

<b>Institution:</b> University of Sussex		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 25 – Area Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Generating Understanding of Political Party Membership in the UK		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2015 – 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Paul Webb	Professor of Politics	Sept 2000 – present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2015 – 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Paul Webb’s research on British political party members has substantially informed and contributed to the parties’ own understanding of their memberships, and media coverage of party politics. The primary evidence that it has boosted the beneficiaries’ (i.e. parties’ and the media’s) awareness and understanding of this subject lies in: (1) the frequency with which the research has been used by media for their output, and (2) the attention it has gained from the parties themselves, in the form of invited presentations to party conferences and professional staff, and further commissioned research designed to shape their political strategies.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>The ESRC-funded Party Members Project (PMP) is the most extensive study of British party members ever undertaken. The project commissioned YouGov to survey members of 6 parties after the 2015, 2017 and 2019 election campaigns; Labour members in 2016; Labour-affiliated trade union members in 2015; and partisan identifiers in that same year. PMP also surveyed Conservative and Labour members on Brexit in December 2018, and Conservative members on the leadership election in May 2019. In addition, several dozen interviews with party officials and politicians were conducted. The quantitative analysis, which was central to this project, was led and conducted by Webb, as Co-I. This body of work builds on previous research on Conservative Party members conducted by Webb and Bale in 2013-14.</p> <p>Key findings relate to: the identity of members (and non-member supporters) in terms of demographic and attitudinal profiles; why they join parties; what they do for their parties in election campaigns; why Labour’s membership surged so dramatically after the 2015 general election; what members think about party leaders, intra-party procedures and relationships; and why some eventually leave parties. Of particular note are the following findings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Non-member supporters do as much campaign work as members in total, but members remain more important for high-intensity activities such as canvassing [R1];</li> <li>ii. the well-known ‘General Incentives Model’ of party membership, first developed and tested in the early 1990s, still broadly holds today [R2], but factors specific to local constituency and party contexts also contribute significantly to understanding the campaign activity of members, especially in respect of traditional ‘offline’ as opposed to ‘online’ activity [R3];</li> <li>iii. the most ‘intensive’ forms of membership activity depend in significant part on those members who either seek a career in politics or are embedded in social networks based around their local parties [R4];</li> <li>iv. Labour’s membership surge after 2015 was driven in part by the society’s ‘educated left-behinds’ (ie, economically insecure graduates – [R5]);</li> <li>v. when members leave political parties, it is usually over perceptions of ideological distance from, and disillusionment with, the leadership [R6]; and</li> <li>vi. Conservative members increasingly came to favour ‘Hard Brexit’ after 2015, while Labour’s membership overwhelmingly disapproved of Brexit, the UK’s departure from the Single European Market and EU Customs Union, even though the party leadership initially embraced all of these positions in 2017 [R6].</li> </ol> <p>Webb has been fully involved with the design of the project and surveys as an equal partner and has taken primary responsibility for quantitative analysis of data. He was lead-author on R1-R4, and co-author of the monograph [R6]. Thus, his contribution has been central to material that has been disseminated to the media and parties – even when he has not been the team member directly engaging with media. After the initial funding period ended, ESRC awarded</p>		

additional funding that enabled the PMP team to run further surveys following the 2019 general election.

### 3. References to the research

- R1.** Webb, P., Bale, T. & Poletti, M. (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. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2017.02.002>
- R2.** Poletti, M., Webb, P. & Bale, T. (2019) 'Why is it that only some people who support parties actually end up joining them? Evidence from Britain', *West European Politics*, 42(1): 156-172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2018.1479921>
- R3.** Bale, T., Webb, P. & Poletti, M. (2019) 'Participating locally and nationally: Explaining the offline and online activism of British party members', *Political Studies* 67: 658-675. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321718794740>
- R4.** Webb, P., Bale, T. & Poletti, M. (2020) 'Social networkers and careerists: Explaining high-intensity activism among British party members', *International Political Science Review* 41: 255-270. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512118820691>
- R5.** Whiteley, P., Poletti, M., Webb, P. & Bale, T. (2019) 'Oh, Jeremy Corbyn! Why did Labour Party Membership Soar after the 2015 General Election?' *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 21: 80-98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148118815408>
- R6.** Bale, T., Webb, P. & Poletti, M. (2019) *Footsoldiers: Political Party Membership in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203731765> Available on request.

**Funding: G1.** ESRC ES/M007537/1. 01/15-12/18. *Political Party Members in the UK*, PI: Tim Bale, Co-I: Paul Webb. Total £733,484.48 + £27,250 (2017 surveys); £154,650.40 to Sussex.

