**Joining the Party: Incentives and Motivations of Members and Registered Sympathisers in Contemporary Multi-speed Membership Parties**

*This is the accepted version of an article published in Party Politics. For referencing purposes, please use the published version.*

Raul Gomez, University of Liverpool, UK

Luis Ramiro, UNED, Spain

Laura Morales, Sciences Po, CEE, CNRS, France

Jaime Aja, University of Cordoba, Spain

**Abstract**

Many parties have updated their recruitment strategies and offer softer routes for joining their ranks. In some parties, registered sympathisers are given virtually the same rights as traditional members with substantially lower costs. This begs the question, why would somebody take the further step of joining such parties as full members rather than sympathisers? This article analyses this question by using membership surveys from three left-wing Spanish parties. As such, it explores the usefulness of the General Incentives Model (GIM) for explaining the decisions of these two groups of affiliates. We find that full members and sympathisers differ in the motives they have for joining the party and in their evaluations of the diverse types of incentives included in the GIM. Candidate selection incentives seem particularly important for sympathisers, whereas selective outcome incentives, selective process benefits, collective outcome benefits and altruistic motivations play a more significant role for members.

**Keywords**

Party Membership; Party Sympathisers; Political Parties; Joining Parties; General Incentives Model

**Introduction**

Why and how do citizens join political parties? And what drives their degree of engagement and participation in party activities? The development of new forms of party affiliation in the past few decades has added complexity to these questions. Parties have reacted to their membership crisis by implementing a broad array of innovations. They have increased the political benefits of membership, modified the internal distribution of power in favor of – at least nominally – individual members (Scarrow 2000; Scarrow *et al.* 2000; Gauja 2013; Cross and Pilet 2015; Faucher 2015; Sandri *et al.* 2015; Scarrow 2015), and they have lowered the procedural and financial costs of membership (van Haute and Gauja 2015). Parties have redefined the very notion of member while simultaneously creating new forms of affiliation through registered party friends, supporters or sympathisers (Faucher 2015; Gauja 2015; Scarrow 2015). Multi-speed membership parties not only offer individuals a long menu of options to join the party, but also concede more power to their adherents and grant them a say in key party decisions (Scarrow 2015). By modifying the costs, benefits and incentives of party membership, they seek to recruit different profiles of members, including individuals who are uninterested in becoming conventional party members but might be attracted by more flexible, cost-free modes of recruitment in which they also enjoy the capacity to influence the party’s decisions (Kosiara-Pedersen *et al.* 2017; Achury *et al.* 2018). But these changes also mean that full members no longer possess the monopoly of membership rights. This raises the question, what leads individuals to join parties as members rather than sympathisers in multi-speed membership organisations?

In this article, we approach the interaction between demand-side party-level factors (parties offering different types of affiliation), and supply-side individual-level motives and perceptions of parties’ incentives in order to analyse how these affect membership recruitment. The article builds upon Poletti *et al*.’s (2018) ground-breaking work, but instead of only focusing on *why* individuals choose between supporting a party from the outside or becoming a member, we pay close attention to the motives and incentives that explain *how* individuals join parties that offer them more than one way of doing so. Therefore, our main research questions are: Why do some individuals decide to join parties as full members while others prefer other forms of affiliation, such as becoming party sympathisers? What are the motives behind this decision? What role do the incentives offered by parties play in this? And, are these incentives equally important for all modes of recruitment?

To answer these questions, we apply Seyd and Whiteley’s (1992) General Incentives Model to analyse original data from a survey of traditional members and registered party sympathisers of three multi-speed membership organisations which are part of the left-wing *Unidas Podemos* (‘United We Can’) parliamentary group in the Spanish lower chamber of parliament (*Congreso de los Diputados*): *Izquierda Unida* (IU, United Left), *Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds* (ICV, Initiative for Catalonia- Greens), and the green party *Equo*. We use the General Incentives Model because it contains a wider set of incentives than previous approaches, and has been tested in many different contexts and parties.

In the next pages we first sketch the hypotheses and expectations based on previous research on why people join parties. Then we briefly summarize key features of the parties analysed and explain our data collection strategy. After that, we present our findings and comment on the main results. Our research finds that members and registered sympathisers differ in the relevance given to key motives and incentives, with Seyd and Whiteley’s (1992) framework helping to illuminate and partially explain this divergence. Members and sympathisers differ regarding the role played by selective outcome incentives, selective process benefits, candidate selection incentives, collective outcome benefits, and altruistic motivations. Our findings contribute to the wider literature by allowing us to understand citizens’ choices of membership modes.

**Understanding why and how citizens join parties**

Party membership only attracts a small and shrinking number of individuals, as reflected by the mounting evidence showing the decline of party membership in the past few decades (Scarrow 2000; van Biezen *et al.* 2012; van Haute and Gauja 2015; Webb and Keith 2017). However, individuals still join political parties albeit in smaller numbers than in the past (van Haute and Gauja 2015). Understanding party membership entails confronting theoretical and empirical puzzles that have attracted scholars since long. Besides individual-level characteristics such as socio-economic resources (e.g. age, education, income…), which have long been shown to have an impact on the probability to join political organisations (Verba *et al.* 1995), the study of party membership entails looking at the incentives provided by the parties themselves. As Olson (1965) argues, parties mainly offer collective benefits and, therefore, suffer from collective action problems. Olson (1965) acknowledges that parties may also offer selective incentives in the form of ‘individual, non-collective goods’. However, even assuming that some individuals might join parties because of the economic incentives they offer, the truth is that benefits such as jobs, professional advancement and prestige are limited to a small amount of people and very specific parties (governing and larger parties). It is therefore possible that these incentives play only a minor role in many parties. For Olson (1965: 60), the main motives for membership for most individuals are ‘respect, friendship, and other psychological objectives’. However, these psychological and non-economic incentives play a very minor role in his model. Therefore, except for the correct expectation that party membership must be a rare occurrence, Olson’s model is unlikely to perform well in explaining why people join organizations in which economic selective incentives are uncharacteristic (McCulloch 1990: 501). Eventually, some expressive, moral or altruistic motive is required to explain party membership.

