Institution: Queen Mary University of London	
Unit of Assessment: 19 Politics and International Studies	
Title of case study: Busting Myths and Boosting Engagement: Transforming how the British Media and Politicians Understand Political Party Members	

Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: September 2012-2020

Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:

Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed:
Tim Bale	Professor of Politics	2012-Present
Monica Poletti	Postdoc Research Fellow	2015-2019

Period when the impact occurred: 2015-2020

Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N

1. Summary of the impact

Research by Professor Bale has shaped how political party membership in Britain is represented within news media and by parties themselves. The project has enabled a more accurate representation of the views of party members with regards to key social and political issues, and of the record and conduct of their leaderships accordingly. This has directly informed the discourse of the news media and political parties themselves in two key respects: (a) understanding of who joins (and leaves) political parties and why; and (b) considering what members' views are on crucial political developments, including the Brexit process and its impact on members' relationship with party leaderships. The project's data and analyses have also served to shape politicians' and parties' own responses to key issues facing their membership subsequently, including reports of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, the contribution members make to campaigning, and attitudes on Brexit.

2. Underpinning research

Bale's ESRC-funded research – the Party Members Project (PMP) - has coincided with a dramatic period of upheaval in British politics. Jointly developed with Paul Webb (Sussex) and Monica Poletti (Queen Mary) and preceded by a pilot project with Conservative Party members in 2013, it initially sought to explain why party membership was declining, but the surge of several parties' memberships presented a new puzzle to solve [3.1, 3.2]. The EU referendum outcome provoked new questions about members' views on Brexit. Growing concern on key issues also led the PMP to explore the extent of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism among members and to probe members' preferences in a number of leadership contests that determined the economic, social and diplomatic policy direction of the parties involved [3.2]. The PMP initially ran from 2015-18, before continuing with a second extension of ESRC funding into 2019-2020 to cover the 2019 general election.

Prior to the PMP, no scholars had been able to undertake research on the members of several parties simultaneously. The PMP has therefore undertaken hitherto unparalleled, survey-based research on the nature, attitudes, and behaviour of the members of six parties: The Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, UKIP (and later the registered supporters of the Brexit Party), the Greens, and the SNP [3.3]. The PMP is built on pioneering work from the 1990s, but also draws on comparative research insights (from the *Members and Activists of Political Parties* project based at ULB in Belgium). It has pioneered the use of internet panels in order to survey party members simultaneously and – crucially – independently of the parties themselves. In addition, Bale and colleagues also conducted interviews with party managers and politicians in order to look at the demand as well as the supply-side of membership [3.3, 3.4]. Key goals included understanding the characteristics of party members, why people join and leave parties, what members do during election campaigns, and members' views and expectations of how parties are and should be run, including their views on leadership and candidate selection [3.4, 3.5]. The 2015 surveys were supplemented by voter surveys of partisans who were not party members, as well as surveys of members of unions affiliated to the Labour Party.

Evidence produced by the PMP has at times lent empirical support to otherwise 'common sense' perceptions about party members, but it has also generated findings that have run contrary to the expectations of professional journalists and policymakers. Some key results include:

- Members' demographic characteristics sometimes differed from widely held expectations, with implications for inclusion, diversity and sustainability, as well as leadership contest outcomes. For example, Conservative Party members were found to be overwhelming male (70/30), while Labour Party members were much older and middle-class than discussion of the "Corbyn youthquake" suggested. The surge of new Labour members may in part have been driven by the 'educated left-behind,' but they were accompanied by a lot of re-joiners who felt they had 'got their party back' [3.2, 3.4, 3.5].
- Members' views on Brexit differed sharply from both voters' views and parties' policies. Conservative members became increasingly keen on a hard or no-deal Brexit (which contributed to Johnson provoking and winning the 2019 leadership contest), while Labour members were intensely pro-Remain and Second Referendum (which had a bearing on Keir Starmer winning the leadership in 2020) [3.3].
- Anti-Semitism, and the dismissal of such, in the Labour Party was a serious problem, as was Islamophobia in the Conservative Party [3.3, 3.7].
- Members' (offline) activism is often related to feeling part of a local party's social network and/or career ambition, although non-member supporters do a lot of (less intensive) campaigning and could perhaps be persuaded to join if parties cleared up some misperceptions about the commitment involved [3.7].
- The primarily ideological, but to some extent social, reasons people join parties nowadays differ little from those first revealed three decades ago [3.1].
- Political parties lose as well as gain lots of members. This is mainly attributable to disagreement with the ideological direction their leaders are pursuing, meaning administrative approaches to retention have their limitations [3.1, 3.3].

