

# **Attitudinal, Motivational and Media Usage Factors Influencing the Decision of the Young Politically Engaged to Join a Political Party: An Investigation of the Canadian Case<sup>1</sup>**

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## Abstract

Situated in the literature concerning the decline of party members, and the dearth of young party members, this paper considers the factors that influence the decision of a politically engaged young person to join, or not join, a political party. Making use of a unique data set, we examine the attitudes and socialization of a large group of politically active young Canadians that includes a significant number of both party members and non party members. The paper finds significant attitudinal differences towards political parties with non members highly suspicious of parties in terms of their general democratic performance, their efficacy in achieving social and political change and in the ability of grassroots members to influence party decision making. We also find important socialization effects, with the most significant being that young party members are considerably more likely than non members to have a parent who is a party member. Recruitment through family members appears to be a principal path to party membership for young voters.

Key words: political parties, interest groups, members, political participation and Canada.

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## ***Introduction***

A large number of recent studies conclude that membership in western political parties is generally in decline (Scarrow 2000, Seyd and Whiteley 2004, Pedersen et al 2004, Mair and van Biezen 2001 and Webb, Farrell and Holliday 2002). Party scholars argue that this trend raises questions about the continued effectiveness of parties as bridges between civil society and government. With their membership numbers declining, parties risk becoming increasingly detached from the voters they are meant to represent. Seyd and Whiteley (2004) suggest that the roles members have traditionally played as ‘ambassadors’ of the party in their community and their function as political communicators between civil society and the political party leadership are jeopardized by their declining numbers.

Beyond a decline in membership numbers, the party member studies share a finding of a pronounced under representation of young voters within the parties. As Pedersen et al conclude of the Danish case: “The young are strongly underrepresented and the old strongly overrepresented among party members” (2004, 372). Writing on the Irish case, Gallagher and Marsh (2004, 412) find that “the members are middle aged, if not elderly, with an estimated average age of 52.” Seyd and Whiteley (1992, 1994) find similar patterns in the British case with the average age of Conservative party membership being 62, while Cross and Young (2004) report the average age of a Canadian party member at 59.

Mair and van Biezen (2001, 14) suggest that the general decline in party membership is somewhat paradoxical as citizens “appear to be as supportive of the idea of democracy as ever they were. Nowadays, however, they do not appear to be quite so willing to involve themselves in actively maintaining the very institutions which democracy requires if it is to thrive.” In their studies of the Canadian case, O’Neill (2001) and Gidengil et al (2004) report similar findings relating to young citizens who they find are not particularly disillusioned with politics and, in fact, in comparison with older age cohorts often indicate greater satisfaction with democracy and political institutions. Nonetheless, consistent with findings throughout western democracies, they are voting in dramatically lower numbers and few are joining parties.

There is some suggestion, however, that while many younger citizens may be absenting themselves from the political sphere, a significant corps continue to be involved just not through

the traditional institutions such as political parties. This is consistent with the arguments of Inglehart (1990) and Nevitte (1996) relating to a value shift among younger cohorts of voters. Their argument essentially is that younger, post materialist, voters reject hierarchical forms of political participation but do not reject, or lack interest in, politics per se. As O'Neill (2001, 8) argues: "Younger generations are more likely to engage in 'new politics,' ... and to be involved with non-traditional institutions and processes such as grassroots social movements and protest behaviour."

These findings suggest an important challenge for political parties: the attraction of engaged young citizens to party membership. If parties are to be vital organizations with significant ties to civil society they require members. They are not likely to find these new recruits from among those youth who are not interested in politics. Rather, a more fertile strategy for increasing their numbers of young members might be recruitment efforts aimed at attracting youth who are engaged in alternative methods of politics. This is likely easier said than done. As Inglehart suggests, members of this group are likely to have explicitly rejected traditional forms of hierarchical political participation and instead opted for more direct, egalitarian methods.

In order to consider the likelihood of parties' ability to reenergize themselves by recruiting larger numbers of young partisans, we need to know considerably more about the attitudes and socialization of both engaged youth who do choose to join political parties and of those who reject parties in favour of political participation through other means. We are not interested here in youth who have 'tuned out' of public and political affairs, but rather in better understanding the reasons why among the significant pool of engaged youth some choose to join political parties while many others do not. By better understanding the attitudinal and socialization differences between those engaged youth who choose to join parties and those who do not, we will have a fuller understanding of how parties may, or may not, be able to reform themselves to become generally more attractive to this cohort of engaged young citizens. In order to consider this question we examine the Canadian case.

### *The Canadian Context*

In Canada, as in other industrialized democracies, there is compelling evidence that political parties are in decline as membership organizations (Cross and Young 2004). Juxtaposed against this trend is evidence of marked generational change, in which significant numbers of young Canadians are tuning out of the formal political arena, as evidenced by declining rates of voter turnout, political knowledge, and political interest (Gidengil et al, 2004). This paper is located at the intersection between these two trends, focusing on the decline in young Canadians' propensity to join political parties.