As McCulloch (1990) stresses, these alternative motives were precisely a key element in Barry’s (1970) re-examination of Olson’s (1965) collective action ‘paradox’. First, in the absence of economic individual benefits, joining a party might still be rational if the cost of joining is low. Moreover, the very notion of individuals considering any sort of cost-benefit evaluation might be out of place in situations where costs are negligible (Barry 1970). As Rothenberg (1992) shows, the small costs of joining mean alternative, experiential approaches to membership are needed. Second, Barry incorporates ideology (and the individuals’ feeling that ideological principles may at times be more important than mere self-interest) as one of those expressive and altruistic motives that are essential for understanding individuals’ decisions. ‘Normative’ incentives, ideologies, values and cultural norms, are key to explaining party membership.

The significant role of normative incentives is also one of the main findings of the influential research by Seyd and Whiteley (1992; Whiteley *et al.* 1994). Individuals certainly respond to incentives, and the costs and benefits of political action might be important; but understanding party membership requires taking into consideration a much wider set of incentives. Seyd and Whiteley, therefore, proposed the use of the General Incentives Model (GIM), a more complete model than its predecessors that has acquired the status of dominant explanatory model for participation and involvement in political parties (Poletti *et al.* 2018). The model includes three types of positive incentives: a) *selective incentives*, which can be of two types: process (benefits that participants obtain from political involvement in itself, such as learning about politics or meeting like-minded people) and outcome (private returns associated with developing a career in politics); b) *collective incentives*, which includes collective policy outcomes (the incentive consisting in achieving particular policy goals), and group efficacy (which derives from thinking that their party can make a difference); and c) *emotional/affective incentives*, which include altruism, social norms (benefits deriving from conforming to the expectations and behaviour of one’s closer network of social contacts), and normative or affective motivations such as partisan identification. It also takes into account negative incentives – namely, the cost of political involvement.

Whiteley *et al.* (1994) find that, alongside selective incentives, political and ideological motives play a considerable role in explaining the decision to join and participate in a party. In particular, collective incentives, altruism, and emotional attachments are relevant for explaining party membership, as are social norms, which operate through the influence of social networks and social or family acquaintances. The essential role of collective incentives and social norms has been supported by ensuing research (e.g. Young and Cross 2002; Gallagher and Marsh 2004; Pedersen *et al.* 2004; Heidar 2015). Recently, Poletti *et al.* (2018), who for the first time used multivariate analysis to study the differences between supporters and members of the main British parties, also concluded that collective and selective incentives, alongside expressive and altruistic factors and social norms, all contribute to explaining why people join parties. When they analyse the differences between party supporters (voters with a strong party identification) and members, they find the latter to have a higher level of group efficacy, stronger expressive ideals and greater altruistic concerns than the former. Supporters, on the other hand, place less importance on selective outcomes and process incentives, and are less influenced by social norms and more sensitive to the costs of party membership than members (Poletti *et al.* 2018).

While the literature tends to focus on party members – or in the case of Poletti *et al.* (2018) on the differences between members and non-members –, there is much less research on the differences between types of members in multi-speed membership parties. In general, registered party sympathisers tend to show lower levels of commitment and involvement than full members (Webb *et al.* 2017). This means that both registered party sympathisers and party identifiers represent weaker forms of involvement than classic party members (as already suggested in Duverger’s (1957) model of concentric circles of party supporters). From that point of view, the differences between sympathisers and full members might also be explained by the GIM model. However, we need to bear in mind that some multi-speed membership parties, including those that we analyse here, provide very similar – if not the same – rights to both sympathisers and full members at a lower cost for the former (Scarrow 2015). The new forms of affiliation are a less demanding type of participation and involve lower financial and procedural costs. Potential parties’ affiliates can now choose between different membership modes, and might take into consideration the benefits/costs balance of the different forms before deciding how to join (Kosiara-Pedersen et al. 2017: 234-5). Parties are expected to find additional difficulties in recruiting conventional members if they are offering simultaneously new, less costly and more accessible forms of affiliation that also enjoy most of the political benefits offered to conventional members, and some evidence shows that this is in fact the case (Kosiara-Pedersen *et al.* 2017: 251). Therefore, choosing one membership mode over another often comes down to accepting a heavier load of obligations in exchange for a marginal amount of (increased) benefits. The question, therefore, is why would somebody take the further step of joining a party as a full member?

Full membership can be a costly activity that is likely to attract individuals who value political participation in itself. Therefore, they are likely to be motivated by collective benefits, as well as normative and altruistic motivations, to a greater extent than those who join parties as registered sympathisers. They might perceive lower costs of membership than sympathisers, whose decision not to become a full member might be influenced by such perception (Bale *et al.* 2019). Full members might also place more emphasis on selective incentives, such as the benefits of belonging to a group of like-minded individuals (selective process benefit), and a desire to influence politics, perhaps even by developing a career in politics (selective outcome) - although the latter is likely to depend much on other factors such as the party’s size, whether they are in government and the context they operate in (i.e. whether there are opportunities for patronage).

While the above factors are similar to those that have been shown to explain the difference between party members and non-members, there is an additional selective incentive that is of particular relevance for multi-speed membership parties: participation in decision-making processes. In parties where decision-making processes, including candidate selection, are open to both full members and registered sympathisers, they may represent an important incentive for membership recruitment (Kosiara-Pedersen *et al.* 2017: 239), particularly among those who are not interested in the particularities of formal party activism. So, while full members may be motivated by the expressive and psychological rewards of membership as well as selective incentives, the possibility to influence parties’ key decisions through low-cost participation mechanisms is likely to play a fundamental role for sympathisers, to the extent that it may be the main reason why most of them choose to formally register.

