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OPEN UP

The future of the
political party

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DECEMBER 2014



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FOREWORD

**By Tim Bale, Professor of Politics at
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Political parties aren't exactly winning any popularity contests these days. But however much people vilify parties, the truth is they can't do without them. Democracy can't function without political parties. Anyone who thinks differently should just look around the world and try and name a democratic polity that operates without party competition. It can't be done.

That it can't be probably explains the fact that academics writing on the subject invariably end up quoting the words of the American political scientist, E.E. Schattschneider, who wrote way back in 1942 that 'political parties created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties' – which is presumably why, despite the low esteem in which they hold parties nowadays, people remain willing to go out in their millions and vote for them, however reluctantly, every four or five years.

Pundits and commentators nevertheless now routinely claim that our political parties are in 'freefall' or in 'terminal decline'. And on the face of it, they have a point. Parties are clearly struggling on a number of fronts. Yet even then, there are arguably positive aspects to that struggle.

Many parties are losing members, it is true. But, as UKIP, the SNP and the Greens have recently shown, it is more than possible to buck that trend if you offer people an alternative that inspires at least some of them with fresh hope.

Parties are also losing the loyalty and affection of those sections of the electorate that they used to be able to call their own. This may be no bad thing, however, since it suggests that people are increasingly making up their own minds about who to vote for rather than relying on atavistic, almost tribal instincts.

And, partly as a result of that volatility, parties are finding it increasingly difficult to win sufficient support to garner the kind of vote shares necessary to produce single-party governments capable of controlling the House of Commons. Again, though, some would argue that this is, in fact, a good thing. It forces parties to put together coalitions based (as the current coalition is based) on a majority rather than a minority of the electorate. It also encourages the legislature to stand up to the executive.

So if everything is changing, all is by no means lost. Parties, believe it or not, are not so cut off from society that they fail to realise they have a serious problem. And they are trying as best they can to think hard about solutions, including some of those discussed in more detail in the following pages. Becoming more transparent, less hierarchical, and more eclectic surely has to be the way to go.

But it won't be easy. That parties don't always take the advice offered to them isn't necessarily because those who lead them are stupid or consumed by self-interest. It's because many of those solutions involve trade-offs which are difficult to make: 'open primaries', for example, sound wonderful – until one remembers that they remove one of the few remaining incentives to joining a party, namely being granted the exclusive right to select candidates for one's party of choice.

What we do know, however, is that – inasmuch as politics is a market – some parties will respond better to the preferences of their consumers, be they voters or members, than others. Some will therefore survive, maybe even thrive, while others will go to the wall. Those outfits hoping to do the former rather than the latter would be well advised to read this stimulating new contribution to the debate.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all staff at the Electoral Reform Society and others for their help and feedback. We would especially like to thank the 721 ERS members, supporters and members of the public who contributed to our consultation and provided us with such a rich collection of thoughts and ideas. We hope we have fairly reflected their views in what follows.

INTRODUCTION: ONLY PARTIES HAVE THE ANSWER?

Britain's political parties are caught between two competing trends. On one hand, parties have never been as unpopular as they are now. People are becoming more and more alienated from formal politics, and parties tend to be seen as causing or at least exacerbating this problem, rather than as a means of solving it.

Back in the 1950s, one person in every ten was a member of a political party. Now, there are more people who identify their religion as 'Jedi' than there are members of the Conservative party – and almost the same as the number of Labour members¹. This year, 83% of UK citizens surveyed said they 'tend not to trust' political parties². And one in five (21%) citizens say they do not identify with any political party³.

But on the other hand, challenger parties traditionally seen as outside the mainstream have enjoyed significant successes recently. While the traditional parties take the full brunt of people's disgust, newer parties such as UKIP, which (at least in part) models itself on its opposition to the established party system, benefit from the anti-party mood. At the same time, post-referendum Scotland has seen a huge surge in membership of the SNP, and the Green Party in England and Wales has seen its membership double in the space

1 See ONS Census data: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/business-transparency/freedom-of-information/previous-foi-requests/people--population-and-community/religion-classification--jedi/index.html>.

2 See Eurobarometer: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_arch_en.htm.

3 Park, A., Bryson, C., Clery, E., Curtice, J., and Phillips, M., (eds), *British Social Attitudes 30: 2013 Edition*, National Centre for Social Research.

of one year⁴.

At the Electoral Reform Society, we believe that parties should be a part of the solution to political disengagement, not part of the problem as they are often seen. Parties should provide a forum for discussing and reaching agreement on multiple issues; they should be groups of people working together to pursue their visions of the good society; and they should be the building blocks of governments and governmental scrutiny. At their best, parties can bridge the divide between people and politics.

This report is the start of a long-term investigation by the Electoral Reform Society into the future of political parties. It is built on an assumption that parties, in some form or another, are crucial to the good functioning of any representative democracy. But it is also built on a recognition that people have largely lost faith in political parties. They are going to have to work hard and be innovative if they are ever to regain that faith.

Our analysis of the state of the modern political party – based on a combination of polling, secondary research and above all a survey of our members and supporters (*see methodology note, p8*) – provides a simple recommendation for the future: **parties need to open up**. They need to reach out beyond traditional membership structures and open up to supporters and the wider public. They need to think differently about how they relate to other parties. And they need to shift structurally to provide the catalyst for fundamentally changing the culture of our politics. By doing this, parties may begin to catch up with the way citizens want to do politics. They may have a chance of meeting people's (often contradictory) expectations of a party fit for today and prepared for tomorrow.

To provide background for what follows, we commissioned a poll of voters in the 40 most marginal Conservative-Labour constituencies⁵. This poll found that – even in these 40 areas where the two-party competition is most fierce – a clear majority preferred a system where multiple parties compete for votes. Some 67% thought “the rise of smaller parties such as UKIP and the Greens is good for democracy”, and 51% believed “it is better to have several smaller parties than two big parties (versus just 27% who thought the opposite)”. These respondents also demonstrated a commitment to multi-party and consensual politics at the parliamentary level.

4 See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-29505094>.

5 Fieldwork by ComRes, 15-24 November 2014. Sample: 1,002 GB adults.

Methodology note

This report is based primarily on a consultation of our own members and supporters, which was also open to the general public. We asked three open-ended questions: What are political parties for? What does the political party of the future look like? And what can parties do now to reconnect with people? The responses have given us a detailed picture of people's aspirations for political parties¹.

The results from our consultation are not intended to be widely generalisable. Our survey respondents are self-selecting and unrepresentative demographically. They are also more likely to be interested in politics, being (in the main) supporters of democratic reform. In this, however, we see a strength: our respondents are already interested and engaged in politics, and therefore represent a constituency of critical friends to political parties. If the parties cannot persuade these critical friends of their own worth, then what hope do they have of persuading anyone else?

We use the survey responses to complement the research. Our argument is supported and illustrated throughout with quotations from the respondents because we believe parties will not survive – let alone prosper – unless they can bring the public back on their side. Ultimately, parties need to reconnect with people.

