41.508*** (13.598)
Direct democracy context²	29.822*** (7.332)	37.697*** (6.503)	36.907*** (5.435)	145.642*** (41.957)
Log N referendums (by decade)	–4.568*** (1.275)	1.073 (2.262)	0.887 (2.284)	–2.549* (1.434)
DD context*DD use		–9.512 (6.487)	–8.763 (5.353)	5.907 (5.955)
DD context²*DD use		2.991 (3.219)	2.585 (2.604)	–3.479 (5.150)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year dummies (ref. 1980)	–	–	Yes	–
Country dummies (ref. Austria)	–	–	–	Yes
Constant	20.420*** (2.371)	19.663*** (1.981)	19.219*** (1.806)	–75.653*** (28.316)
R^2	0.563	0.595	0.601	0.944
N countries	16	16	16	16
N	64	64	64	64

Notes: Panel corrected standard errors are reported in parentheses. All independent variables are lagged with one year; the full results are available in the Online Appendix. *p value ≤ 0.10; **p value ≤ 0.05; ***p value ≤ 0.01, two-tailed.

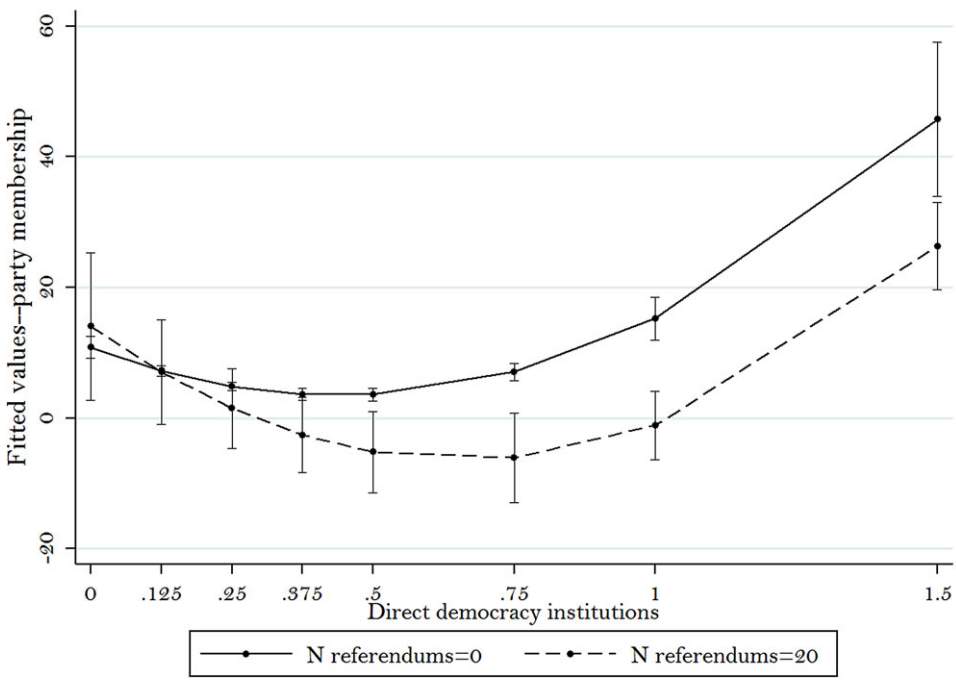

Figure 4. Membership and the interaction between direct democratic institutions and usage.
Note: Predictive margins with 90 per cent confidence intervals.