3. References to the research

[3.1] Bale, T., Webb, P., & Poletti, M. (2019). *Footsoldiers: Political Party Membership in the 21st Century*. Routledge.

[3.2] Whiteley, P., Poletti, M., Webb, P., & Bale, T. (2019). Oh Jeremy Corbyn! Why did Labour Party membership soar after the 2015 general election? *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 21*(1), 80-98. doi.org/10.1177/1369148118815408

[3.3] Bale, T., Poletti, M., & Webb, P. (2019). Not exactly a mirror image. British parties' members and voters compared. In Heidar, K., & Wauters, B. (Eds.) *Do Parties Still Represent? An Analysis of the Representativeness of Political Parties in Western Democracies*. Routledge. doi.org/10.4324/9781351110952

[3.4] Bale, T., Webb, P., & Poletti, M. (2019). Participating locally and nationally: explaining the offline and online activism of British party members. *Political Studies*, *67*(3), 658-675. doi.org/10.1177/0032321718794740

[3.5] Webb, P., Bale, T., & Poletti, M. (2020). Social networkers and careerists: Explaining high-intensity activism among British party members. *International Political Science Review*, *41*(2), 255-270. doi.org/10.1177/0192512118820691

[3.6] Poletti, M., Webb, P., & Bale, T. (2019). Why do only some people who support parties actually join them? Evidence from Britain. *West European Politics*, *42*(1), 156-172. doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2018.1479921

[3.7] Webb, P., Poletti, M., & Bale, T. (2017). So who really does the donkey work in 'multi-speed membership parties'? Comparing the election campaign activity of party members and party supporters. *Electoral Studies*, *46*, 64-74. doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2017.02.002

4. Details of the impact

Direct influence on journalistic reporting and public understanding of UK party membership

Bale's research has directly affected how British political party membership is reported on, and understood, across national and international news media. This has in turn affected the reception of and engagement with British political party membership in the public sphere at large. PMP has provided an essential empirical basis for evidence-based journalism in the UK and internationally across a range of issues affecting British political parties [5.1]. PMP's findings have directly influenced how key journalists and commentators – and their readers - understand the country's party memberships in reporting on political developments [5.1.2, 5.1.3]. Analysis of PMP's media reach shows that since the project's inception at least 31 articles referencing PMP findings have been published in *The Guardian/Observer*, 17 in *The Independent*, 3 in the *Financial Times*, 7 in *The Telegraph*, 6 in *The Times* (including Red Box), 2 in the *Washington Post*, 4 in the *Daily Mail*, 5 in the *Daily Express*, 4 in the *Daily Mirror* and 6 in *The Sun*. In addition, BBC News and Sky News have posted at least 6 and 3 articles, respectively, using PMP findings. Many articles have also been published in alternative publications such as Huffington Post, *New Statesman*, LSE Blogs and partisan sites such as Labour List and ConservativeHome [5.3]. Bale and his colleagues have also been able to trail a significant amount of the project's findings [3.1-3.7] across a range of media outlets in advance of their (conventionally slower) academic publication, doing so 7 times in *The Guardian* (print readership: 3,600,000; circulation: 111,953), *The Independent*, *New Statesman* (circulation: 37,828), and the *Washington Post*, among others [5.2].