This research design is predicated on two assumptions: that the rate at which young people are joining political parties is in decline, and that young people show a discernible preference for advocacy-type organizations over political parties. There is ample evidence supporting the first assumption in the Canadian context. The 2000 Study of Canadian Political Party Members (SCPPM), found a remarkable dearth of young Canadians involved in federal political parties. The data indicate that the average age of a member of the five major Canadian federal parties was 59. While 11 per cent of Canadians were between the ages of 18 and 25 in that year, only 3 per cent of party members were 25 or younger (Cross and Young 2004). Analysis of the SCPPM data suggests that this trend did not reflect earlier patterns of recruitment: of the party members over the age of 25, fully one-in-five had joined their party before their twenty-fifth birthday. Mass surveys confirm this trend. A study conducted by the Institute for Research on Public Policy found that only one-in-twenty Canadians age 18-30 has ever belonged to a political party (either federal or provincial), compared to one-third of those over age 60 (Howe and Northrup 2000). The same question was asked in a survey conducted in 1990; at that time, one-in-ten respondents aged 18-30 reported having belonged to a party.

The low rate of youth membership in Canadian parties currently stands in sharp contrast to the situation only a generation ago. Perlin et al (1988) review the formal status accorded to youth in the major parties of the day and analyze surveys of delegates to the 1983 Conservative and 1984 Liberal leadership conventions. They express a strong concern that the over-representation of youth in party decision making was distorting parties' internal democratic processes. Twenty

years later, such concerns have little currency. The shift toward plebiscitary forms of decision-making in Canadian parties has weakened youth organizations and reduced opportunities for young people to exert influence over leadership contests and other party decisions.

The second assumption -- that the decline in party membership contributes to a rise in activism through advocacy-type organizations--is more difficult to demonstrate conclusively. Certainly, public opinion data show that Canadians born after 1971 are the only age group more likely to report membership in an interest group than a political party (Young and Everitt 2005, 31). Consistent with this, O'Neill (2001) finds that Canadians 18-27 years of age are four-and-one-half times more likely to belong to an interest group than a political party. This contrasts with a ratio of less than 1 to 1 for older age groups. Perhaps even more troubling to parties, she finds that of the 98 per cent of members of this youngest cohort who do not belong to parties, 97 per cent have never even considered joining a political party. She concludes that: "Interest groups are more likely to be the organization of choice for younger Canadians who wish to participate politically. Among older Canadians, political parties come out ahead" (2001, 14). Younger Canadians are also more inclined than their older counterparts to indicate that membership in an interest group is a more effective means of achieving political change than belonging to a political party (Howe and Northrup 2000). All of this leads us to believe it is plausible to assume that those young people who might have joined a political party a generation ago are now more likely to channel their activism through an advocacy group.

Our approach is consistent with Whiteley's findings from a multi level analysis of party activism across 22 European countries. He finds that a lack of generational replacement explains the decline in party membership as existing party activists are not being replaced by younger cohorts of volunteers. He suggests that: "Young cohorts of political activists prefer to get involved in single interest pressure groups and in other types of voluntary organizations, rather than in parties" (2007, 2)

Given that there are so few youth party members today, and that the available evidence suggests many older members first joined when they were 18-25 year olds, the parties face the possibility of a steep decline in their memberships. This has potentially profound implications for Canadian democracy. Political parties occupy a crucial role in Canadian democracy, and one that is

privileged by their institutionalisation in the electoral process and parliamentary arena (Cross 2004). A large majority of Canadians believes that parties are an essential part of Canadian democracy (Blais and Gidengil 1991, 20). Even among the youngest cohort of voters, seven-in-ten agree with this sentiment (O'Neill 2001, 14). The central role of political parties in Canadian democratic life makes the question of why young Canadians are reluctant to participate in these organizations of central importance, both to our understanding of political parties and to the functioning of Canadian democracy. If parties are increasingly unable to attract and retain youth members, they are at risk of becoming shells dominated by electoral and political professionals without an activist corps to provide the important linkages between civil society and those who govern.

The decline of parties literature (see, for example, Dalton and Wattenberg 2000, Meisel 1991) and the literature on the professionalization of parties and resulting dependence on new technologies over volunteer person-power (Panebianco 1988, Butler and Ranney 1992, Cross 2004, Whitaker 2001) reflect this risk of parties becoming member-less shells. Because parties have traditionally been viewed as bridges between civil society and government, as a means for socializing new groups of Canadians into politics, and as offering opportunity for wide spread grassroots participation in Canadian politics, the possibility of parties losing their membership base is cause for considerable concern (see, Carty et al 2000).<sup>1</sup>

### ***Methodology***

Our purpose in this paper is to better understand the factors which lead some engaged youth to join political parties and many others to reject parties. We are interested in exploring the views of engaged young citizens towards political parties and advocacy groups in ways that will assist us in better understanding the attitudinal dimensions that influence the decision to join a political party. We also explore some socialization and media usage variables primarily in order to determine whether there is a relationship between ones political exposure both in the home and at school and the likelihood of joining a political party.

In order to carry out this analysis we examine survey data gathered from a large group of engaged young Canadians. We conducted a mail survey of youth members (ages 18-25) of three federal

political parties (Liberals, New Democrats and Bloc Quebecois) between November 2003 and February 2004. We mailed surveys to 3,962 young party members from lists of members provided by the parties. After several reminder mailings, an overall response rate of 39 per cent was achieved. These three parties are located at the center and left of the Canadian political spectrum. Initial plans to survey youth members of the right of center Progressive Conservative and Canadian Alliance parties were rendered impossible when the two parties unexpectedly merged in the fall of 2003.

