Members Are Not the Only Fruit:
Volunteer Activity in Political Parties

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Abstract

Existing research on volunteer activity in political parties has focussed almost exclusively on party membership, both in terms of aggregate levels and activities undertaken. Recent developments in British political parties suggest however, an increasing role for party supporters – supporters of parties who are not formal members. Using data collected through surveys of election agents at the 2010 general election, this paper examines the extent of supporter activity in constituency campaigns, correlates of supporter and member activity, and assesses the impact of supporter activity on electoral outcomes. The paper will provide an opportunity to question whether the evolution of party organisations suggests that formal members are less important than has been previously assumed in the conduct of election campaigns and whether supporter activity complements or substitutes for that of members.

Introduction

Existing research on volunteer activity in political parties has focussed almost exclusively on party membership, both in terms of aggregate levels and activities undertaken. Studies of the health of political parties often draw upon membership levels and their decline as an indicator of some form of malaise in political parties (see, for example, Mair & van Biezen, 2001), even if, as Webb (1995) has pointed out, there are many more nuanced ways of evaluating such questions. Notwithstanding Webb's intervention, the message in much research has been clear: formal party membership is the appropriate indicator of volunteer activity within political parties, and that metric is in decline (and has been so for some time). This is taken as a strong indication that political parties as we understand them are in some form of crisis (Mair & van Biezen, 2001; Whiteley, 2011; Lawson & Merkl, 1988).

The same message is broadly reflected in Seyd and Whiteley's path-breaking studies of party membership (Seyd & Whiteley, 1992; Whiteley, Seyd & Richardson, 1994). Their studies illustrated not only the importance of volunteer activity in electoral terms through the mobilization of the votes, but also in terms of varying key roles that members play in the life of political parties: selecting candidates and leaders, the population from which candidates are selected, the parties' representatives on the ground, political communication, and policy and campaign initiation (see also Scarrow, 1996). Yet, these studies also suggested that such activities were not always widespread within parties and that much party activity was in decline. As such, this presented a problem for political parties.

Denver, Hands and Fisher (1997, 2003, 2006a, 2006b) have also focussed almost exclusively of party members as the source of voluntary activity in constituency campaigns. Where volunteers were recruited from outside the constituency party, the assumption was that these people were party members from a neighbouring constituency. Fisher and Denver's (2008, 2009) analyses also showed that party membership was in broad decline, but offered a less pessimistic interpretation. They showed how advances in technology and its falling relative cost were increasingly being used as a substitute for traditional activity by all parties. Moreover, they questioned the assumption that having more members was always electorally beneficial; showing that central party management of campaigns frequently had stronger effects (Fisher & Denver, 2006a). Scarrow (2000: 95), too points out that the size of a party's membership may not necessarily be linked to the level of individual activity. Fisher and Denver (2009) do, however, also show that voters tended to respond more positively to more traditional campaign methods which were associated with volunteer labour, rather than more modern techniques which could be used without such intensive volunteer help (though that gap is diminishing). Moreover, Fisher (2011) shows that 'free' forms of campaigning (which are exclusively based on volunteer activity) are generally more electorally effective than 'costed' campaigning – techniques that cost money including traditional items like leaflets and posters, and more modern ones like telephones and computers. Nonetheless, volunteer activity was assumed to have been provided by members.

Comparative research, however, suggests that this virtually exclusive emphasis on members may be misleading. Ware (1996: 65-69) for example shows that both cadre and mass parties had supporters who were willing to carry out some party tasks. Thus, the party supporter was an important feature of cadre parties. He/she was not part of the party elite, but helped out regularly in election campaigns; a good example being the Primrose League and its members' support in Conservative campaigns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Equally, however, supporter activity sometimes featured in mass parties. Ware shows that *contra* to Duverger's assertions, that this was the case in some mid-to late nineteenth century religious parties.