PMP's findings about the demographics (relatively middle-aged, well-heeled, and well-educated) and attitudes (even more socially-liberal than left-wing) of Labour Party members – especially newer members who turned out, for instance, not to be so young – helped to explain and even predict Corbyn's re-election as party leader in 2016. As Tom Edgington, Senior Broadcast Journalist for BBC News attests, PMP 'has proved to be a highly valuable resource for engaging storytelling. It's offered audiences a unique insight into attitudes toward party membership – something that would have otherwise been very difficult to capture. This has been especially important in providing greater context and understanding to the leadership victor[y] of Jeremy Corbyn' [5.1.13]. Similarly, the project's findings about the demographics (relatively old and well-off, not so well educated) and attitudes (even more socially conservative than they were economically Thatcherite) of Conservative Party members helped to explain and even predict Johnson's election in 2019. As Heather Stewart, Political Editor of *The Guardian* has stated: 'when the Project's research revealed that Conservative grassroots members rejected Theresa May's "Chequers" Brexit deal, preferring to run the gauntlet of no deal. It was that tide of opinion that eventually propelled Boris Johnson to the premiership' [5.1.4].

From the summer of 2017 onwards, the project showed that Labour Party members were overwhelmingly pro-Remain and pro-Referendum, and much more so than Labour voters and the Labour leadership, helping to explain and to intensify the latter's dilemma over Brexit. The empirical basis of this finding had a significant influence on journalists' reporting, as Anushka Asthana of ITV's Peston has explained: 'The stand-out example of the Project making a difference would be the teams' findings in the summer of 2017 pointing to just how pro-EU Labour's membership really was – something many guessed but until then had no hard data on' [5.1.5]. In addition, the finding released in January 2019, that Conservative supporters had swung dramatically towards not just a hard Brexit but actually favoured a "no deal" was something of a game-changer, as Sam Coates, Deputy Political Editor of Sky News explains: 'the Project showing in January 2019 that most of Theresa May's own rank and file preferred no deal to her deal had a big impact on Tory MPs' [5.1.6].

In January 2020, when many members were still reserving their judgement when asked unprompted, media (not least SkyNews and *The Guardian*) reported the projects' discovery that Keir Starmer was the standout front-runner in the Labour Party leadership contest. Until that point, much media reporting had assumed that a continuity Corbyn candidate would be performing more strongly. There was also a presumption that different leadership qualities were valued more highly by the supporters of particular candidates and that Momentum members were not as keen on the organisation's preferred candidate as its executive. PMP research on the Lib Dems also made it clear that Ed Davey was the clear front runner among members in the contest, which would take place later that year, even to the point of getting very close to the actual result (see supporting statements from journalists [5.1.6-5.1.9]; see also [5.4]).

With respect to anti-Semitism, the project showed that the problem within the Labour Party – at the grassroots level – was a real one, although one about which a substantial proportion of members were effectively in denial, choosing instead to see the issue as an attack on their leader. The project's discovery of previous levels of Islamophobic prejudice among a substantial minority of Conservative Party members, at least in terms of their willingness to see more Muslim candidates selected, suggested that concerns voiced by, among others, Sayeeda Warsi, were borne out in reality [3.1]. The import of this finding is reflected in the testimony of several leading journalists, including Nick Cohen of *The Observer*, who writes, 'I have found the Party Members Project to be an incredibly useful reference point. In writing about racism, it has given me real data rather than anecdotal observations on the extent of Islamophobia on the right and anti-Semitism on the left. At a time when party members have so much power over MPs and leaders, it provides an anchor in fact for anyone discussing Westminster politics' [5.1.11].