We also require data from members of the same age group who are politically aware and active, but have chosen not to join a political party. To find such a group, we focused on young Canadians who belong to advocacy type organizations. When we examine data from the young party members survey we find that the vast majority of respondents are either in post secondary education or are university graduates. More than seven in ten respondents are currently students, and of the remainder eight in ten have some post secondary education. Thus, an acceptable group for comparative purposes is comprised of current university students who are members of advocacy groups. Accordingly, we surveyed members of advocacy groups on five geographically dispersed university campuses (University of British Columbia, University of Calgary, Carleton University in Ottawa, universite de Montreal, and Mount Allison University in New Brunswick). On each campus we identified groups whose mandate includes a significant advocacy purpose and surveyed members attending group meetings. Examples of the types of groups surveyed include: Students for Life, Amnesty International, Students for a Free Tibet and Eco-Action. In total, approximately 600 useable surveys were completed.<sup>2</sup>

The absence of Conservative party youth members is not a significant problem in terms of comparing our party members to non members as fewer than eight per cent of our non members report that they voted for the new Conservative party in the 2004 general election. Thus, our sample primarily includes young party members of the centre-left with non members who support these same parties.

The two groups are not completely discrete in terms of party and advocacy group membership. Most of our party members are highly engaged in their communities belonging to all sorts of community and advocacy types of groups. In all, 98 per cent of our party members belong to

these types of voluntary organizations and more half of them devote ten hours or more a month to these activities.<sup>3</sup> Far fewer of our respondents who were captured through their advocacy group membership belong to political parties. There were 72 respondents who fell into this category. As we are interested in comparing party members with non members, from a universe of engaged young Canadians, we include these 72 individuals in our party members cohort.

The combined sample of youth activists encompasses what we might consider a future Canadian political elite. The respondents to our surveys are almost all currently engaged in post-secondary education, they have self-identified as being interested in politics, and they have acted on this interest by joining a political organization. While recognizing that there are many routes into politics over the course of a citizen's lifetime, we believe that the respondents to our survey offer us insight into patterns of elite political participation among the youngest generation of Canadian adults, and can tell us a great deal about the future of Canadian political parties as membership organizations.

To help determine what distinguishes those young Canadians who join political parties from their non-partisan counterparts, we develop a model using binary logistic regression, with party membership as the binary dependent variable. A series of independent variables tapping respondents' socio-demographic status, childhood and family socialization, and attitudes toward political parties and interest groups are employed as independent variables in the analysis.

The choice of logistic regression is appropriate for this analysis because of the character of the binary dependent variable. Although the analysis is being performed on a dataset that merges survey responses from young Canadians sampled in different waves, the questions employed in the analysis are identical, making such an analysis possible. The results of the logistic regression analysis must be interpreted with some caution, however. The sample on which the analysis is based does not purport to be a random sample of engaged young Canadians, so the proportion of party members in the sample is larger than would be found in a random sample. As such, it would be inappropriate to report the probability of joining a political party based on this sample. The coefficients reported in this paper can tell us which variables have the strongest effect on the likelihood of an engaged young Canadian joining a party; we cannot, however, use them to calculate actual probabilities of such an event.



Included in the analysis are four sets of independent variables: socio-demographics, socialization, media usage and evaluations of parties and interest groups. Each of these are discussed below, showing bivariate comparisons of party members versus non-members. They are followed by the full logistic regression analysis.

### ***Socio-Demographics***

Research in Canada and elsewhere demonstrates that political party membership is generally unrepresentative of the electorate in terms of age, socio-economic status, education and gender (Gallagher and Marsh 2002, Seyd and Whiteley 2004, Pederson et al 2004, Cross and Young 2004). In this study, several of these characteristics are essentially held constant: virtually all our respondents have some university education and they are all under the age of 26. The two socio-demographic characteristics that remain are gender and family income.

Given literature that suggests that women are more inclined to participate in non-political organizations (Schlozman et. al. 1994), and that women are substantially more likely than men to believe that joining an interest group is a more effective way to achieve change (Howe and Northrup 2000, 95), there is reason to believe that women will be less inclined toward partisan activism than their male counterparts.

This expectation is reflected in our sample, in which we find our party members are slightly more likely to be male (53 per cent) while our non members are predominantly female (59 per cent). Canada's university campuses are increasingly female dominated, with current enrolments being approximately 60 per cent female. Thus, we find that men are represented in our non member sample in proportionate numbers while they are dramatically over represented in the party member sample. Accordingly, it is important to control for gender in testing for the significance of our attitudinal, socialization and media usage variables.

We face a methodological challenge in terms of measuring income. Our expectation is that the political behaviour of our young respondents are influenced more by their families' income than their own personal income. Accordingly, we use this measure for purposes of controlling for

income. The difficulty is that we are reliant on the young respondents' report of their families' income – information that they may not accurately know.

A bi variate analysis finds only modest differences between the members and non members in terms of family income. One quarter of party members report family income of \$100,000 or greater compared with 27 per cent of non members; similarly, 29 per cent of members' families have income of less than \$50,000 compared with 23 per cent of non members.

### *Socialization*

There is a substantial body of literature suggesting that youth socialization in the home and school has an effect on political attitudes and behaviour (Hooghe and Stolle 2004, Galston 2001) and, as discussed below, there is an expectation in the literature on Canadian parties that many youth are socialized into partisanship by family members. We are interested in possible socialization effects that may influence the likelihood of engaged youth joining political parties. To measure these effects, we asked our respondents a series of questions relating to their exposure to politics in the home and at school, and about the partisan activities of their parents. As illustrated in Table 1, we find that there are significant differences between party members and non members on each of these measures.