20 referendums are held. Figure B in the Online Appendix, which graphs the more precise confidence intervals, further suggests that the quadratic effect of direct institutions indeed does not differ significantly either. The effect is stronger for when 20 referendums have been held than when there have been none, but this is *only* the case when there is little direct democracy institutionalisation and when the effect is negative. When direct democracy is institutionalised more thoroughly, the effect is stronger in contexts when no referendums have been held (though with an even smaller difference). Figure C in the Online Appendix shows the same effect plotted with the number of referendums on the x-axis. The rather stable horizontal lines in this figure additionally underpin that the number of referendums hardly influences the overall pattern of the effect of direct democracy institutions. These findings thus provide some, but not enough support for *Propositions 1b* or *2b*, suggesting that the usage of referendums does not either *substantially* or statistically significantly influence the effect of direct democracy institutions on membership.[5]

Finally, the argument concerning the effects of direct democracy on party membership is argued to hold over time and across countries. This has indeed been largely the reason for the choice of statistical models. It is, however, interesting to see to what extent variables get their explanatory power from the different levels (i.e., countries and/or time). For this reason, I also included two models that allow me to test this. Model 4 in Table 3 keeps the time component in effect stable by including year-dummies, while model 5 includes country dummies so as to keep the country component stable. Model 4 thus focuses on explaining the variation in party membership across countries. It shows that the direct democratic

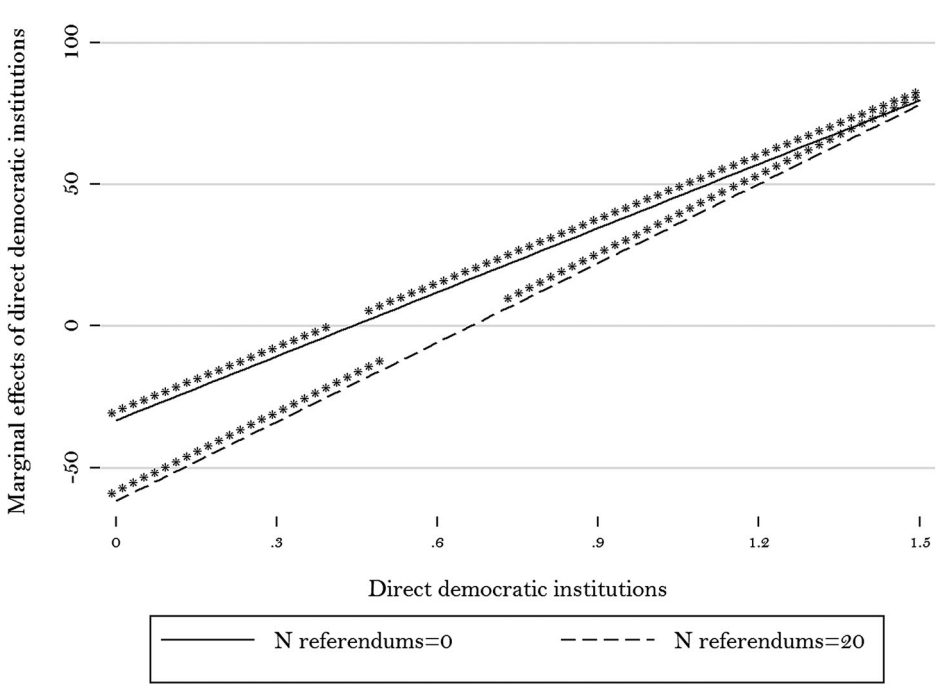

Figure 5. Marginal effects of direct democratic institutions on membership levels.
Note: Asterisks indicate p-value < 0.10.

context has very similar effects to those in models 2 and 3, and that the interaction with usage is largely similar yet slightly weaker. Model 5 further shows that the effect of the direct democratic context also remains overall positive and significant when the variance *within* countries is examined, although it needs to be noted that this effect is due to just a few changes over time.[6] The interaction term with the usage of referendums is again weaker, resulting in a smaller difference in the effect of the direct democratic institutions on membership according to the number of referendums.

Conclusion

Party membership is an important indicator for the strength and the role of political parties in representative democracy. However, while the traditional role of the party is placed in representation, their role in a more direct democratic context is somewhat less studied. It has been argued that parties might actually benefit from direct democratic mechanisms. These mechanisms may offer parties structures in which they are encouraged to connect citizens better to the state, including their ideas and preferences into policies. People would have more to gain, and have more incentives to become a member of a party as a direct democratic context opens the possibility and perhaps even need for parties to consult their members. On the other hand, parties may simply become redundant in a context where citizens can

be directly involved in policy making, and where they can choose their allegiance in each referendum since these are specifically issue-based.