- 1 The survey was conducted between November 2013 and January 2014, with 721 respondents. The respondents ranged in age from 20 to 88 with 57 being the mean age. Their political affiliations were spread across all parties and none, with no one party affiliation dominant. Respondents from all over the UK contributed to this survey though the sample group was not gender balanced.

Some 78% thought “the Opposition should work with the government on issues they agree on”, while 54% believed “parliaments work best when no party is too dominant so that cross-party agreement is needed to pass laws” (against just 28% who thought the opposite).

This poll chimes with the findings presented in the remainder of our report. The responses to our members' and supporters' survey paint a rich, detailed picture of people's desire to see a modern party system: multiple parties opening up to their membership and the wider community, competing for votes across the country, and working together in government for the common interest. To

summarise this picture, we provide four central recommendations to increase the popularity and effectiveness of political parties. These are:

- **Increased role for non-members** Parties' experiments with involving non fee-paying supporters should be accelerated
- **More member- and supporter-led policymaking** People want to see an end to top-down, command-and-control politics
- **Party funding reform** Parties' reliance on big donors is undermining people's trust in them
- **Electoral reform** A fairer voting system would help meet people's expectations of having a greater choice of parties and more consensual policymaking

Structure of the report

The report proceeds by first (Chapter 1) looking at the role of political parties (in theory and in the views of our survey respondents) and the degree to which today's parties are seen to be fulfilling that purpose. Chapter 2 places the role of political parties in its historical context, showing how changes in society and the way people behave politically have presented parties with significant challenges to their continued legitimacy and even existence. Chapter 3 shows how parties have tended to adapt to these changes, and how these developments have arguably fuelled a disconnect between people and parties. Finally, Chapter 4 looks at some of the more positive innovations with which parties are experimenting, and what else parties can do to ensure people do not turn away from them forever.

1

WHAT ARE PARTIES FOR?

Political parties have come to be seen as part of the cause of widespread disillusionment with politics. Yet they are also central to a well-functioning democracy. From providing many voters with their first point of contact with politics and recruiting candidates for elections, to developing policies that shape society, parties are a necessary part of representative democracy. This section sets out the multiple roles that parties should (ideally at least) perform. We also set out the degree to which our survey respondents a) recognise these roles and b) believe political parties are fulfilling them.

Playing many parts

For the electorate, parties have traditionally been key communicators of political issues, and political educators of the general public. They also structure electoral choice: a party banner provides a short-cut to understanding a candidate's position on issues. In this way they also encourage turnout, making the voting process simpler and therefore requiring less effort from the voter. They mobilise people to vote in a multitude of other ways too, stimulating interest in the election, campaigning and providing activists to encourage turnout.

As organisations, parties seek elected office: finding, training and nurturing candidates for elections and filling leadership positions. They also represent the interests of their membership as well as aggregating their demands.

In government, parties implement policy programmes; in opposition they scrutinise and provide an alternative vision. They also ensure government responsibility: the buck stops with the party.

Our survey results suggest that voters understand and value these roles, and view parties as integral to a healthy democracy. Asked about their view of the role of political parties, the vast majority of our respondents saw parties in a positive role, or at least

What do parties do?

How our respondents saw parties' functional roles



Elections

- Providing candidates
- Providing choice
- Simplifying decisions for voters



Legislature

- 'Making democracy work'
- Forming a government
- Scrutinising a government



Policy

- Creating policy
- Creating a programme for government
- Finding solutions to problems

thought that there is a positive role for them even if they do not live up to the ideal. Some 80% of responses included positive sentiments about parties' role in democracy.

Respondents highlighted parties' functional roles in providing candidates for public office, forming or scrutinising governments, and in creating policy (*see page 11*). They also highlighted parties' representational roles, from providing representatives for election to performing the fundamental (although highly problematic) function of "representing the will of the people" (*see page 14*).

As well as making reference to these functional and representational roles, people also saw the potential for parties to fulfil a transformative and inspirational role in society. In answer to the question "what are parties for?", respondents saw parties as reflecting, shaping and structuring citizens' ideals to change society for the better:

"[Parties] provide a structure around which people's aspirations can be channelled, debated and clarified."

"To give a voice to the people. To help decide what sort of a society we are and want to be and help build a package of measures to help make the transition from what we are to what we want to be."

Some respondents expressed more explicitly the positive role parties can and should play in society, helping to create a better future for citizens:

"Raising the quality of life for ordinary citizens."

"To help maintain a social structure that helps people to live in freedom from oppression."

"Working to build a better society."

Not all good news

But many respondents also expressed concern that in reality, political parties do not live up to this ideal. They believe that parties are not fulfilling these roles in society, the legislature or in government; and they are concerned that parties are not fit for purpose. Of the negative responses, the majority homed in on a sense of the

political party as a club for other people, with widespread concern about the power of vested interests and cronyism (*see page 19*). Some saw political parties as purely in it for themselves:

“Political parties promote the interests of the party not the interests of the people.”

“Self-interest, self-aggrandisement and power for power’s sake.”

Some viewed political parties as having other paymasters:

“To mask the real decision makers who are the elite, corporations and lobbyists.”

“Doing the bidding of industry and inherited money over the wishes and betterment of the vast majority of the country.”

Respondents also felt that parties simply sought to secure power as an end in itself:

“They’re a vehicle for getting power and therefore don’t serve the common good.”

The gloomiest news for political parties is that some of those surveyed saw parties as redundant, and could imagine a democracy without them:

“I do not agree that parties are essential. They are part of the problem.”

Our survey responses reflect a strong sense of political parties not living up to their expected roles. But the results also reflect the fact that parties’ functions are multiple, varied and contested. The many roles which parties perform – as political organisations, in society and in government – make it extremely problematic for parties to live up to expectations on all fronts.

It should be restated that most respondents saw a very positive role for parties, from “representing the will of the people” to being “essential for democracy and the prevention of dictators and despots”. Even if they felt that political parties currently do not live

What have parties got to do with us?

How our respondents saw parties' representative roles



Representation 'of the people'

- Representing 'the people'/'the will of the majority'/'the majority of the people'



Organising

- Bringing 'like-minded' people together
- Providing a platform for people who share views
- Collective activity



Interest articulation

- Representing views of the majority/of members
- Promoting interests of the majority/of members



Interest aggregation

- Managing conflicting views
- Finding the best solution amongst differing views

up to expectations, nearly all respondents saw a positive role for them in our democratic system and society at large.

Yet despite a seemingly widespread public acceptance that political parties are an essential component of our democratic system, there is clearly a growing anti-party political mood. The following two chapters set out the historical and social context in which that growth in anti-party sentiment is situated.

THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

The first step in explaining the growth of people's distaste for political parties is to understand how the social and political context has changed since parties' heyday in the middle of the 20th century. This chapter sets out those changes, and – with reference to our survey – how public expectations of parties have changed at the same time.

The big picture

Changes in society including expanding education, technological advances, globalisation and consumerisation have contributed to a profound shift in the way citizens engage with politics, and have challenged the authority of representational party politics.