To summarise, we expect the difference between full members and sympathisers to be similar to the ones found by previous research when analysing the difference between party supporters and members who are involved in high-intensity political participation (see, e.g., Seyd and Whiteley 2012; Webb *et al.* 2017; Poletti *et al.* 2018). However, in multi-speed membership parties, candidate selection incentives may play a critical role in explaining why people decide to join as sympathizers rather than members. Individuals who are close to the party but are not interested in high-intensity party activism may, however, decide to join as sympathizers in order to have a say in its main decisions. In contrast, candidate selection incentives are just one among the many other benefits sought by those who pursue a high-cost type of membership. Therefore, full members will be less likely than sympathisers to stress the importance of candidate selection incentives in their decision to become members. To put it succinctly:

*H1 – H3. Selective incentives:*

*The probability to be a member rather than a sympathiser will be higher among those who place greater emphasis on selective outcome benefits (H1) and selective process benefits (H2)*

*The probability to be a sympathiser rather than a member will be higher among individuals who place greater emphasis on the importance of candidate selection incentives (H3)*

*H4-H5: Collective incentives:*

 *The probability to be a member rather than a sympathiser will be higher among those who emphasise collective policy outcome benefits (H4), as well as those with greater levels of group efficacy (H5),*

*H6-H8: Emotional/affective incentives:*

*The probability to be a member rather than a sympathiser will be higher among those with greater altruistic motivations (H6), those who had more friends/family/acquaintances in the party before joining (social norms) (H7), and those with greater expressive or affective motivations (H8).*

*H9: Costs. The higher the perceived costs of membership, the higher the probability to be a sympathiser rather than a member*

If these hypotheses hold true, that will imply that, despite organizational innovation, affiliation to the different options offered by multi-speed membership parties is by a large affected by similar incentives to the ones found in more traditional membership schemes (as Poletti *et al.* 2018 show in their analysis of party members vs. party identifiers). The findings would therefore contribute to the existing evidence that shows that such innovations have only produced slight changes to the classic scheme of concentric circles of party supporters originally proposed by Duverger (1957) (see, e.g., Gomez and Ramiro 2017).

**Cases, Data, and Operationalization**

We use data from three online membership surveys conducted in 2018 among members and registered sympathisers of three left-wing Spanish parties: IU, ICV, and Equo. As in many other studies in this area, the need to use considerably complex survey questionnaires still constraints the availability of comparable cross-national data. Therefore, we focus on the analysis of three political parties that operate in a single country. While this may limit the external validity of our findings, it also enables us to compare organizations that operate under very similar contextual constraints.

The three parties under study are all multi-speed membership organizations. They are also left-wing parties (in Spain, multi-speed membership models are much less developed among right-wing parties). Even though these parties are formally separate entities, at present they do not compete electorally in general elections. On the contrary, they are part of a common electoral coalition called *Unidas Podemos* and form a joint parliamentary group with *Podemos* (another left-wing party) in the Spanish parliament. IU is a nation-wide radical-left organization originally created in 1986 as an electoral platform promoted by the Communist Party of Spain. It is a model case of the changes that have characterized the radical-left party family in the last decades, with a platform that combines classic Socialist and anti-capitalist orientations with New Politics policies (feminism, environmentalism, minority rights, etc.). ICV is a Catalan Ecosocialist Green party created in 1987 by the transformation of the Catalan Communist party, PSUC. ICV was organisationally linked to IU until 1997, when it became independent. Lastly, *Equo* is a nation-wide Green and progressive party created in 2011 as the successor of The Greens. IU belongs to the Party of the European Left, and ICV and Equo are members of the European Green Party. The three parties have been part of coalition governments at regional and, predominantly, local levels. They have at times provided parliamentary support for Social-democratic minority governments, but at the time of writing they had never been part of coalition governments at national level.

In organizational terms, IU and ICV have their historical roots in the mass party model (or, more precisely, in the aspiration to build a mass party - a hard to achieve goal in the Spanish context of comparatively low party membership). IU and ICV have implemented organizational innovations since the 1990s, whereas Equo, which was founded in 2011, was already born as a multi-speed membership party. IU was among the first Spanish parties to show an intention to apply grass-roots democratic principles in its internal procedures (for example, participatory mechanisms for manifesto drafting and party primaries for the selection of electoral candidates). Although their actual implementation was limited (Ramiro and Verge 2013), the accomplishment of multi-speed membership features was intensified later on. ICV and Equo have historically been more decisive in creating an innovative organization. Registered sympathisers have existed in both parties for long (in ICV since the end of the 1990s), and they both have also adopted different kinds of grass-roots democratic procedures. Currently, in all three parties registered sympathisers have the right to participate in primaries for the selection of election candidates as well as other party activities such as internal referendums, manifesto drafting and even party meetings. While those joining as full members are required to pay a fee in all three parties, registering as sympathiser is cost-free; registered IU, ICV and Equo sympathisers do not pay any fee unless they want to. In sum, these organizations are exemplary cases of established but small parties who, as some other parties also seem eager to do (Kosiara-Pedersen *et al.* 2017), have reduced the costs of membership and increased its political benefits while introducing alternative types of affiliation.

Evidence from Spanish parties that goes beyond party conference attendants is very rare due to the small number of party members present in general public surveys as well as parties’ reluctance to collaborate with academia (Ramiro and Morales 2014; Baras *et al.* 2015; Gomez and Ramiro 2017). This is, therefore, a very rare opportunity in which data for several parties was gathered using equivalent questionnaires and data collection methods. The research was only possible after a lengthy trust-building process between party officials and the academic researchers.[[1]](#footnote-2)

As regards data collection, a link to the online questionnaire was sent to all the members and sympathisers for which there was an available email address. The emails were sent by the parties themselves in order to comply with data protection regulations, and they also contained a covering letter signed by the party leadership. In total we have 4,843 responses from the three parties, 3,383 from full members and 1,460 from registered party sympathisers.[[2]](#footnote-3) Details of the fieldwork and response rates can be seen in Table 1 below. [[3]](#footnote-4)

Table 1. Fieldwork information

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Parties |
|  | IU | Equo | ICV |
| Members with an available email address  | 15,976 | 1,615 | 3,826 |
| Members’ response rate | 2,304 (14.4%) | 520 (33.2%) | 559 (14.6%) |
| Registered sympathizers with an available email address  | 7,489 | 2,179 | 1,821 |
| Registered sympathizers’ response rate | 1,043 (13.9%) | 307 (14.1%) | 110 (6%) |
| Fieldwork duration (days) | 31 | 45 | 45 |
| Number of reminders  | 2 | 2 | 2 |