In the analyses of West European countries, I tested these rivalling hypotheses. Both top-down and bottom-up institutions of direct democracy appear to be beneficial for parties: in more direct democratic contexts, party membership was also more likely to be higher. The effects of the usage of the direct democratic mechanisms, however, are negative. Thus, the different elements of direct democracy, the institutions and their use support different elements in the rivalling hypotheses. These findings align, to some extent, with those of Bauer and Fatke (2014), who argued that a direct democratic context boosts levels of political trust, while the need for its usage gives people the idea that something is not working as it should and therefore have lower political trust when referendums are more frequent.

One possible mechanism for this may be closer congruence between the members and their party. Acting in a more direct democratic context, (governing) parties would want to avoid an actual referendum due to its costs and uncertain outcome. They will be able to get more information about people's preferences through their own members, as well as through the standpoints of other parties. Party members are thus more important, which also gives people more incentives to become a member as they have a bigger say and more influence. On the other hand, the actual usage of referendums opens other possibilities, and changes this incentive structure. In a referendum citizens – members or non-members – make the final decision and do not need to depend on parties for their influence; apart from political parties, there are other organisations that can guide them towards a decision if needed. Referendums are issue-based, and with that, people do not need to commit to an ideological 'package' of standpoints that comes with parties. Further, by holding a referendum, members actually lose some of the control over the party as parties now also need to take into account the rest of the electorate in order to be successful. Moreover, as Bauer and Fatke (2014) argue, the use of referendums can be seen as a sign that (governing) parties have already failed at an earlier stage, causing people to lose trust in them. All in all, the usage of direct democracy itself gives people fewer incentives to become or stay a party member.

What needs to be noted, however, is that the effect of the institutions is not fully challenged by the usage of referendums. So, while referendums have a negative effect on levels of membership, they do not alter the positive effect of the institutions of direct democracy. In all, it seems that it is specifically the direct democratic structure that may benefit parties in terms of members, but whether there are many or few referendums within such a structure only changes the effect in terms of magnitude.

While these findings and conclusions are interesting and give more insight into the interaction between representative and direct elements of democracy, further research could provide a more detailed overview of party behaviour in a direct democratic context. It would, for example, be fruitful, especially for the causality arguments made here, to analyse party manifestos and the conduct in referendums more closely to find out how deliberate parties aim to fulfil their role to connect citizens to the state. One study that looked more closely at the processes of different referendums found that parties were crucial in the mobilisation of people and provision of information (Sinnott 2002), though it is not completely clear to what extent parties actively realise this. Moreover, it would be interesting to see whether all parties are more or less similar in their approach concerning direct democratic mechanisms, or whether there are specific types of parties, or party families, that make more or less use

of the opportunities the direct democratic context provides. It is, for example, interesting to see whether new parties rely more heavily on their members, or whether they have rather different party structures and aims, and therefore do not allow for the possibility to become a member at all (such as the PVV in the Netherlands). While much work is still needed, this study has contributed to the study of the role of the party in a direct democratic context and in examining the relationship between representative and direct democracy more generally.

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Appendix: Data and variable operationalisation

Variable	Description	Source	Descriptive statistics: Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Party membership	Percentage of the electorate that is a member of a political party	Van Biezen et al. (2012)	6.66	5.23	1.20	28.50
Top-down direct democracy provisions	Five-point index composed of 'constitutional referendum' (0 = institution; 2 = institution exists) and 'legislative referendum' (0 = no institution; 0.5 = institution exists, but referendum is not binding; 1 = institution exists and is binding)	International IDEA (2008) & www.C2D.ch, cross-checked with Scarrow (2001, 2003) and Setälä (1999)	0.72	0.57	0.00	1.50
Bottom-up direct democracy provisions	Three-point index composed of 'citizen initiative' (0 = no institution; 3 = institution exists (1.5 = when it exists but is limited, e.g., to existing laws only)) and 'agenda initiative' (0 = no institution; 1.5 = institution exists)		0.33	0.53	0.00	1.50
Direct democracy context	Eight-point index composed of the variables *Top-down direct democracy* provisions and *Bottom-up direct democracy* provisions		0.52	0.44	0.00	1.50
Frequency of referendums, general	The number of referendums over the decade preceding the measurement of membership, including that year	www.C2D.ch	6.75	19.70	0.00	93