Citizens are more educated than ever before and have access to a mass of political information which has replaced parties in their role as political communicators. Globalisation has arguably contributed to a sense that no party or government can solve the internationally interlinked problems facing the country, and this has been compounded by a crisis of faith not just in political parties but across national institutions from finance to the police and the media. Weakening social ties and class structures coupled with expanding communications have led citizens and parties to a distinctly market-based approach to engagement, with policies tailored for consumer citizens to 'buy'. We have also seen the emergence of a plethora of single-issue campaigning organisations, and citizens are increasingly choosing to participate in these rather than in traditional party political activism.

The biggest challenges to traditional party structures stem from the behaviour of the electorate: far fewer citizens are identifying strongly with a political party, and far fewer are choosing to vote.

Those who identify strongly with a party has dropped ten percentage points since 1987 (from 46% to 36%), although there has been little change since 1997¹. Likewise the number of people enrolling as members of established political parties has dropped dramatically. Combined party membership of the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats comes in at less than half a million². In the 1960s parties' membership extended into the millions, with around one in ten people holding membership of a party in 1964³. Correspondingly parties have fewer core voters to mobilise and fewer activists to mobilise other voters.

Representatives that stand on a 'not the others' ticket have enjoyed recent successes

Turnout decline is one of the most obvious indicators of the shifting patterns of engagement in society. Whilst turnout has improved since reaching a low of 59.4% in 2001, the number of citizens using their vote has dropped dramatically since the 1950s.

These changes represent a real drift away from traditional party politics, and have significant implications for parties' future.

An anti-party era

Recent years have seen a significant growth in anti-party politics. Representatives that stand on a 'not the others' ticket have enjoyed recent successes, with populist politicians and parties achieving support not just in the UK but across Western Europe. In Iceland in 2010, a satirical party led by a former comedian ran on the promise to be openly corrupt. Mimicking established political parties and drawing on public anger over the financial crisis, they won enough seats to co-run Reykjavik's city council. The party's leader, Jón Gnarr, became Mayor. Italian comedian Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement, created in 2009 in the wake of the Eurozone crisis, continues to perform well in the polls, coming second in the 2014

- 1 Park, A., Bryson, C., Clery, E., Curtice, J., and Phillips, M., (eds), *British Social Attitudes 30: 2013 Edition*, National Centre for Social Research.
- 2 House of Commons library note, 3 Dec 2012, *Membership of UK Political Parties*. SN/SG/5125.
- 3 Wilks-Heeg, S., Blick, A., and Crone, S. (2012) *How Democratic is the UK? The 2012 Audit*, Liverpool: Democratic Audit. www.democraticaudit.com.

European elections with 21.2% of the vote. The movement positions itself outside of the political establishment, claiming ground as the voice of the people. In Britain, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) – running on a distinctly populist, anti-establishment ticket – came first in the 2014 European elections with 32.9% of the vote.

This trend has been attributed, at least in part, to growing political cynicism, distrust in political institutions and anti-party sentiment. Though difficult to measure, to gain an idea of anti-party feeling we can look to some key questions designed to test how well people think politics responds to citizens. In the UK, changes in opinion have not been all that dramatic over the last 30 years, but there is nevertheless very clear evidence of an increasing cynicism. In 1987, 64% of people agreed that ‘parties are only interested in people’s votes, not in their opinions’. By 2011 this had risen to 75%. Likewise in 1994, 57% of people agreed that ‘it doesn’t really matter which party is in power, in the end things go on much the same’. By 2011 this had risen to 71%⁴.

Why so cynical?

Perhaps there is something in the culture of our politics that creates a more cynical response to political parties. It has been said that the UK has adopted ‘cynicism bordering on nihilism’ as something of a national ideology⁵. The seemingly endless cycle of political scandals has certainly damaged the reputation of politicians generally and created a sense of the political class being unfit for purpose.

Whilst it might be easy to blame politicians’ behaviour for this turning away from formal politics, it would be too simplistic. Research shows the 2009 expenses crisis had little impact on voters’ view of politicians, mainly because it was so low even before the crisis (in 2004, 70% of people said they trust politicians either ‘not very much’ or ‘not at all’; in 2010 this figure was 73%)⁶.

Perhaps the problem lies instead with some of the contradictory expectations of politics itself. Our survey respondents clearly felt that parties should be more collaborative and co-operative, working together in the best interests of the country, not themselves:

4 Park, A., Bryson, C., Clery, E., Curtice, J., and Phillips, M., (eds), *British Social Attitudes 30: 2013 Edition*, National Centre for Social Research.

5 See: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/102d71fc-cebe-11e3-8e62-00144feabd0c.html#axzz30GZ0tLfg>.

6 Hansard Society (2010), *Audit of Political Engagement 7: The 2010 Report*.

What's wrong with parties?

How our respondents saw parties' negative roles



Vested interests

- Working for big business/lobbyists/donors/the few



Cronyism/Power

- Seeking/maintaining power
- Self-serving/corrupt
- Working in own interests/party interests



Top-down

- Elitist
- Drawn from a narrow class
- Not enough member involvement



Redundant

- Not fit for purpose
- No need for them

“I wish they were less about confrontation and opposing views, and more about working together to find solutions.”

“We need more consensus, less party-political politics.”

“Stop the inter-party warfare. There is a lot more common ground that should be worked on.”

Respondents felt that parties of the future should engage in more open and honest discussion on issues.

“Get rid of the party whip system. Allow more dissent and discussion.”

“Hide less behind party dogma. Dismiss the idea of certainties and try to engage people in a genuine discussion where uncertainties and unknowns are welcomed.”

Our survey of voters in Conservative-Labour marginals clearly demonstrates this desire for a more consensual politics. We found that, even in constituencies which could be said to represent the archetypal two-party system (ie. Conservative-Labour marginals), 78% believed that “the Opposition should work with the Government on issues they agreed on”, and 54% believed that “Parliaments work best when no party is too dominant so that cross-party agreement is needed to pass laws”⁷.

And yet, whilst greater co-operation is desired, our respondents also wanted parties to be more distinct in their ideology.

“The main reason party politics is seen as irrelevant is that there is, in reality, very little difference in their policies.”

“We need parties to look different... There is no real difference between the three main parties: all are centre, with a tiny degree of left or right.”

7 Survey by ComRes for the Electoral Reform Society. Fieldwork took place from 15th to 24th November 2014, sampling 1,002 GB adults living in the 40 most marginal constituencies where the Conservatives and Labour shared first and second place between them at the last General Election in 2010.

“The problem is many people have lost faith in the current parties because they are not distinctive enough.”

The sense that parties are growing more similar is supported by survey data: only 23% of respondents in 2010 felt there was a ‘great difference’ between Labour and the Conservatives – though higher than in 2005, still a good ten percentage points lower than any election between 1964 and 1997⁸.

So, people want parties to be more consensual and work together, but they also want them to be more distinctive in terms of policy and ideology. That is the tightrope which parties must walk – later, we examine how parties may be able to do so (*see chapter 4*).