**Table 1**  
**Respondents' political socialization (percentages and Ns reported)**

|   | Party members  | non party members |
|---|----------------|-------------------|
| did you take a Canadian government or politics class in high school (yes)                                   | 57.7<br>(1222) | 49.7<br>(499)     |
| Did you take a Canadian government or politics class in university or college (yes)                         | 48.1<br>(1149) | 37.9<br>(499)     |
| When you were growing up, how often did your family talk about politics (often and frequently)              | 72.5<br>(1233) | 63.7<br>(505)     |
| Have either of your parents ever belonged to a political party (yes)  | 62.0<br>(1230) | 28.4<br>(504)     |
| When you were growing up, was either of your parents involved in political activities (yes)                 | 51.3<br>(1231) | 26.7<br>(505)     |
| How active were your parents in community and volunteer activities when you were growing up (very/somewhat) | 73.7<br>(1229) | 66.2<br>(504)     |

(all differences between members and non members are significant at the .01 level)

This bivariate analysis suggests that parents may play a key role in a young person's decision to join a political party. Youth party members are more than twice as likely as engaged non members to have a parent who belongs to a political party. Similarly, the members are twice as likely to have a parent who was politically active while they were growing up and we even find a modest, but significant, difference in terms of the parents of party members being more involved in community and volunteer activities. These data strongly suggest that partisan political activism is handed down from generation to generation.

We can explain this effect by considering routes into party membership. Youth members of political parties are significantly more likely to have been asked to join their party than are members generally. In our 2000 survey of party members we found that fewer than four in ten

members who were over the age of 25 when they joined the party were recruited to membership. Among respondents to our survey of youth members, we find that six in ten were asked to join.

When we probe who asked these members to join we discover the importance of having a parent belonging to a political party. One in five of our older party members who was asked to join a party were recruited by a family member. For party members 25 and younger, half of those who were asked to join were recruited by a family member. This means that while eight per cent of all older members were recruited to a political party by a family member, the same is true for almost four times as many youth members. Thus, it is not surprising that youth members disproportionately come from households with parents who are members. The effect is also suggested by the finding that youth who were asked to join their party are ten percentage points more likely to have a parent who is a party member than are young members who joined of their accord.

Consistent with our understanding of party membership mobilization (see Young and Cross 2002), many youth members joined their political party specifically to participate in either a local candidate selection or a party leadership vote. These members were the most likely to have been asked to join the party. Two-thirds of those who joined to participate in a leadership contest were recruited to the party and 52 per cent of these by a family member. Three quarters of those who joined specifically for a local candidate selection vote were recruited into the party and six in ten of these were asked to join by a family member. In all, close to two-thirds of our youth members suggest that they were motivated to join their party because of one of these personnel recruitment contests. We have long suspected that the membership drives surrounding these contests were conducted among tight circles of family and friends. Our data suggest that parents recruiting their children to participate in one of these contests remains an important route of entry into political party membership.

Approximately, one in three youth members reports joining a political party specifically to influence a public policy issue. These members are far less likely to have been recruited into the party. Half of them were asked to join the party, and of these 39 per cent were recruited by a family member. Still, even for these members, recruitment by a family member is more common

than recruitment by a friend or neighbour (18 per cent) and recruitment by a fellow student (17 per cent) combined.

Fewer than one in twenty young party members who were recruited to their party were asked to join by a group or association they belong to. It appears that group membership is not a common avenue into party membership. This is not surprising given the overall attitudes of group members towards political parties recounted above.

Beyond a parent's political involvement, there appears to be an effect related to whether a young person has taken a Canadian government or politics class in either high school or university. We find that party members are more likely to have taken these courses which tend to portray political parties as central players in Canadian democracy. Students having taken these classes might have a more favourable opinion regarding the ability of parties to effect change and, given our earlier findings regarding the relationship between views of party efficacy and likelihood to join, may thus be more amenable to party membership. We do find significant differences in this regard for both party members and non members. Party members who have taken a civics class score parties nine points higher on the 100 point scale than do their counterparts without a civics class. Similarly, non members with a civics class score parties seven-and-one-half points higher than do those without a civics class. In both cohorts, those with civics education view parties as more effective in achieving change. Among non party members, 64 per cent of those with civics education consider parties somewhat or very effective at achieving change compared with 56 per cent of those without civics. A similar pattern is found among party members with 84 per cent of those with civics education believing parties an effective way of achieving change compared with 75 per cent of those without civics.

Thus, we do find evidence that socialization effects are related to the likelihood of joining a political party. Our data suggest that having a parent who belongs to a party makes a young person substantially more likely to become a member themselves. It appears that this is largely a result of young partisans being recruited to the party during a local candidate selection or party leadership contest. This speaks to Scarrow's (2000) observation that even in political parties that have become professionally-dominated electoral machines, party members are valuable as a

resource in intra-party battles. It appears that this is one of the primary purposes for which young people are recruited into Canadian parties.

### *Media Usage*

Information is a critical resource in political activism, and there is reason to expect that in the multi-media universe the amount of information as well as the medium through which it is accessed may affect the modes of activism chosen. Studies of youth non-voting in Canada and elsewhere have demonstrated that younger generations pay less attention to politics than prior generations, as manifested through lower rates of news consumption (Buckingham 2000). Levels of political information, closely related to rates of news consumption, shape levels of activism and preferences (Gidengil *et. al.* 2004).