*Operationalization*

We follow Poletti *et al.*’s (2018: 6-8) most recent application of the GIM, which includes seven incentives and motivations (perception of group efficacy, collective policy outcome benefits, selective outcome benefits, selective process benefits, altruistic motivations, social norms, and expressive or affective motivations). Most of these also appear in Weber’s (2018) recent study of young German party members. To operationalize these incentives and motivations, the question wording mostly follows Seyd and Whiteley (1992: Appendix II; and Whiteley *et al.* 1994: Appendix II) with some adaptations from Weber (2018) and Poletti *et al.* (2018). When more than one indicator measuring the same incentive was available (i.e. selective outcome benefits, selective process benefits, and collective policy outcome), we created a composite index using principal-component factor analysis.[[4]](#footnote-5)

*Selective outcome benefits* were measured through three Likert scales. The first one asked respondents to evaluate how important the desire to become a professional politician was in their decision to join the party (‘I wanted to work professionally in politics’) (Weber 2018: 5). The other two indicators measured the extent to what respondents agreed that ‘The party would be more successful if people like me had more influence in the organization’ (adapted from Seyd and Whiteley 1992: 245), and ‘A person like me could do a good job of being a local councillor’ (Seyd and Whiteley 1992: 244).

*Selective process benefits* are measured through a composite index built with three Likert scale questions. They follow wordings used to this aim in previous research and asked the respondents about the importance they gave at the time of joining the party to meeting like-minded individuals (‘I wanted to know people that thought as me’) (adapted from Weber 2018: 5; and Poletti *et al.* 2018: 7), and learning about politics (‘I wanted to learn more about politics’) (adapted from Seyd and Whiteley 1992: 244), and finally asked members to what extent they agreed that ‘Being a member is a good way to meet interesting people’ (Seyd and Whiteley 1992: 245).

C*ollective policy outcome* is also measured by a composite index combining two Likert scales that measure the perceived importance of the following two statements in joining the party: ‘I wanted to collaborate in achieving the political goals I supported’ (Weber 2018: 5) and ‘I wanted to support the party economically’.[[5]](#footnote-6)

In addition to these indicators, we include a measure of the importance of another incentive that may be particularly relevant to multi-level membership parties: *candidate selection.* This is measured through a question where respondents evaluate the perceived importance of selecting election candidates (‘I wanted to influence the selection of party’s election candidates’).

G*roup efficacy* is captured by a variable measuring the respondent’s degree of agreement with the statement that ‘When members stand together and work together they can change the country’ (Seyd and Whiteley 1992: 243).

*Altruistic motivation* is operationalized through a Likert scale that asked about the importance given to political involvement when respondents joined the party (‘I wanted to be politically involved’) (adapted from Weber 2018: 5; and Poletti *et al.* 2018: 6).

The influence of *social norms* and networks is measured through a variable accounting for whether someone in the respondent’s family, friends or acquaintances was already enrolled in the party when they joined (Seyd and Whiteley 1992: 65).[[6]](#footnote-7)

*Expressive or affective motivations* are measured by asking respondents about the intensity of their party identification (using a four-points ordinal variable where 1 is not identified with the party, 2 somewhat identified, 3 quite identified, and 4 very much identified) (Poletti *et al.* 2018).

The relevance of *costs* is measured through a Likert scale capturing agreement with the statement: ‘Attending party meetings after working all day may be too tiring’ (Seyd and Whiteley 1992: 245).[[7]](#footnote-8)

Finally, we also control for other variables that have been found to be important for the explanation of political involvement and are related, not specifically to the GIM, but to the civic voluntarism model (CVM, Verba *et al.* 1995). In particular, we include gender (binary variable where 1 is male and 0 is female), age (in years), education (binary variable where 1 corresponds to individuals who have attended university and 0 to all other individuals), current work situation (categorical variable with three categories: 1, working, 2 retired or inactive, and 3 full-time student). We also control for ideological proximity, which was part of Barry’s (1970) model and is included as an ideological incentive in some versions of the GIM – although its effect is usually insignificant (e.g. Whiteley *et al.* 1994). This is measured as the euclidean distance between the respondent’s self-declared ideology and their perception of the party’s ideology (continuous variable ranging from 0, no distance, to 10, maximum distance). We also control for internal political efficacy, measured by a 5-point scale capturing respondents’ agreement with the statement ‘People like me can have a real influence on politics if they are prepared to get involved’ (Seyd and Whiteley 1992: 244). In addition, we control for membership length (number of years since respondents joined the party), as this could be partly related to both our dependent variable and some of our independent variables (e.g. expressive motivations and group efficacy).

We analyse the three cases together because we wish to be able to reach conclusions that go beyond each particular case and can be generalised to similar parties. All three organisations are deeply related to each other. They all operate in a similar ideological space and are part of the same electoral coalition and the same parliamentary party grouping. However, the three are also independent parties, and so we need to introduce fixed effects by party in order to control for the influence of any unmeasured characteristics of these organisations on the dependent variable.

**Results**

To test our hypotheses we have run a number of logistic regression models in which the dependent variable takes on value 1 when respondents are full party members and 0 when they are registered party sympathisers. We first introduced indicators for the different incentives and motivations one at a time, and then included all of them simultaneously in a final model. All models control for the socioeconomic and attitudinal variables associated with the CVM. Fixed effects by party are captured by dummy variables indicating the party that respondents belong to.