**G2.** ESRC ES/T015632/1. 01/20-06/20. 2019 General Election. PI: Bale. £71,519 to QMUL, but Webb executed all subsequent data analysis, and was substantially involved in survey design.

### 4. Details of the impact

Political parties are an integral component of the UK system of representative democracy. It is therefore no surprise that the parties, the media and politically-engaged citizens seek accurate and detailed information about who the members are, why they join and leave parties, what they think, and what they do for the parties. This research has provided the contemporary baseline for public knowledge and debate about the demographics, attitudes and activities of party members in Britain today: figures from the project have become 'the facts' used by the media and by politicians themselves, as well as by other researchers, academic and non-academic.

The significance of the PMP's impact can be demonstrated by reference to two direct beneficiary groups: (1) political journalists, who have reported the findings directly, using them to inform their own political analysis, and who have commissioned work by the researchers; and (2) political parties, whose staff have sought to understand the findings and apply them to their membership and electoral strategies. Each of these is a conduit to broader public awareness. The reach of PMP's impact can be demonstrated by: (1) the very large readerships and viewerships of the media sources (including social media) exploiting the project findings, and (2) the leading party politicians and national officers who acknowledge the impact of the research.

#### Impact on journalists' and their audiences' understanding

Impact has been achieved through media engagement, including articles written for *The Times*, *The Observer*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Financial Times*, *The New Statesman*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Monkey Cage*, *Prospect* and *Political Insight* magazines, and various blogs. Since the project's inception, the team has authored 47 published articles (of which Webb has been co-author 22 times), and at least 60 articles referencing PMP findings have been published in a wide range of national and overseas media outlets. The PMP team have made more than 20 broadcast media appearances on BBC News, Sky News, Radio 4, LBC and the BBC Parliament Channel, including an episode of BBC Parliament Channel's *Booktalk* dedicated to the *Footsoldiers* book [R6]. All of these contributions [outlined in S1] have depended heavily on Webb's quantitative research.

Webb's research has enhanced the media's understanding, analysis and reporting of this topic. The research has provided evidence about the demographic and attitudinal profiles of party

memberships, the relationships between leaders and members, and the reasons behind phenomena such as the huge surge in Labour Party membership after 2015. The media have used Webb's findings to inform their coverage of party leadership contests (Labour in 2015, 2016 and 2020, Conservatives in 2016 and 2019, Liberal Democrats in 2019), and the debate about Brexit. This impact is not limited to the UK media: see, for instance, Luke McGee's piece for CNN on the Tory leadership contest of 2019, or Yasmeen Serhan's piece for *The Atlantic* about the same contest, both of which draw heavily on and directly cite *Footsoldiers* [R6] [S1].

Some examples illustrate the significance of Webb's contribution via PMP to the media debate: In his *Guardian* article (16 September 2017), Nick Cohen draws on PMP findings to argue that the surge in Labour membership has been driven in part by the frustrations and resentments of a 'left-behind middle class', which is very closely connected with PMP's concept of the 'educated left-behinds' [R5]. In a *Guardian* article (27 July 2016), Owen Jones cites Webb's research on Labour's electorate, to show that it is 'unrepresentative of the population', because middle-class professionals make up half of Labour Party members. He urges Labour leaders to adopt a strategy to 'recruit and give leadership positions to underrepresented working-class people, particularly in the north'. This may or may not be sound advice, but it is unlikely this analysis would have come about without PMP's research findings on Labour's grassroots.

In a notable contribution, PMP ran the first survey after the 2017 General Election that revealed how Labour Party members were overwhelmingly against Brexit, and in favour of the UK remaining in the Single European Market and Customs Union. *The Guardian's* Anushka Asthana (17 July 2017) reported this finding and it was immediately re-Tweeted by the then-leading Labour anti-Brexiteer, Chuka Umunna, among others – thus informing and shaping the debate about Brexit both within parties and beyond. In December 2018, PMP ran a detailed survey of the attitudes of Conservative and Labour members on Brexit [R6]. The research was able to demonstrate that positions on Brexit distinguished the two parties' membership far more starkly than their positions on any other issues. These findings were widely reported across numerous media outlets during (and after) January 2019, ranging from *The Guardian* to *The Mirror*, and the broadcast media. Several items at the time of the Conservative leadership election of 2019 made heavy use of Webb's PMP research.