Moreover, the medium through which this information is found may have substantive effects. While it is possible to be somewhat ideologically selective in one's choice of television news, radio news or newspaper in Canada, the range of choices is not nearly as ideologically diverse as what can be found on the Internet. In essence, these remain largely 'mass' media in the Canadian context. Internet news sources available to young Canadians, however, are more diverse both in their ideological content, their issue focus and their nation of origin. Studies of Internet usage as a source of news information demonstrate that users are prone to seeking out sites that support their political viewpoints and spend more time reading news items with which they agree (Garrett 2006).

To probe differences between party members and non-members on media usage, two measures were created. The first is a measure of total news usage, which is the sum of each respondent's reported usage of television news, radio news, newspapers and Internet news sites in a typical week. The second measure is reliance on Internet news, which is calculated as total reported Internet news usage in a typical week divided by total news usage (as calculated above).

Table 2 shows that party members and non-members differ significantly in both their total news usage and in their reliance on the Internet. Party members consume more news from all sources in a typical week, while non-members are considerably more reliant on the Internet for their news.

While non-members get 29 per cent of their news from the Internet, party members get only 21 per cent of their news from this source. One can speculate that engaged young people, in many instances focused on one particular issue, may be selecting news sources that reinforce their political inclinations, and make political parties, with their need to find compromises, less appealing options.

**Table 2: Mean Scores for Media Usage and Internet Reliance (Mean, standard deviation and N reported)**

|               | Total News Usage |           |      | Internet Reliance |           |      |
|---------------|------------------|-----------|------|-------------------|-----------|------|
|               | Mean             | Std. Dev. | N    | Mean              | Std. Dev. | N    |
| Party Members | 15.0             | 6.7       | 1239 | .21               | .17       | 1225 |
| Non-Members   | 12.3             | 6.7       | 515  | .29               | .23       | 495  |

(Eta significant at  $p=0.001$  for both variables)

### *Attitudes toward Political Parties and Advocacy Groups*

#### *General evaluations*

We begin this part of our investigation by examining whether the likelihood of joining a political party is related to a young activist's general perceptions of both political parties and advocacy type organizations. What we find is that views towards advocacy groups do not vary significantly between party members and non members while overall assessments of political parties vary sharply. This suggests that a decision to join a political party is not related to dissatisfaction with advocacy groups, which is consistent with our finding that many party members also belong to these types of groups, but rather by views towards political parties.

Our respondents were asked to rate political parties and interest groups on a 100 point thermometer scale. The mean score party members give to political parties is 59 and to advocacy groups 58 indicating similar overall perceptions of both types of organizations. For non members, the difference is considerably larger with parties receiving an average score of 48 and groups 62, indicating that they view groups far more positively than parties. Note that the difference is only 4 points in the two cohorts' ranking of advocacy groups (62 to 58) and 11

points in their ranking of parties (59 to 48). What stands out in these numbers is that those who do not belong to parties have a significantly more negative view of parties than do party members, while their overall view of interest groups is only marginally more positive than that held by party members. It appears that it is overall evaluations of political parties (and not advocacy groups) that distinguishes the party members from non members. This is not terribly surprising. What we need to know are the reasons for the different evaluations of parties held by members and non members. In the next section, we examine evaluations that underlie this general pattern, lending some insight into the deficiencies of political parties in the eyes of youth activists who opt not to join them.

#### *Structuring attitudes towards political parties*

In further considering the attitudes of party members and non members towards political parties, our intent is to probe the contours of each cohorts' opinion structures in order to determine which characteristics are responsible for the different evaluations of parties held by the two groups and ultimately their decision to join, or not join, a political party.

Our two survey instruments include 12 identical questions relating to specific attitudes towards political parties. A factor analysis, of a merged data set, suggests that these can be grouped into three categories measuring attitudes towards: how parties fulfill their general democratic responsibilities; the efficacy of parties in effecting change; and intra party democracy (the full factor analysis is included in appendix 1).<sup>4</sup>

On each of the three factors, youth activists who belong to political parties report more favourable impressions of parties than do their non member counterparts. The comparative factor scores are shown in Table 3.



**Table 3.****Mean factor scores**

(higher scores reflect more positive attitude towards political parties) (Ns)

|   | members       | non members   |
|---|---------------|---------------|
| fulfill general democratic responsibilities | .12<br>(1239) | -.28<br>(515) |
| efficacy of parties in achieving change     | .23<br>(1239) | -.55<br>(515) |
| parties welcoming and responsive to members | .06<br>(1239) | -.14<br>(515) |

(all differences between members and non members are significant to .001)

The first factor contains seven items evaluating respondents' attitudes on issues such as how good a job parties do in expressing the concerns of ordinary citizens, in finding solutions to important problems and at keeping their promises. On all seven questions, we find that youth who belong to political parties have a significantly more positive view of parties. Table 4 illustrates some of the simple frequencies for the questions included in the index.

**Table 4.**  
**Respondents' views on how parties fulfill their general democratic responsibilities**  
 (percentages and Ns reported)

|   | party members  | non members   |
|---|----------------|---------------|
| how good of a job do parties do at expressing the concerns of ordinary citizens (per cent answering very or quite good) | 39.6<br>(1226) | 27.0<br>(507) |
| how good a job do parties do at finding solutions to important problems (per cent answering very or quite good)         | 40.6<br>(1229) | 15.8<br>(506) |
| how good a job do parties do at presenting clear choices on the issues (per cent answering very or quite good)          | 45.4<br>(1230) | 23.9<br>(507) |
| how often do you think political parties keep their promises (per cent answering hardly ever)                           | 21.3<br>(1233) | 33.6<br>(509) |

(all differences between members and non members are significant at the .01 level)

It is, of course, possible that this table captures the effect of the membership experience and is not reflective of attitudinal differences existing prior to the decision to join the party. However, when we restrict our analysis to only those party members who joined within the 12 months prior to our data collection (30 per cent of all respondents) we find very small differences between these new members and those who have belonged for a longer period. Thus, it does appear that youth who decide to join parties have a significantly more favourable prior view of parties on these indicators than do engaged youth who do not join parties.