Aggregation and articulation

The way citizens choose to participate politically has changed fundamentally, with more informal and direct forms of engagement becoming increasingly popular. Instead of becoming members of political parties, citizens are choosing single-issue campaigns and issue-specific membership organisations such as those supporting conservation, human rights or even democratic reform. There are also more ways to participate in politics through online petitioning and action groups such as 38 Degrees. It could be argued that such groups have overtaken parties in articulating citizens’ interests.

These interest-based organisations and campaigns seem better adapted to the way citizens want to participate, with looser structures, a more direct approach and fewer calls on supporters’ time. Citizens have access to a seemingly limitless range of information sources and no longer depend on parties for their political information. Likewise political participants are better educated and less deferential, but also more individualistic. The political party is elite-driven, with organisational structures reminiscent of a bygone era. For many citizens, parties therefore no longer appear to be the appropriate vehicle for political self-expression.

Politics is about collective decision-making and the allocation of resources. This places severe constraints on what political parties are able to achieve in comparison to the other types of association which are much more popular in the 21st century. Politics requires parties to aggregate interests as well as articulating them. Whilst

8 Park, A., Clery, E., Curtice, J., Phillips, M., and Utting, D., (eds), *British Social Attitudes 28: 2010-2011 Edition*, National Centre for Social Research.

interest groups are able to articulate citizens' views, they do not perform the task of mediating between them. They can campaign on their chosen issue or group of issues without the need to balance competing demands. Parties – if they are serious about forming a government or being part of one – are required not only to articulate their supporters' views but also to put them into some kind of order. Under circumstances where resources are scarce (as they always are), what are the top priorities for government? If the party pursues policy A, what effect does that have on policies B, C and D, and how does that affect the decision to pursue policy A? These are political questions which parties are in a position to answer, but which often do not feature in the articulation of citizen interests through narrow-focused or single-issue groups.

One of parties' most important functions is being largely overlooked by members of the public

Political parties' dual roles – aggregating citizen's interests as well as articulating them – came through strongly in our survey. However, representing individuals' interests (articulation) was mentioned far more frequently than the role of prioritising and choosing between them (aggregation). This suggests that one of political parties' most important functions is being largely overlooked by members of the public, perhaps because other, more popular, types of association do not have to perform this function.

Respondents clearly saw a role for parties in translating ideas into action, though most saw this as translating the will of 'like-minded people'.

“To channel the representative views of a section of society into the governance of the nation.”

“So that people of a like mind can join together to try to change society in a way they would like to see it go.”

However, some responses reflected the need to compromise, manage varying views and protect those in the minority.

“Members’ views are not monolithic and the party has to be able to incorporate and tolerate... variances.”

“Political parties are ways of ensuring that individual voices are heard and solutions are found when opinions differ.”

Some of those surveyed who saw parties as vehicles for articulating ideas and interests believed parties should bring citizens’ voices into the policy-making process.

“[Parties should be] engaging people in democracy, putting ordinary people into politics and expanding participation.”

“Bringing people with similar ideals together; providing an organising framework and social support where individuals can discuss, debate and generate ideas and policies that will seek to realise the greatest good for the greatest number of people.”

Our survey reflected the idea that people want parties to open up more and to give them a far greater role. Today citizens have a range of opportunities to self-organise and campaign. It would seem that parties need to respond to this by letting go of the top-down structures of the past and allowing people in (*see chapter 4*). But parties are faced with the challenge that, while anyone can articulate their views, not every view can be accommodated; aggregating interests and views remains an important role for parties, and one not easily or readily appreciated.

Smaller, and more of them

As well as desiring more direct involvement and a bigger voice in party politics, our respondents wanted more choice.

The two-party system in Westminster, which for so long has been propped up by a broken electoral system, is a thing of the past. In elections where the system allows it, people are choosing to support a wider range of parties, and more conditionally⁹. Our survey of voters in Conservative-Labour marginals showed that even where competition between the two ‘big’ parties is fiercest,

9 Dunleavy, P., (2005), ‘Facing up to Multi-Party politics: How Partisan Dealignment and PR Voting Have Fundamentally Changed Britain’s Party Systems, Parliamentary Affairs, Vol. 58 No. 3, 503-532.

people are more likely to see British politics as a multi-party arena. Some 67% in these marginals thought “the rise of smaller parties such as UKIP and the Greens is good for democracy”, 50% thought “the era of two parties dominating British politics is over” and 51% believed “it is better to have several smaller parties than two big parties”. And when these voters in Labour-Conservative marginals were asked who they would vote for if all parties had a realistic chance of winning, five parties received over 5% of the vote¹⁰.

The respondents to our survey on the future of political parties expressed a desire to have parties which more closely fit their political preferences than the large, catch-all parties of the past. Many of our respondents felt that the parties of the future should be smaller and more diverse in size and number. This would give voters options which more closely fit their preferences. What is more, these smaller, more various parties would be incentivised to co-operate and collaborate – another important improvement which our respondents want to see in the way parties operate:

“[Parties of the future would be] smaller and based more around central issues than previously. They will be competing for an increasingly short-term thinking voter. Their strategy will be based around bargaining within coalitions, not on a broad programme.”

“Coalitions having a mandate from more than 50% of the electorate would be able to make the necessary reforms and bring this country into 21st century.”

Our respondents were clear that such an aspiration for smaller, more coalition-minded parties could only be achieved with a change in the electoral system:

“A voting system that doesn’t automatically disenfranchise most of the electorate would be the main change I would recommend.

¹⁰ Survey by ComRes for the Electoral Reform Society. Fieldwork took place from 15th to 24th November 2014, sampling 1,002 GB adults living in the 40 most marginal constituencies where the Conservatives and Labour shared first and second place between them at the last General Election in 2010. Asked to imagine a situation where all parties had a realistic chance of winning, voters said they would vote for a wide range of parties: 28% Labour, 23% Conservative, 19% UKIP, 10% Green, 6% Lib Dem, 3% Independent, 1% BNP, 1% Other, and 7% for a ‘new party which better reflected [their] views’.

There isn't much point in joining any political party unless you feel they can change things, and that your involvement can make a difference."

"All the time we have First Past the Post then the parties stay polarised and look after their own interests."

It is clear that parties are operating in a very different world from the past – one in which citizens' expectations are not as they were. The two-party era, when the vast majority of citizens both voted for and identified with one of the two main parties, is categorically over. People want to see the shape, nature and activities of political parties changing to meet their expectations of what politics should look like in the 21st century. The next chapter sets out some of the ways in which parties have already adapted to changes in society, while Chapter 4 examines the immediate future in terms of party innovation.

HOW NOT TO ADAPT

Claims that parties are in terminal decline may be too hasty. Political parties have shown an enormous amount of resilience and are continuously adapting to survive. But while some of the ways in which parties have adapted to the changing environment are positive for our democracy (*see Chapter 4*), other developments could be exacerbating their unpopularity. As people have moved away from parties, parties have also moved away from people.

This section looks at two of the changes which parties have made since the mid 20th century, and how these could have contributed to the dire situation in which parties now find themselves.