Other comparative studies draw a similar picture. Dalton (1996) also shows that volunteer activity can be provided by sources outside the formal membership of parties. While he argues that in Britain parties relied on formal party members for the bulk of campaign work, he shows that in Germany, 'campaign activity extends beyond formal party members to

include a significant proportion of the public' (p.48). Scarrow (1996: 198-201) additionally points out that the SPD and CDU in (West) Germany began moving towards greater 'inclusiveness' – allowing non-members a greater say in party affairs - from the early 1970s. Indeed, both the CDU and SPD encouraged local parties to allow non-members to stand as candidates, though party supporters were still prevented from participating in intra party votes. Equally, Ware (1996:84) cites the example of the RPR in France, who in 1989 declared that notions of party membership were meaningless on the grounds that that party had no definition of membership.

Challenges to Notions of Party Membership

The first key question for this paper is whether this near exclusive focus on formal members is obscuring the party activity of non-members. In one sense, Labour's party structure, which includes affiliated trade unions, suggests that an exclusive focus on formal members could be missing something. Members of affiliated trade unions are themselves affiliated members of the party, though are frequently not formal members in any meaningful sense, despite the efforts of the Labour Party to boost individual membership among affiliated union members in the 1980s and 1990s (Russell, 2005: 218-9). Seyd & Whiteley's (1992:35) study of Labour members showed for example that while 64% of Labour members were in a trade union in 1989, large numbers were from non-affiliated unions. By 1997, only 34% of Labour members were trade unionists and the authors concluded that 'At its grassroots, the Labour Party is now neither a working class nor a trade union party' (Seyd & Whiteley, 2002: 35-7). Nonetheless, affiliated members could be a source of volunteer labour for the party. In the 2001 study of constituency campaigning, some questions were asked on this topic. The responses suggested that there were indeed some supporters who came to Labour's campaign via affiliated unions – 13% of Labour constituencies reported receiving *a good deal of help* from locally affiliated unions. But equally, some 64% reported receiving *no help* from regional liaison committees and nearly 50% had *no help* from affiliated local unions. Where help was given, it was largely financial (18%) and help with printing (18%). In terms of supporters, some constituencies received help with distributing leaflets (17%) and telephone canvassing (13%).

The concept of Labour party membership has itself also become somewhat less rigid. Prior to the reforms instigated by Neil Kinnock, membership of the Labour Party was handled with varying degrees of success by constituency Labour parties. There was also a formal (if not always observed) requirement that members should belong to a trade union. Kinnock's reforms transferred membership to the central party and thus enabled people to join the party by by-passing local activists (Russell, 2005: 218). The concept of membership,

therefore, had become a little less formal (Fisher, 2008:260) and moves in the mid-1990s, such as 'recruit a friend' continued this trend (Russell, 2005:220). Ironically, there has been similar change in the Conservative Party, though in the opposite direction. Hitherto, membership of the Conservative Party had been a rather vague concept, with no set membership fee (Whiteley, Seyd & Richardson, 1994: 72). The basis of Conservative membership is now more akin to that of Labour – centralised membership with a fixed fee (Fisher, 2008: 260).

However, despite the parties uniting around a broadly common approach to individual party membership, Fisher (2008) highlights four developments that suggest that supporters (but non-members) are becoming more involved in party activities. Firstly, in Labour's organisational reforms of 1996/1997 (*Partnership in Power*), non party members were permitted to have input into the policy making process at the stage of the policy commissions along the lines of Kirchheimer's 1966 'catch-all' thesis (Fisher, 2002). Secondly, in recent years, both Labour and the Conservatives have established supporter databases, and there have been serious debates in the Labour Party regarding the incorporation of supporters into the activities more usually reserved for traditional members (Horton *et al*, 2007). This has culminated in the consultation paper *Refounding Labour* (2011), which highlights a number of key roles for supporters. This paper acknowledges that the party has many supporters 'who might have joined in previous times' (p.11) and that those supporters can be a crucial source of labour in election campaigns (p.12). But it goes further, floating the idea of supporter involvement in party policy making (p.17) and even leadership elections (p.24).