The second factor includes two questions, both relating to the relative effectiveness of political parties in effecting social and policy change. As the factor scores in table 1 illustrate, it is on this factor that we find the largest differences between party members and non members. As illustrated in Table 5, on both questions party members have a significantly more favourable view of the efficacy of parties than do non members. For example, a majority of party members

believe parties are more effective in achieving change than are interest groups while fewer than one-in-five non members share this sentiment.

**Table 5**  
**Respondents' views regarding the efficacy of political parties in effecting social and policy change** (percentages and Ns reported)

|  | party members  | non members   |
|--|----------------|---------------|
| if you want to achieve social change, how effective is joining a political party (per cent answering 'very')   | 28.3<br>(1228) | 10.0<br>(500) |
| which do you think is a more effective way to work for change nowadays?<br>joining a party or an interest group<br>(per cent answering 'join a party') | 52.7<br>(1209) | 17.5<br>(485) |

(all differences between members and non members are significant at the .01 level)

We do find a relationship on this factor between the length of party membership and the view of party efficacy, with longer party members having a more positive view of parties in this regard. However, the differences between the new and old party members are relatively small and are dwarfed by the differences between non party members and members.

The third factor includes questions generally relating to dimensions of intra party democracy. These include attitudes relating to how open and welcoming the parties are, how responsive they are to their grassroots members and whether they are overly responsive to minority interests. Overall, we find that youth party members have a more favourable view of parties on these questions than do non members. These findings are consistent with the expectation that individuals who choose alternative participatory means to parties do so at least in part because they view parties to be hierarchical and elite dominated organizations. An illustrative example of the frequencies for these questions is shown in Table 6.

**Table 6**  
**Respondents' views towards party democracy (percentages and Ns reported)**

|  | party members  | non party members |
|--|----------------|-------------------|
| decision making in political parties is too top down (per cent who agree)        | 51.9<br>(1222) | 75.5<br>(502)     |
| Political parties aren't really welcoming to people like me (per cent who agree) | 15.1<br>(1225) | 32.6<br>(488)     |

(all differences between members and non members are significant at the .01 level)

Similar to the analysis for the other factors, we find only minor differences on these questions between party members who had joined the party most recently and those who had belonged for a few years or more. This suggests that the differences in evaluations of intra party democracy between party members and non members precede a decision by a party member to join. Those who decide to join political parties appear to have a more favourable view of intra party democracy when they join the party than do non members. Overall, these data do support the hypothesis that youth who join political parties have more positive attitudes towards parties than do those who opt solely for advocacy group activity.

These data go a step further than the general thermometer scores examined earlier as they begin to tell us something about the dimensions of the attitudes towards parties held by both members and politically engaged non members. Those who join parties have a more positive evaluation of the way parties fulfill their role in Canadian democracy and believe that regular members of the party can have meaningful influence on party decision making. However, where they differ most dramatically from engaged non members is in their evaluation of the efficacy of party membership as a way of effecting change. While this dimension is captured in our factor analysis it is also made clear in respondents' evaluation of how effective various forms of political action are in effecting change. As illustrated in Table 7, when presented with six different political tactics, party members rank joining a party as the most effective action, while non members rank party membership last. There is perfect symmetry in the two groups' ranking of the other five activities.

**Table 7: Party members' and non members' perceptions of the effectiveness of various tactics**

(rank order of how frequently the action was deemed 'very effective')

|                               | Rank order    |             |
|-------------------------------|---------------|-------------|
|                               | Party members | non members |
| <i>Join a political party</i> | <i>1</i>      | <i>6</i>    |
| Attend a lawful demonstration | 2             | 1           |
| Join a boycott                | 3             | 2           |
| Join an illegal strike        | 4             | 3           |
| Occupy building/ factory      | 5             | 4           |
| Sign a petition               | 6             | 5           |

Taken together, these measures make clear that activists who do not join parties see group membership as a significantly more efficacious way of achieving change than belonging to a political party -- a view that is not shared by party members.

#### *Views toward internal decision-making*

In order to fully consider the role of intra organizational decision making in young activists' decision whether to join a political party we contrast the views of our party members towards intra party decision making with the views of respondents captured through their membership in an advocacy group to decision making in that group. We do so because we suspect that the preference for groups over parties, among political engaged non party members, is not rooted solely in a perception that groups are a more effective means of achieving social change but also because they perceive greater opportunities to influence advocacy group than political party decision making. We find that respondents in our non party member sample do view advocacy type organizations as being more welcoming and less hierarchical than parties, and believe that group members have a better opportunity to make a difference through their activism.

Non party members were asked the same three questions, relating to internal decision making, about both the activist group they were captured in and political parties in general. For all three items, as shown in Table 8, activists express significantly more favourable opinions of their groups than of parties. Half of our non member sample believes that there are many opportunities available for a young person who wants to be active in their group, but less than one-in-five thinks the same opportunities are available in political parties. One-in-three non party members strongly disagrees with the notion that decision-making in their advocacy group is too top down, but only three per cent reject the notion that parties are too top-down in their decision making. Similarly, while the majority of these respondents strongly disagree with the notion that their advocacy group is not welcoming only fifteen per cent reject the notion that parties are not welcoming.