Reliance on money

Whilst political parties do not necessarily need members to function, membership decline has had various impacts on the way parties operate, particularly in terms of finance. Declining numbers of fee-paying members, combined with centralisation of party organisation and campaigning techniques, has forced parties to rely on a few large donors to fill the gap left by membership dues and meet substantial campaign budgets.

Correspondingly there has been an increase in perceptions of corruption in parties, with suggestions that donors are receiving undue influence for their cash. Our own research¹ found that 61% of people think that the current party funding system is corrupt and that 75% of people think that big donors have too much influence on political parties.

Similarly, the respondents to our survey on the future of the political party overwhelmingly felt parties were in the pockets of their donors and correspondingly that they held far greater sway over decisions than ordinary voters:

1 Survey carried out by Greenberg, Quinlan, Rosner, 24-27 February 2014, 1402 respondents.

“[Parties] exist to whip their Parliamentary Members to tow the party line which is too often dictated by big donors.”

“[Parties exist] to serve the banking, financial services, energy, and the media. To manufacture fear, and to manipulate consent.”

“[Parties] should be a means of exercising collective democracy for the people: but in the UK they seem to be representing only the vested interests of the few.”

There is little doubt that negative public perceptions of money in politics has contributed to people’s growing cynicism. Whilst the British political system has not experienced corruption on any significant scale in comparison to countries around the world², people are suspicious of the ways parties obtain funding. The perception of unfair advantage, be it a seat in the House of Lords, dinner with the Prime Minister or policy influence, is keenly felt. Our surveys clearly showed that citizens feel their voice has little weight compared to big business and lobbyists.

Negative public perceptions of money in politics have contributed to people’s growing cynicism

The trend towards seeking a smaller number of large donations is unstable and probably unsustainable. It is therefore crucial that parties find a solution. In 2011 the Committee on Standards in Public Life published a proposal for reforming political party funding. In these proposals the Committee recommended a cap on donations at £10,000 from individuals or organisations and state support for political parties (for parties with two or more representatives in Westminster or devolved governments) based on number of votes.

Many of our respondents felt that public funding of parties was key to keeping vested interests outside party politics:

“Stop taking donations from big business and wealthy pressure

2 See Transparency International’s Global Corruption Report, available at: http://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/pub/global_corruption_report_2004_political_corruption.

groups, even if it means funding politics from the public purse.”

“Be funded by the taxpayer instead of vested interests.”

“Government funded so that no party is dependent on unions or big business and a budget cap on electioneering.”

Parties play a crucial role in our democracy and need funding in order to carry out many of these functions. Moving away from relying on a handful of larger donors could provide the right catalyst for parties to reach out to a broader support base, but public funding should also be reviewed and considered as part of that picture. Creating a level playing field for all parties, large and small, is an essential task.

Too much control?

In recent years, parties have also changed the way they operate as campaigning organisations: centralising and professionalising; becoming better informed about what voters want (gained through polling and focus groups); and putting greater emphasis on image, of both party and leader³. Parties have adapted to a more participatory age by creating a new, distinctly consumerist model of engagement.

Some respondents to our survey clearly saw parties in this more consumerist model:

“[Parties] provide a kind of brand recognition for a set of shared values.”

“The post-modern [party] model seeks to present whatever image or message or approach is most palatable to most voters in most relevant constituencies, in order to win general elections.”

Yet these very adaptations, which have enabled parties to survive and respond to a changing environment, have themselves contributed to the popular sense of alienation. The ways in which parties have adapted, such as targeted campaigns, centralisation and

3 Webb, P., and Farrell D., in Dalton, R., and Wattenberg, M. (ed) *Parties Without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (2002).

professionalisation, are the very things people consider wrong with the modern party. These innovations make parties feel remote from people and far from genuine grassroots membership organisations.

Our survey respondents wanted the party of the future to be less focused on this narrow vote-winning electoral strategy.

“There is a need to abandon the communications techniques learnt from marketing. These encourage the idea that citizens are consumers of politics and ‘spend’ their vote. This is promoting the disconnect.”

“[A party] should be focused on its policies, not its PR.”

The centralising and professionalising tendency of parties can also reduce the role of members. A vote-winning strategy requires a focus on what will appeal to the largest number of voters, not their members. Parties need to be able to change direction swiftly and with a view to winning votes, not pleasing members. But party members want to be more than megaphones for whatever their party’s policies happen to be; they want to shape them too.

Party members want to be more than megaphones for policies; they want to shape them too

Our survey respondents saw involving party members in policy decision-making as an important function of the political party (*see chapter 1*) and viewed the party of the future as being more connected internally with its members. They felt the party of the future would be:

“One that works from the bottom up. By definition, that means mass membership and a structure that invites discussion and participation.”

“More inclusive. It treats its members as active participants not passive recipients of words from on high.”

Clearly, parties’ reliance on big money and relentless election-winning messages has had a significant negative effect on people’s

perceptions. Perhaps there are better ways of adapting to the changed environment in which parties operate.

HOW OUR RESPONDENTS ANSWERED THE QUESTION:
“WHAT ARE POLITICAL PARTIES FOR?”



ENCOURAGING SIGNS

The degree to which parties are distrusted by the public – and the seriousness of the problem in terms of their future sustainability – has not been lost on the parties themselves. As well as the longer-term changes outlined in the previous section, parties have more recently been experimenting with new ways of organising their affairs. These changes are considerably more promising in terms of their ability to close the gap between parties and people. This section sets out some of these innovations, and shows how they have been received by our respondents.

Supporter, not member

The rapid decline in party membership has created a legitimacy problem for political parties. Whilst capable of operating without members, parties should aspire to attract the backing of more of the population. Parties have met this challenge by loosening their membership rules, and expanding affiliation with the party to encompass less formal attachments. Research on election activity¹ has found that parties are using their non fee-paying supporters as well as members in campaigning activity: some 78% of local Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties recruited supporters to help with campaigning in the 2010 election. A shortage of members is therefore not necessarily an impediment to organisational capacity.

The Labour and Conservative parties are looking to expand their reach beyond members. Labour is encouraging local parties to register ‘supporters’ who do not pay fees. And Labour’s reforms to the union link (whereby union members will now need to ‘opt in’ to their affiliation rather than being automatically affiliated) will

1 Fisher, J., Fieldhouse, E., Cutts, D., (2014), Members are Not the Only Fruit: Volunteer Activity in British Political Parties at the 2010 General Election, BJPIR.

potentially create a new group of non-member supporters. There are also moves within the Conservative Party to engage supporters online and in campaigning. Inspired by the Olympics Gamesmakers and campaign development in the US, party chairman Grant Shapps launched Team 2015, which aims to build a grassroots volunteer network. It is aimed at people who want to get involved in campaigns but are not necessarily members of the party².

These moves present an important change in the way parties connect with citizens, embracing the looser, less formal structures that have served campaign organisations well (*see page 21*) and expanding parties' reach by doing so.