We start by looking at the influence of selective incentives. Model 1 in Table 2 refers to *selective outcome benefits*. As can be seen (Table 2), we find that these incentives increase the probability to become a member rather than a registered sympathiser. Importantly, the sign of the coefficient does not change, and remains statistically significant (albeit only at p<0.1), once other incentives

Table 2. Effects of incentives and motivations on the probability to become a member (1) rather than a registered sympathiser (0). Logistic regression models.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) | (9) | (10) |
| Selective outcome  | 0.134\*\* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | 0.085+ |
|  | (0.039) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | (0.044) |
| Selective process |  | 0.336\*\* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | 0.147\*\* |
|  |  | (0.037) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | (0.045) |
| Selection incentives |  |  | -0.229\*\* |  |  |  |  |  |  | -0.397\*\* |
|  |  |  | (0.028) |  |  |  |  |  |  | (0.032) |
| Collective policy |  |  |  | 0.643\*\* |  |  |  |  |  | 0.595\*\* |
|  |  |  |  | (0.039) |  |  |  |  |  | (0.044) |
| Group efficacy |  |  |  |  | 0.054 |  |  |  |  | -0.084 |
|  |  |  |  |  | (0.047) |  |  |  |  | (0.053) |
| Altruism |  |  |  |  |  | 0.541\*\* |  |  |  | 0.377\*\* |
|  |  |  |  |  |  | (0.035) |  |  |  | (0.040) |
| Social norms |  |  |  |  |  |  | 0.155\* |  |  | 0.142+ |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  | (0.074) |  |  | (0.082) |
| Expressive benefits |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | 0.219\*\* |  | -0.013 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | (0.058) |  | (0.066) |
| Costs |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | 0.011 | 0.043 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | (0.037) | (0.041) |
| Male | 0.138+ | 0.186\* | 0.130+ | 0.159\* | 0.152\* | 0.130+ | 0.153\* | 0.147+ | 0.148+ | 0.118 |
|  | (0.077) | (0.078) | (0.077) | (0.080) | (0.077) | (0.079) | (0.077) | (0.077) | (0.077) | (0.083) |
| Age | 0.001 | 0.003 | -0.001 | -0.006 | -0.001 | 0.007+ | -0.002 | -0.001 | -0.001 | 0.004 |
|  | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) |
| University degree | -0.049 | 0.077 | -0.134 | -0.046 | -0.044 | -0.127 | -0.049 | -0.036 | -0.055 | -0.194\* |
|  | (0.083) | (0.085) | (0.085) | (0.087) | (0.084) | (0.087) | (0.083) | (0.083) | (0.083) | (0.093) |
| Occupational status (ref: working) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Retired or inactive | -0.025 | -0.064 | 0.013 | -0.019 | -0.029 | -0.086 | -0.025 | -0.019 | -0.026 | -0.006 |
|  | (0.103) | (0.104) | (0.104) | (0.107) | (0.103) | (0.107) | (0.103) | (0.103) | (0.103) | (0.112) |
| Unemployed | -0.430\*\* | -0.481\*\* | -0.407\*\* | -0.371\*\* | -0.412\*\* | -0.525\*\* | -0.407\*\* | -0.398\*\* | -0.406\*\* | -0.500\*\* |
|  | (0.117) | (0.119) | (0.118) | (0.123) | (0.117) | (0.121) | (0.117) | (0.117) | (0.117) | (0.128) |
| Student | -0.635\*\* | -0.716\*\* | -0.566\*\* | -0.646\*\* | -0.618\*\* | -0.706\*\* | -0.602\*\* | -0.602\*\* | -0.613\*\* | -0.663\*\* |
|  | (0.172) | (0.174) | (0.173) | (0.178) | (0.172) | (0.176) | (0.172) | (0.172) | (0.172) | (0.187) |
| Internal efficacy | 0.181\*\* | 0.157\*\* | 0.259\*\* | 0.130\*\* | 0.222\*\* | 0.101\* | 0.233\*\* | 0.218\*\* | 0.237\*\* | 0.035 |
|  | (0.045) | (0.043) | (0.042) | (0.044) | (0.044) | (0.044) | (0.042) | (0.042) | (0.042) | (0.051) |
| Ideological distance | -0.052+ | -0.033 | -0.057+ | -0.017 | -0.049 | -0.042 | -0.050+ | -0.024 | -0.051+ | -0.020 |
|  | (0.030) | (0.031) | (0.030) | (0.032) | (0.030) | (0.032) | (0.030) | (0.031) | (0.030) | (0.034) |
| Length of membership | 0.042\*\* | 0.041\*\* | 0.040\*\* | 0.039\*\* | 0.042\*\* | 0.033\*\* | 0.042\*\* | 0.042\*\* | 0.042\*\* | 0.029\*\* |
|  | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) | (0.004) |
| Party (ref: IU) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Equo | 0.157 | 0.110 | 0.262\* | 0.017 | 0.173 | 0.257\* | 0.217+ | 0.163 | 0.161 | 0.224+ |
|  | (0.120) | (0.121) | (0.121) | (0.125) | (0.120) | (0.125) | (0.122) | (0.120) | (0.121) | (0.135) |
| ICV | 0.640\*\* | 0.632\*\* | 0.696\*\* | 0.860\*\* | 0.678\*\* | 0.466\*\* | 0.635\*\* | 0.667\*\* | 0.666\*\* | 0.636\*\* |
|  | (0.172) | (0.173) | (0.173) | (0.178) | (0.173) | (0.176) | (0.173) | (0.173) | (0.172) | (0.183) |
| Incercept | -0.409 | -0.521\* | 0.051 | 0.155 | -0.736\* | -2.344\*\* | -0.632\* | -1.235\*\* | -0.594\* | 0.088 |
|   | (0.265) | (0.265) | (0.273) | (0.276) | (0.307) | (0.296) | (0.264) | (0.319) | (0.301) | (0.472) |
| N | 4,154 | 4,154 | 4,154 | 4,154 | 4,154 | 4,154 | 4,154 | 4,154 | 4,154 | 4,154 |
| Pseudo R² | 0.053 | 0.067 | 0.065 | 0.111 | 0.051 | 0.101 | 0.052 | 0.054 | 0.051 | 0.167 |
| Standard errors in parentheses |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| + p<.1, \* p<.05, \*\* p<0.01 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

and motivations are introduced in Model 10.[[8]](#footnote-9) In general, findings are in line with the expectations deriving from H1 (*The probability to be a member rather than a sympathiser will be higher among those who place greater emphasis on selective outcome benefits*)and the GIM. It is worth mentioning that effects are not consistent across the different items that were used to build the index (see Model 1a, Table 3 in the appendix). The starkest difference is between the item measuring the importance of individuals’ desire to become professional politicians and the other two items. Those who highlight the importance of building a career in politics are *more* likely to be sympathisers rather than full members (the coefficient is negative). This finding is rather counter-intuitive, but its substantial implications are limited as only 11% of the sample considers this reason to have played a somewhat, quite or very important role in their decision to join the party. Overall, results do not change much when the item is excluded, but obviously the size and statistical significance of the effect increases considerably.