The third development is the Conservatives' experiments with primaries for candidate selection. The first Conservative candidate elected after selection through an open primary became an MP in 2005 (in Reading East) (McIlveen, 2009), while in Totnes, the Conservative candidate for the 2010 election was selected through a postal ballot of all voters in the constituency. Finally, the Phillips review of party finance (2006) recommended the encouragement of web-based contributions that would attract a degree of matching funding. All four developments represent to varying degrees both a challenge to the idea of membership as the principal basis of support for parties, and a challenge to the traditional power of party members. It also suggests that many of the roles of members outlined by Seyd and Whiteley may now not be their exclusive preserve. The use of primaries, for example, means that supporters can play a role in the selection of candidates, as well as potentially providing a pool from which candidates can be selected - some of the Conservative 'A list' candidates were only very recent formal members of the party. Equally,

Labour's reforms and proposed reforms suggest that non-members can also play a role in policy initiation. And, of course, supporters can become involved in election campaigns, assisting with the mobilization of the vote and political communication.

Members and Supporters at Elections

Political parties have traditionally relied on members to participate in election campaigns. In addition to their enthusiasm and commitment to the party's goals, they provide a source of free, volunteer labour, which can be drawn upon to engage in doorstep canvassing, delivering leaflets, taking numbers at polling stations, 'knocking-up' voters on polling day and so on. Without party members it would be almost impossible to run a traditional constituency campaign focused on identifying supporters and mobilising them on polling day. Indeed, while Fisher et al. (2006a) argue that simply having a large number of members is no guarantee of an effective campaign (cf. Whiteley & Seyd 2003), they concede, nonetheless, that a campaign involving relatively few members is likely to be less successful than one that can call upon a large volunteer force.

However, as has been well documented, party membership in both Britain and in other European countries is in decline and this is one contributory factor in the relative decline of more traditional campaigning as well as campaigning that can be conducted at no cost (Fisher & Denver, 2008; Fisher, 2011). Although increasing use has been made of more modern and increasingly cheap techniques to partially compensate for the decline of members, the problem for parties is that voters appear to respond better to more traditional, labour-intensive techniques (Fisher & Denver, 2009). This leaves parties with a dilemma – traditional techniques seemingly deliver more electoral benefits, but parties are increasingly unable to mount such campaigns using party members alone.

Table 1 shows how the decline in party members has continued.[1] Labour membership has declined continually from 1997, while membership of the Liberal Democrats has also declined fairly steadily, despite a brief surge in 2005. In the case of the Conservatives, membership is now only just over a quarter of what it was in 1992 (the 2005 figure is almost certainly an exaggeration – see Fisher & Denver 2008). Faced with this dilemma, parties have attempted to compensate through the use of technology (Fisher & Denver, 2008). But they have also looked to non-party members (supporters) to help with campaigns, prompting the question of the extent to which party supporters complement the activities of members,

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[1] These and all subsequent data are drawn from a survey of electoral agents conducted immediately after the 2010 general election (as well as comparable surveys in previous elections) The numbers of responses are shown in the Appendix.

or whether their activities in some way act as a substitute for member activity. In order to begin answering this question, we need to examine the level of supporter activity.

Table 1. Mean number of party members per constituency 1992-2010

	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
Conservative	1,542	732	646	892	402
Labour	444	592	475	349	272
Liberal Democrats	166	162	130	157	116

Table 2 illustrates how important party supporters have become. Overall, in the 2010 election campaign, some 77% of local parties recruited some supporters to help with the campaign – a mean of 17 supporters per constituency.[2] The Liberal Democrats were most likely to recruit supporters (fully 86% did so) and overall, the recruitment of supporters also reflected the parties' electoral priorities, with recruitment most likely to take place in parties' target seats. Two other points are perhaps worthy of note. First, Labour also recruited strongly in its safer seats (labelled Held Not Target) – a reflection of the party's defensive electoral strategy (Fisher, Cutts and Fieldhouse, 2011). Second, the Liberal Democrats also recruited strongly in their 'hopeless' seats (labelled Not Held Not Target) – a reflection of the party's popularity during the campaign.