Our respondents thought parties should connect with the public by doing more in the wider community. They felt parties should:

“Open up debate to non-members and become less hierarchical.”

“Engage with their communities more, by getting out more in the streets to talk to people and being proactive in contacting communities.”

People are much less likely to stick with a political party for life. We have seen an increase in undecided voters in recent years. Three weeks before the 1983 election, only 17% of voters had not decided who to vote for. In 2010, three weeks before the election, 49% remained undecided³. Combined with other trends such as split-ticketing (voting for candidates of more than one party in the same election) and an increase in the number of parties, this suggests that whilst parties may be able to draw on supporters at a particular moment or for a particular campaign, their affiliation may be short-lived. Creating new roles for supporters in specific campaigns or for particular moments is an important adaptation to the way citizens choose to participate in politics today.

Social media

The media in its various forms has become the dominant political

2 See <http://www.conservativehomes.com/thecolumnists/2013/07/grant-shapps.html>.

3 Ipsos MORI <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/39/Voting-Definitely-Decided-or-May-Change-Mind.aspx?view=wide>.

communicator, taking away from parties their traditional role in fulfilling this task. The way politics and political party activity is covered by media outlets plays an important role in perceptions of politics too. Negative and cynical reporting contributes to citizens moving away from party politics. Developments in technology and the rolling 24-hour news cycle have created an environment in which politicians fear to say anything authentic lest they be accused of a ‘gaffe’. No wonder, then, that the new populist politician-as-comedian and comedian-as-politician has emerged over the last few years (*see page 17*), giving the media the soundbites they want, free of the party press officers and approved ‘lines to take’. But this does not necessarily reflect the politics people want.

In future, parties’ messages may be less shaped by the national media lens

The public are all too aware of the role the media plays. The 2014 Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement looked at the accountability and conduct of MPs. Their research found that 62% of people agreed that ‘politicians in the past were no better than today; they just didn’t face the same media scrutiny’, and only 14% disagreed⁴. Our respondents also recognised this effect and expressed a desire for a politics free from these constraints.

“Perhaps the biggest problem is the poisonous attitude of the press to all parties, politicians and politics in general.”

“We need a media that is more interested in political visions and public policy than political drama and skilled in interesting and educating the public in what’s at stake and in facilitating the public debating of the issues. Dramatise the issues not the personalities.”

In future, parties’ messages may be less shaped by the national media lens. Parties are adapting to new forms of communication and increasingly connecting with people directly through social media. Established political parties have, over the last few years, increased their social media presence and are using channels such

⁴ Hansard Society (2014) Audit of Political Engagement 11, The 2014 Report.

as Facebook and Twitter to increase support and disseminate their political messages. Labour and the Conservatives now have more Twitter followers⁵ than party members. The Liberal Democrats' and Conservatives' Facebook 'likes'⁶ also outnumber their formal membership tallies⁷.

New social movements and parties, particularly populist parties, are using social media to great effect. Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (expressly a movement rather than a political party) was born online. Grillo specifically bypassed traditional news channels, choosing to speak only directly to his supporters through social media. The Tea Party movement (or more accurately 'Tea Parties' as it is made up of an array of independent organisations) in the US has also made significant use of social media to bring groups together no matter how far separated by distance. Larger organisations in the movement also trained supporters on Facebook and Twitter in order to help get their message out, again bypassing traditional media outlets.

Asked about what they thought parties would be like in the future, a large number of our survey respondents saw an increased use of and role for political communication and activity online.

“With social media commonplace in everyday lives the best way to engage people in politics is no longer through parties but rather through individual engagement through this medium.”

“Connect more via social media and mobile technology to understand what people think and are concerned about.”

Social media not only gives parties the ability to get their message across directly but also gives them access to a large number of potential supporters. These supporters are online foot soldiers for party messages as well as potential sources of campaign funding too. But it should also be recognised that there might be a difference in how parties and citizens exploit social media. Whilst political actors may be embracing social media to get their message across

5 Based on people who follow a single party or its MPs (minus the leader).

6 Including the official party page and also the party leader's page.

7 Bartlett, J., Bennett, S., Birnie, R., Wibberley, S., (2013), 'Virtually Members: The Facebook and Twitter Followers of UK Political Parties', A CASM Briefing Paper. DEMOS. www.demos.co.uk.

organisational model (as envisaged above) which gives supporters a stronger role, or whether it is simply extending centrally controlled voter targeting activity.

The 2008 Obama campaign is widely thought of as the most successful example of using technology to ‘blend’ top-down and grassroots organising. The Obama e-campaign gave supporters (who signed up via a central hub) autonomy to run campaigns at the local level. Canvassing voters, fundraising and recruiting other supporters was ‘outsourced’ to an army of volunteers who had a greater role in both the initiation and delivery of this activity.

Despite a tradition of more formal membership in the UK compared to the US, parties have begun to exploit similar e-campaigning techniques to involve supporters in campaign activity. However, research suggests that UK parties have, to date, focused more on distribution of campaign messaging rather than its creation and there has been limited opportunity to create policy-focused correspondence or contribute to policy discussion⁸.

Some of our respondents saw new technology as an opportunity to bring citizens into the policy-making process:

“[The future political party] is less rigorously structured and makes use of the internet to change dynamically in response to the opinions of its members.”

“More use of online technology to open up the policy process.”

Intra-party democracy is a difficult balancing act for parties. Whilst it can be an incentive for supporters to get more involved and can bring parties closer to the views of their members, it may limit the party’s capacity to respond to the wider electorate.

While for some parties, expanding opportunities for input is in response to membership decline, for others member involvement is taking on a renewed importance. The SNP recently scrapped their ‘13 month rule’ for new members to be able to vote in candidate selections, so as to embrace their recent flood of sign-ups.

Changes to internal policy-making functions more often than not are in response to electoral context and membership vitality.

The Liberal Democrats’ federalist structure gives considerable

8 Gibson, R., (2013) Party Change, Social Media and the Rise of ‘Citizen-initiated’ Campaigning, Party Politics, (published online before print).

autonomy to its component parts: state parties (England, Scotland, Wales), regional parties, local parties and organisations can all submit motions to federal conference, but the Federal Policy Committee still plays the most substantial role in policy development.

Plaid Cymru, the SNP and the Green Party have relatively high levels of internal democracy⁹. The Green Party structure builds grassroots participation into its decision-making structures, with members able not only to elect the executive but also to contribute to policy development and strategy. It is a structure of policy-making firmly rooted in the party's ideology: the constitution of the Green Party enshrines direct and continuous participation in decision-making processes for its members, reflecting its commitment to new ways of practising politics.

For most people, speaking with party volunteers on the doorstep is their main exposure to politics

Plaid Cymru recently reviewed their internal policy-making procedures. Building on the process used to develop their 2007 Assembly manifesto, in which Plaid engaged in extensive public consultation and one-day policy conferences, new procedures seek to engage a wider cohort of members and external experts. Changes include opening up voting rights at conference to all members, not just delegates. The Labour Party has also expanded its manifesto-shaping process recently, with a fully open online consultation.