In *The Guardian* (21 June 2019), Pegge & Duncan's account of the demographic and attitudinal profile of the Tory members who would elect the new Prime Minister drew heavily and directly on Webb's research, as did Paul Waugh's detailed article in *The Financial Times* (22 June 2019). Similarly, Chuka Ummuna's critical analysis of Boris Johnson's candidacy (*The Independent*, 24 June 2019) made use of Webb's research regarding the Tory membership. In January 2020, PMP released details of the first survey of Labour members about their views of candidates in the then-forthcoming leadership contest, which received heavy coverage (especially Sky News *The Guardian* and *The New Statesman*), including overseas. Moreover, the survey is considered to have impacted on the betting market, with odds on Starmer (the leader in PMP's poll) to win reducing radically in his favour after the research was reported [S7]. Similarly, PMP produced the first poll pertaining to the Liberal Democrat leadership contest in 2020, which was quickly picked up by the *New Statesman*.

Statements from 11 national journalists [S2] emphatically attest to the significance of PMP research for their work. For example, Stephen Bush of *The New Statesman* says '...the Project has provided us with all sorts of valuable insights into an area of political life in this country that previously we'd only really been able to make guesses about. As a result, we've been able to tell our audience much more about what people at the grassroots think and do, and that's made a valuable contribution to our coverage of big issues like Brexit, of elections, and leadership contests' [S2.1]. Zoe Williams of *The Guardian* confirms she 'use[s] the data constantly, not just because I know it to be robust and reliable in support of arguments but as a kicking-off point' [S2.2]. Kishan Korra of ITV's *Peston* says 'Work conducted by the Project has helped us produce graphics for agenda-setting items with findings often put directly to the decision makers who appear on the programme. Their work has really helped our audience (which during recent times of high political interest has often been 0.7-1m people) understand what's been going on during a particularly turbulent time for British politics' [S2.3]. Matt Chorley of *The Times* says 'The Party Members' Project is a brilliant resource, which provides a rich stream of properly researched insight into who grassroots members are, their priorities and values. This has been especially

useful during the many leadership elections we have had in recent years, helping our readers and listeners to develop a deeper understanding of these contests, and their likely outcomes' [S2.4]. Sam Coates of *Sky News* says, 'It's a unique project that has a clear public interest, clear impact, better understanding of key areas and is very simple for large numbers of people to understand and benefit from, via our reporting of it' [S2.5].

The extensive media coverage of the research – given the size of the reader and viewer audiences involved [S1] – has enabled PMP's research to inform readers on an extensive scale. For example, Nick Cohen's *Guardian* article attracted 4659 Facebook downloads and 856 comments. An article citing PMP work in the *Independent* by Ashley Cowburn (8 September 2017) was shared 739 times on social media, attracting 439 comments. Anushka Asthana's *Guardian* article was shared 8259 times, attracting 1386 comments; she cited the evidence again in a subsequent article (24 July 2017) which was shared 938 times and attracted 4236 comments – and then was cited again by Polly Toynbee (25 July 2017), shared 3961 times on Facebook, attracting 2565 comments. An article written by the PMP team for the BBC Website in May 2019 attracted more than 1.1 million views [see Tom Edgington statement, S2.11].

Analysis of social media responses to the project [S3] shows that the PMP has reached a wide and engaged audience on Twitter and Facebook. On Facebook, the number of PMP article shares steadily increased to nearly 20,000 over the course of the project, with the number of comments and reactions increasing to over 60,000 for each measure, which demonstrates that users are engaging with the material [S3, Figure 1]. The analysis set out in S3 also shows that the average reach of journalists tweeting PMP work is 175,001, and calculates that PMP-related articles have appeared on Twitter users' feeds over 8.5 million times in 2019-2020 alone.

#### **Impact on political parties' strategies and parliamentary processes**

Political parties have used Webb's PMP research to inform their understanding, policy and practice. This was deliberately facilitated through a number of activities and presentations to the parties, and one substantial non-technical report that summarised many of the key findings for distribution to all MPs (as well as major media outlets) – [Grassroots](#) (2018). The team has disseminated key findings to Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats and the Green Party of England & Wales (GPEW) in face-to-face briefings and presentations to head office professionals. In addition, presentations have been delivered to the annual conferences of the Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Green parties and UKIP, to the London Liberal Democrats' annual conference, and to public events organised by the Electoral Reform Society, and the Social Market Foundation. Webb featured prominently in all but two of these party presentations (the Conservative and UKIP conferences). In all, the team has undertaken more than a dozen direct engagements with political parties to inform them of its research.