However, in terms of numbers of supporter recruits, the Liberal Democrats were highly targeted. Despite having fewer supporters on average than the Conservatives, their recruitment was extremely successful in target seats (Table 3). The Conservatives, too, had most success in target seats (though also had strong recruitment in their safe seats). Labour, meanwhile, recruited fewer supporters than the other two parties and were most successful in their safer seats, presumably again reflecting the very defensive nature of the party's campaign.

Table 2. Supporter Recruitment by Target Status

% saying Yes	All	Held Not Target	Target	Not Held Not Target
Conservative	75	77	87	66
Labour	75	82	92	63
Liberal Democrat	86	n/a	94	84

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[2]   These figures include responses from the SNP and Plaid Cymru

Table 3. Mean Numbers of Supporters Recruited by Target Status

Mean	All	Held Not Target	Target	Not Held Not Target
Conservative	22	23	33	13
Labour	13	20	16	6
Liberal Democrat	19	n/a	46	15

Of course, these numbers only tell us so much. What is also important is the extent to which party supporters engage in the same kinds of activities as party members and whether that varies by party. We examine these questions in more detail in Tables 4a, 4b and 4c, comparing the activities of supporters, members in seats where supporters were recruited, and all members. The evidence is mixed but pretty consistent across parties. On the one hand, it is clear that to some extent, party supporters engaged to varying degrees in the same activities as party members, and in the case of delivering leaflets (the activity in which all parties made most effort – see Fisher, Cutts & Fieldhouse, 2011), to a virtually identical degree. Equally, supporters were quite likely to staff polling stations relative to members, and were perhaps surprisingly likely to be involved at the campaign headquarters, despite not being formal members. However, in respect of other activities where voters were contacted either on the doorstep or by telephone, supporters were less likely to be involved than members. A reason for this is that according to one agent interviewed, some supporters were uneasy about canvassing where they might be asked detailed questions about party policy. In effect, some supporters excluded themselves from such activities rather than parties being necessarily more reluctant to engage supporters in them.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that party supporters were still used to a significant extent across a wide range of campaign activities. In sum, these data seem to suggest that the previous focus on party members as *the* source of free, volunteer labour has not accounted for the important contribution made by party supporters. Parties still need members, and still rely on them more for particular election activities. But at the same time, party supporters provide a more important source of labour than has previously been appreciated. As one electoral agent in a target seat said: "Members are almost insignificant compared with the pool of helpers and activists…. [Supporters] don't like committing [themselves] to one political party. It's like stating your religion". Another, also in a target seat, claimed that there were two or three times the number of supporters than members. When asked why those supporters didn't join the party, he indicated that many didn't want to be on lists 'receiving begging letters [for donations]'. And, as illustrated in Table 2, supporters were also recruited

in non-target seats. Despite campaigning in a relatively safe seat held by another party, one agent said that through friends of the candidate, they were able to use around 90-100 supporters to ensure that as much of the constituency was leafleted as possible. Thus, there may be a case for saying that in some constituencies, supporters clearly complement the work of members, while in others supporters effectively act as a substitute for member activity.

Table 4a. Activities of Members and Supporters – Conservatives

% saying YES *Differences from supporters in parenthesis*	Supporters	Party Members (Where Supporters)		Party Members (All)	
Delivering Leaflets	92	96	(+4)	81	(-11)
Telephoning Electors	24	65	(+41)	53	(+29)
Polling Station Number Takers	65	76	(+11)	61	(-4)
Doorstep Canvassing	42	92	(+50)	76	(+34)
Helping at Campaign Office	54	84	(+30)	71	(+17)

Table 4b. Activities of Members and Supporters – Labour

% saying YES *Differences from supporters in parenthesis*	Supporters	Party Members (Where Supporters)		Party Members (All)	
Delivering Leaflets	89	96	(+7)	78	(-11)
Telephoning Electors	27	72	(+45)	57	(+30)
Polling Station Number Takers	33	56	(+23)	43	(+10)
Doorstep Canvassing	38	84	(+46)	66	(+28)
Helping at Campaign Office	56	85	(+29)	67	(+11)