**Table 8: Non party members' perceptions of participatory opportunities in both political parties generally and in the advocacy group they were captured in (percentages and Ns reported)**

|  | group respondent<br>belongs to | political<br>parties |
|--|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| if a young person wants to be active in<br>(group/party) there are plenty of<br>opportunities (strongly agree)         | 53.4<br>(554)                  | 15.3<br>(515)        |
| decision making in (group/party) is too<br>top-down; the grassroots cannot make its<br>voice heard (strongly disagree) | 34.2<br>(550)                  | 2.6<br>(515)         |
| (parties/group) are not really<br>welcoming to people like me (strongly disagree)                                      | 55.1<br>(555)                  | 12.7<br>(515)        |

Taken as a whole, these comparisons suggest that non party members' negative perceptions of political parties are at least partially rooted in an assessment of party organizations as overly hierarchical and exclusive. Coupled with the perception that political parties are an ineffective means of achieving policy change, these assessments render these young activists unlikely to expand their activism to encompass partisan as well as group-based activity.

It thus appears that two different faces of efficacy are at play in the relative evaluations non party members have toward advocacy groups and political parties. They see membership in a group as significantly more efficacious both in terms of the internal influence a member can have and in terms of the influence the group can have in effecting social and political change.

### Multivariate Analysis

Table 9 presents the results of a logistic regression analysis. This analysis allows us to determine which differences between young party members and engaged non-members persist, once other factors are held constant. The findings presented in Table 9 uphold the patterns outlined in the bivariate analysis and highlight how distinctive young party members are in terms of their parentage, their evaluations of political parties and their gender.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 9: Results of Logistic Regression Analysis**

| Variable                                 | B         | Exp(B) | B         | Exp(B) | B         | Exp(B) |
|--|-----------|--------|-----------|--------|-----------|--------|
| <b>Socio-Demographics</b>                |           |        |           |        |           |        |
| Male                                     | 0.720***  | 2.054  | 0.832***  | 2.277  | 0.715***  | 2.045  |
| Family income over \$100K                | -0.457*** | 0.633  | -0.394**  | 0.674  | -0.511**  | 0.600  |
| <b>Socialization</b>                     |           |        |           |        |           |        |
| Civics course in high school             | 0.175     | 1.192  | 0.007     | 1.007  | 0.021     | 1.022  |
| University politics course               | 0.281*    | 1.325  | 0.359**   | 1.432  | 0.257     | 1.293  |
| Talked politics often/freq               | -0.075    | 0.928  | -0.111    | 0.895  | -0.164    | 0.849  |
| Parents party members                    | 1.500***  | 4.483  | 1.493***  | 4.451  | 1.448***  | 4.257  |
| Daily paper delivered                    | 0.038     | 1.038  | -0.107    | 0.899  | -0.113    | 0.893  |
| <b>Attentiveness</b>                     |           |        |           |        |           |        |
| Total news consumption/week              |           |        | 0.055***  | 1.057  | 0.044***  | 1.045  |
| Internet news as proportion              |           |        | -2.801*** | 0.061  | -2.590*** | 0.075  |
| <b>Evaluations of Parties and Groups</b> |           |        |           |        |           |        |
| Factor 1: General eval'n of parties      |           |        |           |        | 0.504***  | 1.655  |
| Factor 2: Efficacy of parties            |           |        |           |        | 0.861***  | 2.366  |
| Factor 3: Efficacy within parties        |           |        |           |        | 0.282***  | 1.326  |
| Thermometer score: interest groups       |           |        |           |        | -0.005*   | 0.995  |
| Constant                                 | -0.175    |        | -0.135    |        | 0.692*    |        |
| Nagelkirke R square                      | 0.173     |        | 0.251     |        | 0.399     |        |

N=1754 significance \*\*\*.001, \*\* .01, \*.05

While the bivariate analysis showed consistent differences between party members and non-members over a range of socialization factors, the multivariate analysis suggests that the only robust socialization measure is parents' membership in a political party. In fact, the strongest

predictor of party membership in the model is having a parent who has belonged to a political party. This confirms the idea that the pull of family partisanship and experience is important to overcoming the general push away from partisanship found in the general population.

Respondents' views of parties, as measured by the factor scores discussed above, also prove significant in distinguishing party members from their non-member counterparts. The two groups differed the most on the factor tapping respondents' views of the efficacy of political parties within the broader political system. In fact, this was the second strongest coefficient in the model. This confirms findings in the bivariate analysis that suggest that party members differ from other engaged young people in their perceptions of the ability of parties to achieve change. It is important to note that this factor, as well as the other measures evaluating political parties and interest groups, is not perfectly exogenous to the model. The experience of belonging to a political party may well enhance one's perception of the efficacy of political parties within the broader political system. In fact, we find some evidence for this when we examine mean scores on this factor among party members broken down by length of party membership. There is a clear linear pattern, with evaluations of the effectiveness of parties increasing as one's length of membership in the party increases. That said, even those individuals who have only recently joined parties are substantially more positive toward the efficacy of parties than their non-partisan counterparts. Moreover, the distance between the mean factor score for the longest-serving party members and the most recent party members (0.30 for individuals who have belonged to a party for more than six years versus 0.19 for individuals who have belonged to a party for a year or less) is much less than the distance between party members and non-members (0.23 versus -0.55, as shown in Table 3).