These developments suggest parties are seeing the value in wider consultation, and using online capacity to do so. While members continue to value and desire a role in policy-making, it seems likely that in future supporters will increasingly be brought into this activity. Yet this is not a straightforward change. Policy influence is most often the privilege of membership, and opening up to supporters could sit uneasily with the structures that facilitate members' policy rights. It is a difficult balance and parties will need to use all the options available to them, online and off, to create forums in which both supporters and members can engage. Participatory mechanisms could help parties connect to a wider constituency of

9 Wilks-Heeg, S., Blick, A., and Crone, S. (2012) How Democratic is the UK? The 2012 Audit, Liverpool: Democratic Audit. www.democraticaudit.com.

views while fulfilling their role as interest aggregators.

As well as taking a more open approach to policy-making, parties are starting to engage a wider group of citizens into party-political campaigning. The Labour Party has sought to establish a better connection with communities and grow its supporter base through the community organising model, focusing on local issue-specific campaigns. And there are moves within the Conservative Party to engage citizens in specific local campaigns or ‘social action projects’¹⁰. Whilst community-based campaigning is far from a new invention (community politics was pioneered by the Liberal Party in the 1950s and 1960s), there has been a noticeable shift to a more locally focused and constituency directed approach to campaigning.

Positive campaigning and face to face

E-campaigning is not limited to the online world. The Obama and Grillo campaigns used social media and online hubs to organise activity in the real world, whether meetings in public squares or door-to-door ‘get out the vote’ activity. For many, speaking with party volunteers on the doorstep is an important connection to the world of politics (though a more common one for those in marginal constituencies). With declining membership numbers, parties are finding it harder to resource this activity even though, as we note, parties are engaging supporters as well as members in it.

This resource problem, combined with targeted vote mobilising strategies (which focus activity on known supporters), means the disengaged citizen is unlikely ever to be approached by a political party (particularly if they live in a safe seat). This has the potential to create a negative spiral of disengagement, with parties not reaching out to those who are not already engaged and making it less likely that they will engage in the future.

Yet reaching out beyond your traditional supporters has been shown to reap rewards. In the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary elections, the SNP recorded their best ever result, beating Labour who had dominated Scottish politics for half a century. Much has been written about their campaigning strategy since, in particular about their use of social media and distinctly positive campaign compared to the negative campaign employed by Labour. Research on campaign tone in the 2007 campaign shows that perceiving parties’

10 Barwell, G. (2012) ‘Transforming the Conservative Party’s Organisation’. In Skelton, D. ed. *Access All Areas: Building a Majority*, pp92-98.

campaigns as negative encouraged people to vote for other parties¹¹.

The SNP's broader strategy also involved reaching out to non-traditional supporters. It is a strategy that has been made electorally fruitful by the successful adoption of the Single Transferable Vote for local authority elections in Scotland. Preferential voting systems encourage parties to adopt less negative campaigns because they have can pick up second (and third) preferences from supporters of other parties. It also encourages parties to put up candidates in constituencies formerly considered no-go areas, thus expanding both voter choice and the amount of contact they have with party campaigns. Although parties have been slow to change their campaigning strategies to fully take advantage of these opportunities¹² it has opened up a new way for parties to do politics.

Primaries

Another change in the party political landscape in recent years has been the opening up of selection processes to non-party members. Experiments with primaries have enabled a much wider range of citizens to take part in what had previously been a closed process.

Following experiments in 2005, the Conservatives held over 100 primaries between 2006 and 2010 in which, like caucus meetings in the US, members of the public were invited to hear candidates speak and then cast a ballot. These meetings were attended by between 100 and 500 people, half of whom were party members¹³. Following this, the party held a full open postal primary for Totnes in August 2009 and Gosport four months later. Every registered voter in the constituency was sent a ballot. The participation rate was 25% in Totnes and 18% in Gosport – a significant improvement on previous attempts. In Totnes, voters chose local GP Sarah Wollaston as their candidate, who commented on the process: “the whole point of an open primary is to demonstrate you can bring people into politics from non-political backgrounds and bring their

11 Pattir, C., Denver, D., Johns, RA, and Mitchell, J., (2011) ‘Raising the Tone?: The Impact of ‘Positive’ and ‘Negative’ Campaigning on Voting in the 2007 Scottish Parliament Election’, *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, p333-343.

12 Electoral Reform Society (2007) *Local Authority Elections in Scotland*, 3 May 2007: Report and Analysis, and Curtice, J., (2012), *Local Authority Elections in Scotland*, London: Electoral Reform Society.

13 Institute for Government (2011) *Party People: How do – and how should – British political parties select their parliamentary candidates?*, London: Institute for Government.

experience to bear”¹⁴.

Many of our respondents mentioned primaries and opening up the selection process as a way to increase public participation in party political activity:

“Abandon the selectorate processes and adopt open-primary voting procedures for the selection of all candidates for elected office.”

“Encourage much more local involvement in party affairs, particularly in the selection of candidates.”

Opening up the selection process is important, especially under the current electoral system

It is suggested that the primaries procedure increases public interest, which then carries through to the election and has a positive impact on turnout. Many also see primaries as a way of improving candidate selection and encouraging nominations from a more diverse pool of candidates. In the case of Totnes it certainly showed the public to be in favour of local, more independently minded candidates. But caution should be exercised over how much equality primaries bring to the selection process. The Conservative experiment shows that primaries do not necessarily widen the demographic of those participating. People who turned up were unrepresentative of the electorate as a whole, being generally older and more politically active¹⁵. Yet, primaries do provide a means of bringing political decision-making to a wider audience.

Opening up the selection process is important, especially under our current electoral system. The large number of safe seats means that in many cases, selection is equivalent to election. It is thought that less than one in two members voted in the Labour selection contests for their top 106 seats¹⁶. That candidates in these seats are chosen by so few people, as well as being democratically unsound,

14 Today Programme, BBC Radio 4, Friday 20 January 2012.

15 Institute for Government (2011) Party People: How do – and how should – British political parties select their parliamentary candidates? London: Institute for Government.

16 See <http://www.progressionline.org.uk/2014/02/27/voting-with-their-feet/>.

CONCLUSION: TOMORROW'S PARTY

Party-political decline has been a subject of debate since the 1970s, based on evidence of falls in partisan identification and membership. But long-term trends are now combining with short-term triggers – party funding scandals, general political scandals and the intensification of voter disengagement – to create the possibility that political parties are spiralling into terminal crisis.

The various ways in which parties should be responding to this threat can be boiled down to a simple message: they need to open up, even further and faster than they are already doing.

Opening up organisationally

Parties need to continue to adapt to the new ways that citizens want to participate in politics. **Opening up party processes, letting go of top-down structures and embracing citizen-led activity** will help fundamentally shift the culture of our politics towards what citizens are demanding. An **increased reliance on supporters as well as members** is likely to be a part of this process. Changing party structures to allow supporters a more active and central role in campaigning is an important innovation.