Table 4c. Activities of Members and Supporters – Liberal Democrats

% saying YES *Differences from supporters in parenthesis*	Supporters	Party Members (Where Supporters)		Party Members (All)	
Delivering Leaflets	94	97	(+3)	86	(-8)
Telephoning Electors	16	52	(+36)	45	(+29)
Polling Station Number Takers	47	63	(+16)	55	(+8)
Doorstep Canvassing	22	79	(+57)	69	(+47)
Helping at Campaign Office	40	68	(+28)	59	(+19)

Further comparisons can be made if we create a scale of activities undertaken by members and supporters. This is an additive scale of all the activities in which there was engagement in our list of activities, running from 0 (no activities) to 5 (all five activities). Tables 5 and 6 examine the mean levels of activity by members and supporters and disaggregates them by the target status of the seat. The data are distributed as expected. First, party members engaged in more activities on average than supporters. Thus, Conservative members who were involved in the election in seats where supporters were recruited participated in a mean of 4.1 activities compared with a mean of 2.8 activities undertaken by supporters. Second, the level of activity for both members and supporters was highest for all parties in target seats and lowest in hopeless ones. Third, there was a remarkably similar level of activity by both members and supporters in target seats. Despite Labour's numerical disadvantage in terms of supporters, those that were involved were just as active as those who helped the other two parties.

All this provides further evidence of the importance of supporters to parties' campaigning efforts and this is confirmed by Table 7, which illustrates the mean proportion of activities undertaken by supporters compared with members. On average, this was around two thirds of the effort and highest in relative terms by Liberal Democrat supporters in the party's target seats. So, members do undertake more in the way of activities, but the contribution of supporters is clearly nontrivial and significantly enhances all parties' election efforts.

Table 5. Member Activity Means (Where Supporters Recruited) by Target Status

	All	Held Not Target	Target	Not Held Not Target
Conservative	4.1	4.2	4.8	3.6
Labour	3.9	4.3	4.6	3.2
Liberal Democrat	3.6	n/a	4.7	3.4

Table 6. Supporter Activity Means by Target Status

	All	Held Not Target	Target	Not Held Not Target
Conservative	2.8	2.9	3.2	2.3
Labour	2.4	2.7	3.1	1.8
Liberal Democrat	2.2	n/a	3.3	2.0

Table 7. Mean Proportion of Supporter Activity to Member Activity by Target Status

	All	Held Not Target	Target	Not Held Not Target
Conservative	.68	.69	.67	.67
Labour	.64	.65	.67	.60
Liberal Democrat	.63	n/a	.70	.62

Predicting Supporter and Member Activity

Supporters, then, are clearly important, but again we want to establish the extent to which supporter activity is an extension of that of members, or if there is something different about supporter activity. In order to do this, we ask two further questions. First, under what conditions is supporter activity greatest? Second, we consider whether the correlates of supporter activity are different from those of members. Our analysis breaks the predictor variables down into three categories: *demographic*, *politics* and *party*. Demographic correlates are straightforward aggregate predictors of levels of supporter activity – social class, housing, population density, levels of education, ethnicity, and numbers of students. Previous research (Fisher, 2000; Fisher, Denver & Hands, 2006b) has shown that such variables can be useful indicators of levels of party membership, although the impact of demographics varies somewhat by party.

The category of *politics* is recognition that political circumstances can be an incentive to greater levels of activity. Previous research has demonstrated, for example, the impact of electoral performance on subsequent levels of party membership (Fisher, 2000; Fisher, Denver & Hands, 2006b). We might therefore expect this to occur to a certain extent among party members, but to a greater extent among supporters. Given that supporter activity may not be long term, we might expect variations in intensity to be an important function of political conditions. Thus, the prospect of victory or possible defeat in a seat may prompt supporters to be more active.