Model 2 in Table 2 focuses on *selective process* benefits. As can be seen, the probability to become a member rather than a sympathiser increases among those individuals who place greater emphasis on the benefits that derive from participating in politics and belonging to an organization of like-minded individuals. The coefficient is statistically significant and remains significant in the final model (Model 10) after controlling for all the other elements of the GIM, which provides strong evidence for H2.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Model 3 focuses on an incentive that is not explicitly included in the original GIM, the capacity to influence *candidate selection*. We anticipated that this variable could play a relevant role in multi-speed membership parties, and hypothesized that the importance given to it would be greater for registered sympathisers than for full members (H3). Results provide strong support for this hypothesis. The positive (and statistically significant) coefficient for candidate selection indicates that the stated importance given to this incentive when joining the party is greater among sympathisers than members. As theorized, those who are mainly interested in participating in internal selection processes can do so by becoming sympathisers without having to take on the burden of full membership. Therefore, in multi-speed membership parties, this incentive may be more important a reason for joining for sympathisers than it is for full members. Importantly, the coefficient remains significant and even increases in size when other incentives are added to the specification (Model 10).

Models 4 and 5 refer to collective incentives. *Collective policy outcome* incentives seem important when it comes to distinguishing between full members and sympathisers. As shown in Model 4, individuals who emphasise this aspect of membership more strongly are also more likely to become members rather than just sympathisers. Conclusions remain largely the same when other incentives are controlled for (Model 10) and provide support for H4.[[10]](#footnote-11)

In contrast, we only find weak evidence in favour of H5, which predicted that *group efficacy*, another collective incentive, would be greater among full members than among sympathisers.The coefficient for this variable is positive, indicating a higher degree of group efficacy among full members, although it is not significant at standard levels (Model 4). The coefficient remains statistically insignificant (and becomes negative) when other incentives are controlled for (Model 10).

Models 6 to 9 in Table 2 focus on normative and altruistic motivations.First, *altruistic motivations* seem to play a role in determining who becomes party member or sympathiser, with greater levels of altruism significantly increasing the probability to become a full member (Model 6) – a finding that remains significant after controlling for other incentives (Model 10) and provides support for H6.

The influence of *social norms* seems rather weak. Individuals who knew other party members before joining are more likely to opt for classic membership rather than become a sympathiser, but the effect is only significant at p<0.05 (Model 7), and does not achieve standard levels of statistical significance when other incentives are included (Model 10). Previous knowledge of party members only increases the probability to become full members by 2 percentage points. Therefore, we only find weak evidence in favour of the hypothesis that social norms explain why some individuals become full members rather than sympathisers (H7). This is not to say that social norms are unimportant for joining the party – in fact, 64% of the sample already knew somebody that belonged to the party before they joined. However, it does not seem to play an important role in distinguishing between members and sympathisers.

Individuals who emphasise *expressive benefits* are more likely to become members rather than sympathisers (Model 8), which is compatible with H8. However, the sign for this coefficient becomes negative and ceases to achieve statistical significance when other incentives are controlled for (Model 10), indicating that a large part of the effect is associated with other related incentives captured by the final model.

Finally, we analyse the role of perceived *costs* of party affiliation. Model 9 shows members to be somewhat more likely than sympathisers to agree that having meetings after work is tiring; however, the effect is rather small and statistically insignificant. Results remain the same after controlling for other incentives (Model 10). This finding does not provide us with strong evidence in favour of H9, which stated that sympathisers should perceive higher costs of membership than full members. As mentioned in footnote 8, Seyd and Whiteley (1992) use an additional item to measure costs which asks respondents how strongly the agree with the statement that party activism takes time away from their family. We find this second item to have a positive (and significant) effect (Model 4a in Table 3, in the appendix), suggesting that full members are *more* likely than sympathisers to think activism takes a lot of time away from their family. As mentioned in the previous section, we think this question lends itself to measuring the actual costs of individuals’ involvement rather than the perceived costs of full membership. So, sympathisers may just be stating a fact when they declare that party activism does not take as much time away from their families – they simply do not dedicate so much time to meetings and other party activities as full members. As can also be seen in Model 4a, when we introduce both items simultaneously we still find a negative effect for the first item, indicating that sympathisers are likely to perceive higher costs than full members. However, the effect ceases to be significant when the model includes all other incentives and motivations (not shown).

As a last step, it is worth mentioning the effect of some of our control variables. The effect of membership length is clearly positive and significant (Model 10), indicating that, quite unsurprisingly, the probability to become full members is higher among those who have been part of the party for longer. Individuals’ internal political efficacy, following previous literature, was introduced as a control in all models. The coefficient for this variable, which is otherwise positive and significant, ceases to achieve statistical significance when all other incentives are introduced at once (Model 10). Some of the variables that are part of the civic voluntarism model are not significant. Older people are more likely to be members rather than sympathisers, but the effect is statistically insignificant. The effect of gender is not significant either, although the sign is as expected, with men being more likely to embark in high-intensity activism than women. In contrast, the effect of education becomes significant in the final model (Model 10), once we control for all incentives, suggesting that university graduates are more likely to become full members -which is consistent with the civic voluntarism model. As for the effect of individuals’ occupational status, both students and unemployed people are more likely to be sympathisers rather than full members (the coefficient is negative and statistically significant). Ideological distance does not have a significant impact on membership mode on its own (which is consistent with the findings in Whiteley *et al.* 1994). Finally, those who have been members for longer are, as expected, more likely to be full members than sympathizers.