(Continued)

Appendix: Continued

Variable	Description	Source	Descriptive statistics			
			Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Executive system: (semi-)presidential versus parliamentary	Dummy variable, where 0 = presidential or semi-presidential, 1 = parliamentary	World Bank political institutions database and Elgie's semi-presidentialism website: http://www.semi presidentialism.com/?cca=61	0.67	0.47	0.00	1.00
Legislative system: unicameral versus bicameral structure	Dummy variable, where 0 = unicameral, 1 = bicameral	Lijphart (1999), Hooghe et al. (2010) and IDEA (www.idea.int/uid/fieldview.cfm?field=162&region=50)	0.63	0.49	0.00	1.00
Societal conflict	Index composed of ethnic and religious fractionalisation that reflects the probability that two randomly selected people from a given country will not belong to the same ethnic/religious group – the higher the number, the more fractionalised society	Alesina et al. (2003)	0.27	0.14	0.10	0.57
Purchasing power parity (PPP) per capita	PPP, in gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, in 1,000s US dollars	International Monetary Fund economic outlook in the world	21.32	9.10	5.28	52.79
Population	The size of the population in millions	Eurostat	23.38	23.99	3.41	82.11
Effective number of parties	The effective number of parties on the votes level, according to Laakso & Taagepera (1979)	Comparative political dataset, CPDS I, 1960–011 (www.ipw.unibe.ch/content/teat/klaus_armingeon/comparative_politipol_data_sets/index_ger.html)	3.90	1.53	2.09	9.07

Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web-site:

Online Supplement
Table A: Direct democracy in Europe—description of the data
Table B: Levels of party membership and direct democracy in West-Europe—*all results related to Table 2 in the manuscript*
Table C: Party membership, direct democracy institutions and usage—*all results related to Table 3 in the manuscript*
Table D: Models 1–5 with direct democracy modelled linearly—*replicating Tables 2 and 3 in the manuscript*
Table E: Individual direct democratic institutions and levels of party membership
Figure A: Individual direct democratic institutions and varying levels of party membership—*based on models* α *to* δ *in Table E above*
Figure B: Marginal effects of direct democratic institutions on membership levels, including confidence intervals—*based on model 3 in Table 3*
Figure C: Marginal effects of direct democratic institutions on membership levels, with the number of referendums on the X-axis—*based on model 3 in Table 3*

Notes

1. 'Strength', here, indicates the strength of the bridge that parties form between civil society and the state. It is mostly this functional bridging that is referred to when parties are said to be in decline. It is also the function that combines governing with popular representation, and is thus specifically relevant to representative democracy. See, especially, Mair (2009, 2013).
2. A referendum is not simply the outcome of a popular vote; the process, debates and campaign before the vote are especially important in a direct democratic context. However, the final vote in many cases is a 'yes' or 'no', which can underline a more polarising 'winner'/'loser' rhetoric. This characteristic may therefore make the referendum more relevant to people, even though this may only be one element in the election.
3. There were no signs of outliers which influenced the results substantially (no outliers with too high leverage), and no signs of serial correlation or unit roots.
4. The number of referendums ranges between 0 and 93 – to create the logged variable 1 is added to the actual number, so that $log(N\ referendums) = 0$ when $N\ referendums = 0$.
5. Note that when the direct democratic context is modelled in a linear fashion, the usage of referendums clearly enhances its effects. Results of the linear models can be found in the Online Appendix.
6. Finland installed provisions for a non-binding legislative referendum in 1987. The Netherlands also institutionalised a non-binding legislative referendum in 2002, but reversed this change in 2006. Also in 2006, the Netherlands introduced the agenda initiative. This amounts to four changes over time in direct democracy, overall.

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