We capture these circumstances through a series of dummy variables, indicating the main two parties in a constituency contest and which party was the incumbent. In addition to the electoral status of a seat, a candidate's sex or ethnicity may also motivate volunteers. Russell (2005: 225-6), for example, shows that the adoption of women's quotas for candidates by Labour in the 1990s transformed the activist base. We would hypothesise then that candidates from underrepresented groups may be more likely to promote supporter activity, since they may attract activists not traditionally prominent in party politics.

The third category is *parties*. This variable deals with three core aspects – the level of preparation in the constituency in advance of the election, whether or not the seat was deemed to be a target and the existing local strength of the party. Preparation is measured through a scale[3] designed to capture a key aspect of good campaign management. Fisher, Denver and Hands (2006a) have shown how effective management is a core aspect of campaign success and we may hypothesise that a better prepared campaign team will be more able to recruit and engage supporters and members. Second, a dummy variable denoting the target status of a seat is included, since we might expect that parties would seek to encourage more supporter and member activity in their target seats. Finally, existing local strength is measured by levels of party membership and the proportion of the constituency covered by an active party organisation, providing an indicator of both volume and actual activity of the standing party membership.

Such measures could have both positive and negative effects on the level of supporter activity. A low or inactive membership may prompt greater activity from supporters in order to compensate - a substitution for party activity. Equally, a high or active membership may be more adept and recruiting and incentivising supporters - complementing the activities of members. These variables are not included in the model predicting levels of membership activity as they would constitute a tautology - active members would be likely to be a function of a more active local organisation (see Table 9). In order then to make direct comparisons with supporters, we run a second model of support activity without these two variables (see Table 10).

Table 8 examines predictors of supporter activity and suggests that to varying degrees, all three categories of variable are helpful at explaining levels of supporter activity. We include those coefficients that are significant up to the 10% level for information, though any effects of these variables are clearly very limited. In terms of *demographics*, the variables are most useful in the cases of Labour and the Liberal Democrats. As might be expected, Labour supporter activity is higher in more densely populated seats, and those with more manual workers and students. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, supporter activity is higher where there are fewer manual workers as would be expected, but lower in areas where there are fewer owner occupiers.

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[3]   This scale captures levels of preparation with the following when the election was announced: Appoint people to particular jobs; raising campaign funds; location of main committee room; arranging local committee rooms; obtaining a copy of the electoral register; preparing the contents of the candidate's election address; making arrangements for printing; identifying potential supporters through canvassing.

In term of *politics*, levels of activity are also as predicted. Labour supporters were more likely to be active when defending seats from the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and the national parties. If we include coefficients that are significant at the 10% level, we find further support for our hypotheses. Conservative supporters were more likely to be active when they were defending seats from the Liberal Democrats. The characteristics of the candidate also matter. As hypothesised, Conservative supporter activity was higher where the party fielded a BME candidate.

Across all parties, the state of *parties* clearly has a bearing on levels of supporter activity. This is very apparent in the case of campaign preparation - the better prepared a campaign was the more supporter activity occurred. For the Liberal Democrats, it was also the case that more active local parties led to more supporter activity, suggesting that rather than supporter activism plugging a gap in areas where membership is low or inactive, it tends to enhance already strong local parties. Of course, it also illustrates that members are of continuing importance. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, active local parties attract supporters – success helps breed success. As Whiteley *et al* (1994: 77-8) show, new members of parties are often recruited through an invitation of an existing member – the same dynamic would appear to be true for supporters. So paradoxically, the high levels of activity of supporters may actually illustrate the need to maintain healthy numbers of active formal members and it suggests that supporter activity may complement that of members. Yet, for Labour, the reverse may be true - supporter activity is greater where there are fewer Labour members (albeit at the 10% level), indicating that in this case, the activities of supporters may substitute for those of members.