Through new technology, parties have more opportunity than ever to connect with citizens directly and on a more local basis. Social media enables parties to create a much-needed dialogue with citizens, and parties should do more to use these opportunities specifically to involve people in policy-making processes. Parties have greater opportunity to listen as well as talk, and should strive for genuine democratising of decision-making, avoiding the tendency to engage in consultation from above.

Parties also urgently need to **rebalance party funding in the interests of the many**, by diversifying their funding sources. They

need to find a solution to keeping vested interests out so that ordinary supporters and members feel they too have a voice. Securing a wider funding base is likely to require consideration of a cap on donations and spending, and a fresh look at how public funding is allocated.

Opening up electorally

As well as expanding the wider public's role in their campaigns, parties should consider **increasing outsiders' role in selecting candidates for election**. Breaking the domination of small 'selectorates' is an important part of opening up politics generally. Experiments with primaries and other ways of engaging non-members should be expanded.

Likewise **changing the electoral system** would breathe new life into campaigning by moribund local parties in historically safe seats, and would give party supporters a reason to be politically active in areas where the voting system had previously made their votes worthless¹. It could also encourage a less negative campaigning style, which has greater potential to engage turned-off voters.

Opening up legislatively

While citizens want distinctive political parties, they also want a less combative, more open style of politics; one that is honest about the choices available and the reasons for decisions made. A change in the electoral system would see politics respond better to citizens' diverging political choices. It would be an acknowledgement that a multi-party system, which makes consensus and collaboration a necessary and normal part of politics, is what citizens want.

A more open party politics could also include a greater role for citizens in decision-making. Parties should think about moving away from focus-group assessment of voter preferences favoured by the centralising party organisations of the past, and consider instead the potential effects of engaging citizens directly in the decision-making process through deliberative democratic mechanisms. This could help bring citizens closer to politics outside of election time.

¹ The Electoral Reform Society believes that the Single Transferable Vote (STV) is the fairest method for determining the outcome of elections. For more information about STV, see <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/?PageID=483>.

The new party model

The recent rise in membership numbers for those parties which are challenging the mainstream – UKIP, the Greens and the SNP – can teach us a lot about the future of political parties. Granted, a fair amount of these parties’ appeal can be attributed to people’s distaste for the mainstream parties or for Westminster politics in general². But, in some cases at least, these parties are also more likely to experiment with opening up to their members and the wider electorate. As newer parties, they have fewer institutional barriers to opening up. And for some of them it is in their very nature and constitution to be less hierarchical and more open.

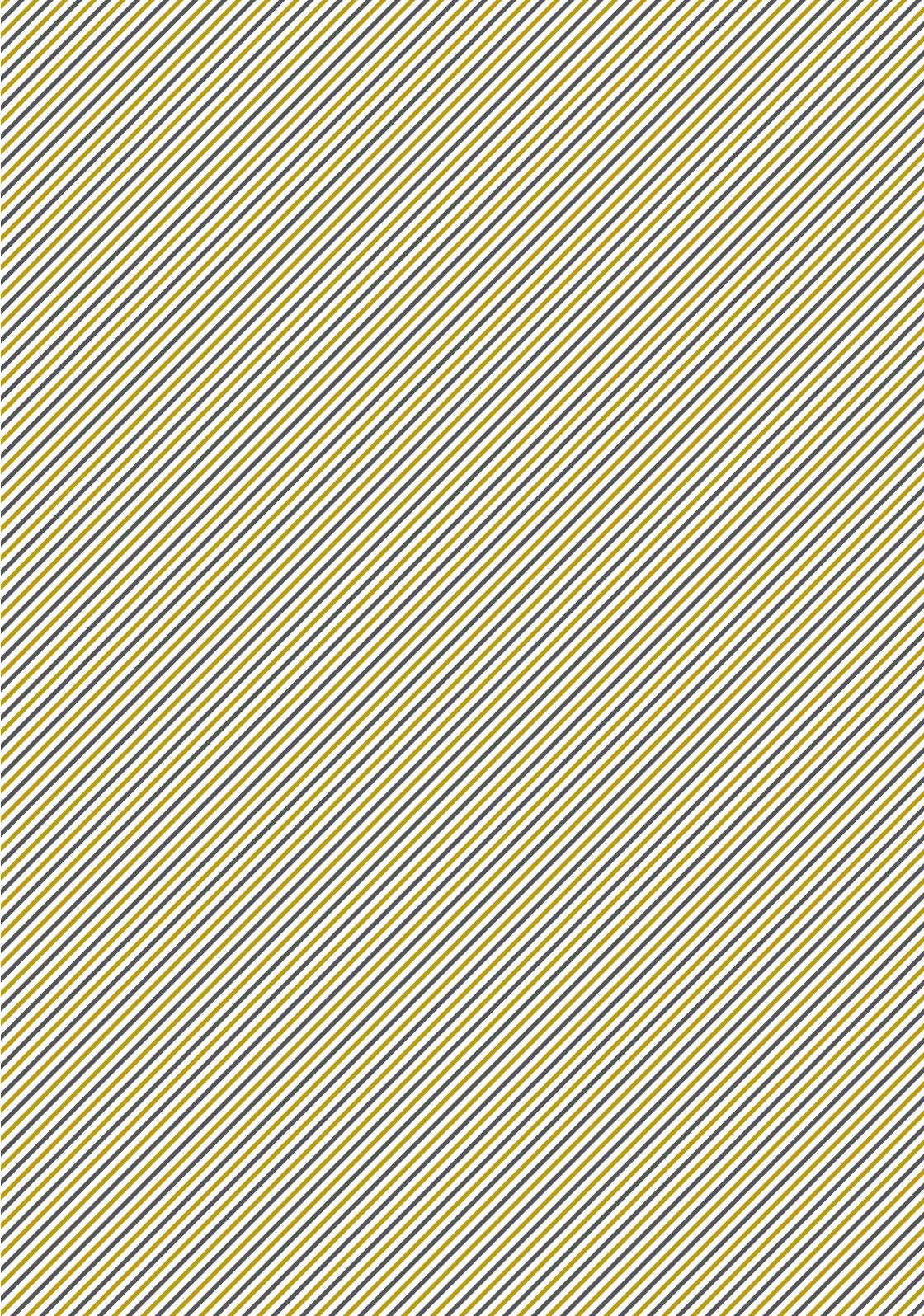
The emergence of these more modern challenger parties also reflects people’s apparent preference for a multi-party system, where parties work together for the common good³. Given these facts, and the picture presented by our members’ and supporters’ survey, we can begin to glimpse the outline of what the future holds for political parties.

The mainstream, traditional parties are already moving towards this future. But if they are ever going to retain people’s faith, they need to get there quicker.

2 See eg. http://www.icmunlimited.com/data/media/pdf/2014_guardian_scotland_poll.pdf#sthash.IQ6zpdZ.dpuf.

3 Cf. Survey by ComRes for the Electoral Reform Society. Fieldwork took place from 15th to 24th November 2014, sampling 1,002 GB adults living in the 40 most marginal constituencies where the Conservatives and Labour shared first and second place between them at the last General Election in 2010.





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