Corroborating statements and evidence pertaining to these activities are collated in [S4]. These include evidence from Iain McNicol, Labour's General Secretary from 2011-18 [S4.1]: 'The qualitative and quantitative analysis the team set out contributed to our HQ's understanding of members' preferences and priorities'; Anita Boateng, special advisor to the Conservative Party Chair [S4.2]: PMP 'proved a really useful additional contribution to our understanding of our members and potential members, and helped inform our strategy going forward'; and Mark Pack, President of the Liberal Democrats [S4.3]: 'The Party Members Project is an invaluable source of insight into party membership, providing information that goes well beyond the internal data held by the Liberal Democrats... It has repeatedly influenced decisions we have taken about our approach to recruiting and mobilising members'. Pack also published a review of *Footsoldiers* in which he asserted the importance of its messages about membership recruitment and mobilization. Liberal Democrat Federal Board member William Dyer published an article in the Liberal Democrat National Newsletter to members citing PMP research findings, following a presentation by Webb to Liberal Democrat headquarters staff on 20 March 2019 [S4.4].

Crucially, Labour peer Baroness Hayter pointed out the impact of PMP research on the party's leadership contest in 2020 [S4.5]: 'The New year poll of Labour members showing Keir Starmer as first choice for Leader did two things. It showed MPs making nominations that their first choice resounded with members. And it completely energised Starmer's potential supporters who realised they could win, and that the hard work to come was likely to pay off. A pivotal point

in the subsequent election.’ As noted above, the effects of these findings were also reflected in the betting market [S7].

A presentation made by Webb to Green Party staff in January 2018 led directly to the party commissioning Webb and Bale to undertake further research on political strategy (the confidential *Issue saliency analysis report for Green Party of England & Wales*), which Webb summarised and presented at the party conference in October 2018. Nick Martin, former CEO of the Green Party, has confirmed its impact [S4.6]: ‘your report helped me and others hold the line strategically against those who wanted some sort of appeal to the whole electorate on a more narrow environmentalist pitch. Your analysis helped maintain an evidence base to what the Party was doing and helped retain a focus on available or potentially available electors.’ The Greens’ former Policy & Governance Manager, Matthew Browne, confirmed that the report ‘informed the Green Party’s political positioning, being used as evidence to inform Political Strategy Reviews held in January and August 2019. The report has also been used by the General Election Preparation Group, to guide Green Party Manifesto drafting and messaging...’ [S4.7]. One of the key messages of the report was that the party needed to emphasize Green housing and transport issues. As Nick Martin says in his email, ‘I think that the work you and Tim did for the party was influential in various choices, e.g. I think you will see quite a lot of coverage of housing in the party’s programme and/or manifesto.’ [S4.6]. Housing was subsequently the second section of the 2019 manifesto (after a green new deal for energy), followed by transport (another issue emphasized in the report) [S5]. All party proposals on these subjects were in line with PMP recommendations.

PMP’s written submission to the Chakrabarti Inquiry on anti-Semitism in the Labour Party used the 2016 PMP survey of Labour members to show the extent to which anti-Semitism was regarded as a problem in the Labour Party by its own grassroots, and how such views tended to split along factional lines (with supporters of Jeremy Corbyn far less inclined to believe the party had an anti-Semitism problem than his internal opponents). Subsequently, the House of Commons Select Committee on Home Affairs Report into anti-Semitism in the UK cited PMP research on the attitudes of party members several times [S6]. In particular, the Report is critical of the Chakrabarti Inquiry’s conduct and conclusions, largely because of a sense of complacency regarding the extent of the problem. PMP research was one of the evidential sources on which the Select Committee drew [S6, p.40].

In May 2019, as a direct result of PMP research, PMP advised MPs Stella Creasy & Lisa Nandy about the demographic profile of a proposed Citizens’ Assembly of Labour members on Brexit. Creasy said: ‘just want to say thank you so much for your help with our together against Brexit stuff - it definitely shifted things in Labour’ [S4.8].

Finally, the Head of General & Social Statistics at the House of Commons Library has confirmed the usefulness of PMP data for the Library’s work in briefing MPs, the media and external users, citing it as being ‘routinely in our “top 10” downloaded briefings on social statistics – typically it is downloaded around 400 times a week’ [S4.9]. In particular, PMP research informed a House of Commons Research Briefing on party members (9 August 2019).

#### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

- S1. Collated evidence of media engagement and outputs.
- S2. Collated statements of support from media contacts.
- S3. Social media impact report for ESRC Party Members Project.
- S4. Collated evidence of impact activity and support from parties and parliamentary sources.
- S5. Green Party of England & Wales general election manifesto 2019, sections 2 & 3 (pp.13-17).
- S6. Report of the House of Commons Select Committee on Home Affairs into Anti-Semitism in the UK, October 2016: see pp.3, 4, 19, 40 & 46.
- S7. Evidence of odds on Labour leadership contest after results of our Labour membership poll were published on 1 January 2020.

*All supplied as PDF files.*