**Conclusions**

This article analyses why some individuals decide to join parties as classic members (full members) while others prefer joining as registered party sympathisers – a different form of affiliation offered by multi-speed membership parties. To answer our main research question we use the General Incentives Model (GIM) (Seyd and Whiteley 1992), which is considered to be the canonical model to explain party member recruitment and involvement. We test the usefulness of this model for understanding individuals’ choice between two different types of party affiliation using data from three online surveys conducted to members and registered sympathisers of three Spanish left-wing parties. In doing so, we expand the GIM beyond the terrain for which it was originally developed and -following insights by Poletti *et al.* (2018) - use it to understand recent changes in party affiliation. To our knowledge, this is the first time that a study deals with the motives and incentives behind individuals’ choice of membership type.

Overall, we expected the GIM to be useful in discriminating between full members and registered sympathisers. This is because full membership is essentially a higher-intensity type of involvement that requires greater incentives (Webb *et al.* 2017). Moreover, we introduced an additional incentive, the desire to influence candidate selection, which we expected to play an important role in explaining why people may decide to join as sympathisers in multi-speed membership parties. Our results fit these expectations but with some qualifications.

Most of the incentives included in the GIM performed in the way that we expected, but results failed to achieve statistical significance (and, in some cases, the sign of the coefficient went in the opposite direction than expected) in several cases. Altruistic motivations are greater among full members than among sympathisers. Moreover, full members also give greater importance to selective process and selective outcome benefits, as well as collective policy outcome incentives. We also find that the stated importance of candidate selection incentives is significantly higher for sympathisers than for full members, suggesting that providing the right to vote in internal decision-making processes may be particularly effective for persuading individuals who are reluctant to participate in high-intensity activism to join political parties.

In contrast, group efficacy, social norms and expressive motivations do not seem to matter as much for distinguishing between full members and registered sympathisers. As for the costs of participation, contrary to our expectations, we do not find full members to perceive lower costs than sympathisers. This provides support to the idea that party affiliates might be cost insensitive, which is consistent with research on other parties – for example, Kosiara-Pedersen *et al.* (2017) found no indication that lowering procedural costs could increase party membership. The costs associated with party activism might therefore be a minor factor in deciding between forms of affiliation.

Overall, our results are relevant in both practical and theoretical terms. When it comes to sympathisers, parties may either take them as a pool of prospective full members, or consider them to be a fully different type of affiliate, most of whom will always remain sympathisers in the long term. Our results indicate that there are clear differences between both groups of individuals, suggesting that the latter interpretation might not be completely far off. Compared to sympathisers, full members are people who place much greater importance on selective process benefits, selective outcome benefits (as long as these are not interpreted as deriving from their personal political ambition), collective policy outcome benefits and altruistic motivations. Sympathisers, on the other hand, are the opposite to the idea of party militant. They are less likely to be guided by normative motivations and collective incentives and more likely to be guided by more practical matters, such as influencing candidate selection. Therefore, full members and registered sympathisers look like two distinct groups in key attitudinal aspects. This is not to say that there are not similarities between both, though. At the end of the day, both of them made the decision to join a party, regardless of the type of membership chosen. We find no evidence that both groups are different with respect to the importance given to expressive benefits and their perception of group efficacy. In this regard, the GIM seems effective for distinguishing between those who joined as members and those who join as sympathisers; but, again, some of our findings, including the lack of significance affecting key elements of the model, call for broader and further analyses on the motivations and incentives of different types of party affiliates in multi-speed membership parties. The analysis of individuals’ motivations might be affected by some social desirability bias, particularly responses portraying the role of material selective benefits. Although the GIM is still useful, the use of mixed-method approaches combining surveys with interviews is a promising future avenue (Bale *et al.* 2019) that could also improve question wordings adapted to the realities of the new forms of party affiliation.

**Appendix**

Table 3. Separate items of incentives’ indexes

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | (1a) | (2a) | (3a) | (4a) |
| Work professionally in politics | -0.092\* |  |  |  |
|   | (0.043) |  |  |  |
| People like me influence in the organization | 0.053 |  |  |  |
|   | (0.046) |  |  |  |
| Would do a good job as local councillor | 0.172\*\* |  |  |  |
|   | (0.040) |  |  |  |
| Know people who think like me |  | 0.182\*\* |  |  |
|   |  | (0.033) |  |  |
| Learn more about politics |  | 0.059+ |  |  |
|   |  | (0.033) |  |  |
| Good way to meet people |  | 0.196\*\* |  |  |
|   |  | (0.050) |  |  |
| Contribute to achieving political goals |  |  | 0.321\*\* |  |
|   |  |  | (0.048) |  |
| Support party economically |  |  | 0.494\*\* |  |
|   |  |  | (0.033) |  |
| Having meetings after work is tiring |  |  |  | -0.107\*\* |
|   |  |  |  | (0.040) |
| Party activism takes time away from family |  |  |  | 0.315\*\* |
|   |  |  |  | (0.037) |
| Incercept | -0.906\*\* | -2.008\*\* | -2.668\*\* | -1.076\*\* |
|   | (0.286) | (0.333) | (0.327) | (0.309) |
| N | 4154 | 4154 | 4154 | 4154 |
| Pseudo R² | 0.056 | 0.068 | 0.118 | 0.066 |
| Standard errors in parentheses |  |  |  |  |
| + p<.1, \* p<.05, \*\* p<0.01 |  |  |  |  |

**References**

Achury S, Scarrow S, Kosiara-Pedersen K and van Haute E (2018) The consequences of membership incentives: Do greater political benefits attract different kinds of members? *Party Politics* DOI: 10.1177/1354068818754603

Bale T, Webb P and Poletti M (2019) *Footsoldiers. Political Party Membership in the 21st Century*. London: Routledge.