In February 2020, media reported the project's finding that a very substantial minority of Labour members blamed not only Brexit for the party's defeat, but a supposedly biased mainstream media. For Sienna Rodgers, the editor of LabourList, PMP has been 'incredibly useful to us in helping to provide our already well-informed readers with some research-backed evidence on what the party at the grassroots is thinking, whether it be about particular issues, like Brexit, or about the leadership' [5.1.12].

Based on the evidence and its reach, the project's extensive media engagement has thus shaped and advanced public understanding. Key outlets on which the research has been featured heavily reach millions of people, including ITV's Peston, where Bale and his colleague were the first to be awarded "geek of the week" three times, which has a live-TV audience of over half a million [5.1.14]. Journalists tweeting about PMP's research have on average 181,000 followers, and social media analysis suggests that the project's research findings appeared nearly 25 million times on users' feeds as a result [5.3]. The project made two contributions to the BBC's news website on the Tory members who would be electing the next leader, which received well over 1 million hits. As the senior BBC journalist Tom Edgington attests in respect of the first website contribution, there were 'total page views: 1,141,413 and total engagement: 1:00. Engagement is how long someone stays on the page before they click away. Typically, we'd be happy with anything over 30 seconds. So, to get a full 1:00 is incredibly strong and very rare. It shows that most readers were really engaged with your story and many got to the end of the article. In terms of youth reach, 33.2% of readers were between 18-34 years old. Anything over is 30% good. And to get 33%, especially for a politics story, is excellent' [5.1.13].

Improving understanding of party membership amongst Politicians, Political Parties and Parliament, and enhancing their engagement with members
Bale's research has transformed how political parties understand the views of their membership, and how they engage with them accordingly. The project team was invited to give direct, face-to-face briefings and presentations at the party HQs of four of the six parties surveyed: Labour, the Conservatives, the Lib Dems and the Greens. The briefings/consultancy for political parties also allowed party managers to better understand their own members and improve the way they engaged with them [see statements from Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives [5.4.1-5.4.5]. As Anita Boateng, former Special Advisor to the Chairman of the Conservative Party

makes clear, 'at a time when the party was looking closely at recruitment and retention of members, I was particularly interested in the work of the Party Members Project. We invited one of the members of the team to come in and present to us in CCHQ on the demographics, attitudes and motivations of Conservative Party members. The presentation proved a really useful additional contribution to our understanding of our members and potential members and helped inform our strategy going forward' [5.4.1].

The PMP's findings on anti-Semitism in the Labour Party, initially submitted to (but not – perhaps significantly – quoted in) the Chakrabati Inquiry, informed a parliamentary inquiry. The Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC) Report on Antisemitism in the UK (HC136, 16 October 2016) cited the research, and it clearly informed the serious criticism of the party's handling of the issue in addition to the recommendation that parties use the suggested reforms in their training and disciplining of activists and members [5.5]. The Committee on Standards in Public Life's Report on Intimidation in Public Life (Cm9543, December 2017) also cited PMP's research on social media use by party members, which informed the Committee's recommendations that both platforms and parties seek to regulate and discourage such behaviour far more rigorously than they have in the past [5.6].

Finally, the research findings also directly shaped the authoritative House of Commons Library Research Briefings on Membership of UK Political Parties (SN05125). Each of these periodic reports, which breakdown developments in and the demographics of party membership throughout the country, cited the research over five full pages with graphics [5.7].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[5.1] [Testimonies] Journalists with contact details to enable verification [Corroborator 1]

[5.2] [Press] Dossier of media reports in which results were trailed [Corroborator 2]

[5.3] [Media] PMP's media reach

[5.4] [Testimonies] Dossier of engagement with parties [Corroborator 3]

[5.5] [Report] Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC). Antisemitism in the UK (HC136, 16 October 20016), p. 4 & 40.

[5.6] [Report] Committee on Standards in Public Life's. Intimidation in Public Life (Cm9543, December 2017), p.48.

[5.7] [Report] House of Commons Library Research Briefings on Membership of UK Political Parties (SN05125), latest report August 2019, pp. 19-22.