Though weaker, the two other factor scores also had a statistically significant impact on the likelihood of joining a political party. The factor measuring respondents' general view of how well parties fulfill their democratic responsibilities has a modest positive impact on the likelihood of joining a party, as did the factor measuring respondents' views relating to intra party democracy. Endogeneity is less of a concern with these two factors, as neither presents a linear pattern when run against length of membership.



Gender also exerted a robust impact on the likelihood of joining a political party, with men substantially more likely than women to pursue partisan activity. This confirms the patterns of gender differences that we found both in the numbers of respondents who belonged to parties and in the gendered patterns of attitudes regarding parties versus interest groups.

We also find that media usage affects the likelihood of joining a party. Total news usage in a typical week has a weak, but positive, effect on the likelihood of joining a party. A much more robust effect is found from the measure of the proportion of total news usage from the Internet. Greater reliance on the Internet as a source of political information increased substantially the likelihood of joining a political party.

### *Conclusion*

This analysis of a unique dataset of engaged young Canadians allows for an empirically driven examination of the factors that influence a decision to join a political party. By examining attitudinal, socialization and media usage variables of a large group of politically engaged youth, some of whom belong to political parties and some who do not, we are able to begin to measure the effect of these variables on the decision to join a political party.

Our findings suggest that the young people who choose to join political parties are a distinctive group. Many were exposed to partisan activity as children through their parents' activism, and most enjoyed greater exposure to other forms of political information than their counterparts in the mass electorate. The 'pull' of family socialization serves to overcome the more general societal 'push' away from partisan activism.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps because of their familial exposure, these individuals are more favorably predisposed towards political parties than are their activist counterparts who choose not to join parties. They perceive parties to be more effective in achieving policy change, and they perceive party membership to be a reasonably effective way to influence party policy. In this regard, the young party members stand in sharp contrast to their non member counterparts who are even more skeptical about the effectiveness both of parties within the political system, and of members within parties.

In this regard, we suspect that our non party member cohort is much more similar to other members of their generation than are the young party members. Recalling that advocacy group activism is a more popular choice for young citizens than party membership, the views of non members tell us something about the inclinations of the politically-oriented elite of the future. If political parties are unable to reinvigorate their membership base and portray an image of more open and inclusive organizations, they risk being perceived increasingly as public utilities propped up by the state but with little connection to society. Simply put, the 'pull' of family socialization will be inadequate to outweigh the more general societal 'push' away from party membership found in Canada and elsewhere.

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## Appendix 1

**Rotated Component Matrix(a)**

|   | Component |       |       |
|---|-----------|-------|-------|
|   | 1         | 2     | 3     |
| In general, how good a job do parties do at expressing the concerns of ordinary citizens  | .684      | .027  | .054  |
| In general, how good a job do parties do at finding solutions to important problems?  | .681      | .265  | .016  |
| Some people say that parties care what ordinary people think, others that parties don't care what ordinary people think; what is your view? | .636      | -.105 | .061  |
| In general, how good a job do parties do at presenting clear choices on the issues?   | .619      | .248  | -.106 |
| Political parties address the issues that young Canadians care about  | .598      | .127  | .180  |
| How often do you think political parties keep their promises?   | .581      | .131  | .169  |
| Political parties generally try to look after the best interests of everybody and not just those who vote for them                          | .581      | .214  | .020  |
| Which do you think is a more effective way to work for change nowadays?   | .128      | .815  | -.016 |
| If you want to achieve social change, how effective is joining a political party?   | .124      | .753  | .158  |
| Political parties spend too much time catering to minorities  | -.167     | -.169 | .772  |
| Political parties are not really welcoming to people like me  | .273      | .303  | .534  |
| Decision making in political parties is too top-down; the grassroots cannot make its voice heard  | .285      | .314  | .517  |

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.  
 Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.  
 a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

Variance explained: factor 1 – 24.7%; factor 2 – 13.9 %; factor 3 – 10.4;  
 total – 49.1%

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> There is no question that Canadian parties continue to recruit members during leadership and nomination contests, as Scarrow (2000) notes is typical of modern parties. This has been a perennial feature of Canadian politics. Of greater concern, however, is the specter of declining membership in parties during the periods between election campaigns and leadership contests.

<sup>2</sup> Because of the way in which data were gathered from activist group members it is impossible to calculate an accurate response rate. In some cases, we were able to distribute and collect surveys at group meetings ourselves. On other occasions, we were not allowed to attend the meetings, but rather delivered surveys to group leaders who distributed and collected them at the meeting. In these cases, it is impossible to know how many attending members opted not to complete the instrument.

<sup>3</sup> We are not able to determine precisely how many of our party members belong to 'advocacy' groups. While we collected extensive data on the members' group associations, we are not able to confidently isolate advocacy type associations from their answers.

<sup>4</sup> A factor analysis of these questions for party members and non members independently produces 3 similar factors for each cohort. However, the factor loadings are not identical in each case.

<sup>5</sup> To test for multicollinearity in the model, the analysis was also performed as a simple OLS regression in order to employ collinearity diagnostics. The Variance-inflation Factor (VIF) for all variables was below 2.0, well below the usual cut-off of 4.0.

<sup>6</sup> We are grateful to Paul Whiteley for this characterization.