Baras M, Barberá O, Barrio A, Correa P and Rodríguez-Teruel J (2015) Party membership in Spain and congress delegates. In: van Haute E and Gauja A (eds) *Party Members and Activists*. London: Routledge, pp. 17-33

Barry B (1970) *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cross WP and Pilet JB (eds) (2015) *The Politics of Party Leadership: A Cross-National Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Duverger M (1957) *Political Parties*. New York: John Wiley.

Faucher F (2015) New forms of political participation. Changing demands or changing opportunities to participate in political parties? *Comparative European Politics* 13: 409–459.

Gallagher M and Marsh M (2004) Party Membership in Ireland: The Members of Fine Gael. *Party Politics* 10(4): 407-25.

Gauja A (2013) *The Politics of Party Policy: From Members to Legislators*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.

Gauja A (2015) The construction of party membership. *European Journal of Political Research* 54(2): 232–248.

Gomez R and Ramiro L (2017) The limits of organizational innovation and multi-speed membership: Podemos and its new forms of party membership. *Party Politics* doi: 10.1177/1354068817742844

Heidar K (2015) Party Membership in Norway: Declining but Still Viable? In: van Haute E and Gauja A (eds) *Party Members and Activists*. London: Routledge, pp. 151-68.

Kosiara-Pedersen K, Scarrow SE and van Haute E (2017) Rules of engagement? Party membership costs, new forms of party affiliation, and partisan participation. In: Scarrow SE, Webb PD and Poguntke T (eds) *Organizing Political Parties: Representation, Participation, and Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 234–258.

McCulloch A (1990) Joining a political party: a reassessment of the economic approach to membership. *British Journal of Sociology* 41(4): 497-516.

Olson M (1965) *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Pedersen K, Bille L, Buch R, Elklit J, Hansen B, and Nielsen HJ (2004) Sleeping or Active Partners? Danish Party Members at the Turn of the Millenium. *Party Politics* 10(4): 367-84.

Poletti M, Webb P and Bale T (2018) Why do only some people who support parties actually join them? Evidence from Britain. *West European Politics* doi: 10.1080/01402382.2018.1479921

Ramiro L and Morales L (2014) Examining the ‘demand’ side of the market for political activism. Party and civil society grassroots activists in Spain. *Party Politics* 20(4): 506-520

Rothenberg L (1992) *Linking citizens to government: interest group politics at Common Cause*. New York: Cambridge University Press

Sandri G, Seddone A and Venturino F (eds) (2015) *Party Primaries in Comparative Perspective*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Seyd P and Whiteley P (1992) *Labour’s Grassroots: The Politics of Party Membership*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Scarrow S (2000) Parties Without Members? Party Organizations in a Changing Electoral Environment. In: Dalton RJ and Wattenberg MP (eds) *Parties Without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 79–101.

Scarrow S, Webb P and Farrell D (2000) From Social Integration to Electoral Contestation: The Changing Distribution of Power within Political Parties. In: Dalton RJ and Wattenberg MP (eds) *Parties Without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 129–153.

Scarrow S (2015) *Beyond Party Members: Changing Approaches to Partisan Mobilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

van Biezen I, Mair P and Poguntke T (2012) Going, Going,… Gone? The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 51:1, 24–56.

van Haute E and Gauja A (eds) (2015) *Party Members and Activists*. London: Routledge.

Verba S, Schlozman KL and Brady H (1995) *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Webb P and Keith D (2017) Assessing the Strength of Party Organizational Resources: A Survey of the Evidence from the Political Party database. In: Scarrow SE, Webb PD and Poguntke T (eds) *Organizing Political Parties: Representation, Participation, and Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 31–61.

Webb P, Poletti M and Bale T (2017) So who really does the donkey work in ‘multi-speed membership parties’? Comparing the election campaign activity of party members and party supporters *Electoral Studies* 46: 64-74

Weber R (2018) Why do young people join parties? The influence of individual resources on motivation *Party Politics* DOI: 10.1177/1354068818792576

Whiteley P and Seyd P (2002) *High-Intensity Participation. The Dynamics of Party Activism in Britain*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Whiteley P, Seyd P and Richardson J (1994) *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Young L and Cross W (2002) Incentives to Membership in Canadian Political Parties. *Political Research Quarterly* 55(3): 547-69

1. The ICV and Equo surveys were part of an extension of the ‘European Green Party Members’ project directed by Wolfgang Rüdig (University of Strathclyde). This project used a common questionnaire and was funded by a British Academy Large Research Grant (LRG-31746) with additional support from the Research Development Fund of the University of Strathclyde. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Excluding respondents for which at least one of the variables in the models is missing, we have a sample of 4,154 individuals (2,907 members and 1,247 sympathisers). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Supplementary telephone or postal surveys for those without an email address were not feasible. We cannot discard the possibility that long-time, inactive members might be absent from parties’ email lists. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. In all cases, there was a one-dimensional solution. Results using individual items rather than a composite index are provided in the Appendix. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Unfortunately, negative collective policy incentives were only available for IU. The question asked about the importance of “fighting other parties and their policies” when joining the party. For the IU subsample, results do not change substantially when this item is included in the collective policy outcome index. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. The exact wording was ‘*Before joining, was any of your family members (spouse, parent, son/daughter), friends, workmates or acquaintances affiliated to either this or any other party?’.* Poletti *et al.* (2018) use belonging to *any* social organization as an indicator but we consider that our question captures the key aspect of the potential influence of social networks better. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Seyd and Whiteley (1992) use an additional item that measures respondents’ degree of agreement with the statement that ‘Party activism often takes time away from one’s family’. Nonetheless, the question wording used in the Spanish translation had a different connotation as it asked individuals if *for them* party activism took time away from their family. This means that the item measured their actual personal costs (which are, obviously, higher for those who pursue a high-cost type of activism), rather than respondents’ perception of the general costs of activism, and so we decided not to include it. We do, however, show the result of introducing both items separately in the appendix. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Results are similar when all items are introduced separately (see Model 1a, Table 3 in the appendix). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Results are similar when all items are introduced separately (see Model 2a, Table 3 in the appendix). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Similar results are found when both items are introduced separately (see Model 3a, Table 2 in the appendix). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)