

Book Review | Footsoldiers: Political Party Membership in the 21st Century



*Although tens of millions of adults turn out to vote at UK general elections having decided which party's policies and leaders they prefer, very few of them join those parties, let alone actively participate in and promote them. Who are those few, why do they join and what do they do? Ron Johnston reviews the latest book reporting on party member surveys, **Footsoldiers: Political Party Membership in the 21st Century** by Tim Bale, Paul Webb and Monica Poletti.*

Footsoldiers: Political Party Membership in the 21st Century. Tim Bale, Paul Webb and Monica Poletti. Routledge. 2020.

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Political parties need members – for their subscriptions, for providing them with links into local communities and, perhaps most importantly, for their contributions to electoral campaigns. But who do they recruit, and how; do their members differ not only from the general population but also from among their own supporters; and having joined, to what extent do they participate; and do they stay as members? Considerable research on British political parties and their members has addressed such questions over the last four decades, but the rapidly changing political landscape makes it desirable to revisit them.

The general trend over recent decades has been for a decline in membership numbers for the country's main political parties, reflecting the patterns of partisan and class dealignment that have characterised the period and the widening range of formal and informal activities available to most people, not least the young. But there have been substantial – if not necessarily permanent – recent deviations from that trend: the Liberal Democrats lost a considerable number of members as a consequence of their 2010-15 participation in a coalition government with the Conservatives, and then started to grow again after their decimation by their former allies at the 2015 general election; the Scottish National Party failed in its attempt to win an independence referendum in 2014, after which its membership boomed and it achieved its best-ever general election result in 2015; and Labour's membership also expanded very substantially after that election and following the subsequent contests for the party leadership won by an avowed left-wing candidate who drew a large number of young people to join.

Context – time and place – are thus important in the parties' fortunes, and several have responded to such contextual variations by creating new membership categories, such as supporters, who for reduced subscriptions compared to full members have fewer rights. Those changes are set out at the start of [Footsoldiers](#), the new book by Tim Bale, Paul Webb and Monica Poletti, drawing on what the parties have published plus the findings of earlier (mainly late-twentieth-century) surveys.

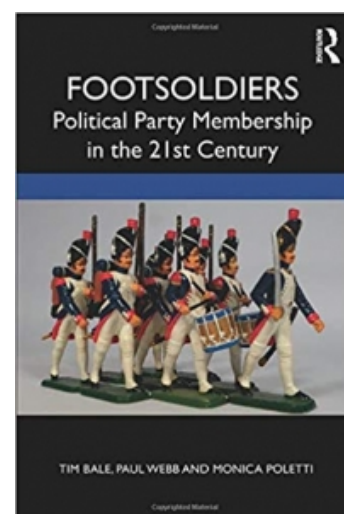




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The remainder of the book is based on two surveys conducted in summer 2015 and 2017 (soon after the UK general elections then, although Northern Ireland parties are not considered), with a linked panel and a number of other surveys. These focused on individuals in the polling firm YouGov's large panel of interviewees who self-identified as either members or strong supporters of one of six parties: Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, United Kingdom Independence (UKIP), Green and Scottish National (SNP). Data from the parallel British Election Study panel survey (drawn from the same database) are also deployed in some chapters to compare each party's members with those who voted for it but were not members, but there are few baseline data on the electorate as a whole.

Those survey data are deployed in the next six chapters that in turn address specific questions: 'who are the members?'; 'what do party members think?'; 'why do people join parties?'; 'what do members think of their parties and how they operate?'; and 'why do members leave their parties?'. A further chapter – 'how parties see membership' – draws on other sources.

The core of the book is thus the discussion of a substantial number of 'raw' data tabulations – sufficient but not overwhelming. General patterns emerge – well-summarised in the concluding chapter – regarding, for example, the types of people who join political parties ('relatively old, relatively well-off and relatively well educated'). There are also important inter-party variations: Green party members tend to be younger, for example; Conservatives are concentrated in the south of England; and Labour members are most likely to work in the public sector.

In terms of their political views, the survey respondents are clustered into four types according to their position on two main scales, Left-Right and Libertarian-Authoritarian. These types are the Libertarian Left (38 per cent of the total); the Conventional Centre (24 per cent); the Authoritarian Left (21 per cent); and the Authoritarian Right (17 per cent) – although different names are used in parts of the text (Libertarian becomes 'Socially Liberal' and Authoritarian 'Socially Conservative'). Different parties draw largely from particular types – Labour and the Greens predominantly from the 'Socially Liberal Left', for example, and the Conservatives from the 'Socially Conservative Right'. And then Brexit came along and created a further divide.

Why do people join political parties? Largely, it seems, because they favour their policy positions. To a lesser extent, because of their leaders and the wish to promote them – and to counter their opponents. They tend to leave when they disagree with either the policies or the leader, or both (assuming that they didn't just forget to renew their subscriptions). Relatively few do very much – they can't be called activists. Some attend constituency or ward/branch meetings but their most important roles are being involved – with non-member supporters – during election campaigns, in the streets and on doorsteps. And those most likely to make such commitments of time tend to be members who are integrated into the (usually local) party socially. People may join a party because they believe in the cause, but they are most likely to work hard for that cause if they socialise with other members. Even so, less than half feel that the experience of being a party member has lived up to their expectations, in many cases because they want to have more influence on party policy and decisions – footsoldiers who want to influence the officers.

What of the future? Increasingly politics is going digital and an increasing proportion of a party's contacts with voters, real and potential, is through impersonal modes, mediated by party professionals and consultancy companies, using money gained from sources other than member subscriptions. Will there still be roles for party members, delivering leaflets, encountering voters on the street and the doorstep, feeding back local views through the party managerial hierarchies? We know that a large percentage of voters, including party members, want representatives (MPs as well as local government councillors) who are local, and presumably they will want their local social support networks. But who will want to join the party, and stay in it? Will they be satisfied with the few rewards they get – perhaps helping to select local candidates – for their commitment to the cause? And will the parties have to do more creating social milieux within which members will integrate?

Footsoldiers is full of valuable contemporary data, updating information of party members within a clear theoretical framework – though it appeared this summer not long before another general election at which one of its six parties (UKIP) was but a trace of its former (brief) self and its successor (the Brexit party) was rapidly waning after waxing early in the year. *Plus ça change*, but will the characteristics of party members remain stable?

Most of the book's analysis is reliant on descriptive data only, some of which should probably have been weighted to give a better overview. There is little rigorous data analysis – some of the tables have associated Cramer's V and η^2 statistics, but readers are not guided on their interpretation. There are two appendices with more 'advanced' statistical analyses, but these are unconvincing. And there are summaries of more detailed studies published elsewhere in academic journals. The general pictures provided are undoubtedly valid, but more sophisticated analyses could have given them greater credibility without, if well-presented, overpowering a non-academic audience. (And do these academic data tell the parties anything they didn't already know?)

Nonetheless, *Footsoldiers* is a solid contribution to a central topic in British electoral study.

Note: The above was [first published](#) on LSE Review of Books.



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