Table 8. Predictors of Supporter Activity (Model 1)

	Conservative (n=154)			Labour (n=220)			Lib Dems (n=214)		
Constant	n.s.			n.s.			10.751	(3.368)	***
% White	n.s.			n.s.			n.s.		
% Manual Workers	.084	(.050)	*	.091	(.043)	**	-.081	(.040)	**
% Professional & Managerial	n.s.			n.s.			n.s.		
% No Qualifications	n.s.			n.s.			n.s.		
% Students	n.s.			.073	(.028)	**	n.s.		
% with Degree	n.s.			n.s.			-.059	(.033)	*
% Owner Occupiers	n.s.			n.s.			-.060	(.026)	**
% Council / Housing Association	n.s.			n.s.			-.054	(.028)	*
Persons Per Hectare	n.s.			.020	(.007)	***	n.s.		
Con / Lib Dem Seat	.966	(.547)	*	n/a			n.s.		
Lib Dem / Con Seat	n.s.			n/a			n.s.		
Con / Lab Seat	n.s.			n.s.			n/a		
Lab / Con Seat	n.s.			.731	(.329)	**	n/a		
Lab / Lib Dem Seat	n/a			.793	(.358)	**	n.s.		
Lib Dem / Lab Seat	n/a			n.s.			n.s.		
Lab / Nat Seat	n/a			1.285	(.568)	**	n/a		
Candidate Sex	n.s.			n.s.			n.s.		
Candidate Race	.942	(.349)	***	n.s.			n.s.		
% Covered by Active Local Org.	n.s.			n.s.			.008	(.004)	**
No. of Party Members	n.s.			-.001	(.000)	*	n.s.		
Level of Preparation	.197	(.049)	***	.120	(.037)	***	.101	(.037)	***
Target Seat	n.s.			n.s.			.713	(.383)	*
Adj. R^2	**.164**			**.316**			**.303**		

Note 1: Coefficients are unstandardised b values.

Note 2: *** p<.01 ** p< .05 * p< .10 n.s. not statistically significant; n/a not applicable

Table 9 assess the correlates of membership activity. *Demographics* have an effect for the Conservatives and Labour, with lower levels of graduates and owner occupiers being the most significant variables for the former, and more ethnic diversity for the latter. *Politics*, however, is clearly important for Labour and Liberal Democrat members. For Labour, member activity is higher when defending seats from the Conservatives and the national parties. More surprising, however, is the finding that Labour supporters were more active where Labour was challenging the Conservatives. An explanation here is that the raw politics of campaigning matters, and fighting the traditional political enemy of the Conservatives is sufficient to generate greater activity, even if there was a strong likelihood

(as there was in 2010) that the Conservatives would win these seats. For the Liberal Democrats, member activity was higher when the party was challenging the Conservatives. Again, this may be expected – the Conservatives have been the more traditional political enemy of the Liberal Democrats. Candidate characteristics also boosted member activity. A female candidate was a spur for more activity by Labour members, and including variables significant at the 10% level, we find that the same was true in the case of the Conservatives. Finally, local preparation clearly matters. For all three parties, better prepared local campaigns generated higher levels of member activity. The same was also true for seats designated as targets by the Conservatives (and the Liberal Democrats if we go down to the 10% level of significance).

Table 9. Predictors of Member Activity

	Conservative (n=204)			Labour (n=284)			Lib Dems (n=301)		
Constant	9.828	(3.259)	***	6.265	(2.684)	**	6.615	(2.746)	**
% White	-.015	(009)	*	-.022	(.009)	**	n.s.		
% Manual Workers	n.s.			n.s.			n.s.		
% Professional & Managerial	n.s.			n.s.			n.s.		
% No Qualifications	n.s.			n.s.			n.s.		
% Students	-.054	(.028)	*	n.s.			n.s.		
% with Degree	-.066	(.034)	**	n.s.			n.s.		
% Owner Occupiers	-.049	(.024)	**	n.s.			n.s.		
% Council / Housing Association	n.s.			n.s.			n.s.		
Persons Per Hectare	-.012	(.006)	*	n.s.			n.s.		
Con / Lib Dem Seat	n.s.			n/a			.655	(.194)	***
Lib Dem / Con Seat	n.s.			n/a			n.s.		
Con / Lab Seat	n.s.			.428	(.197)	**	n/a		
Lab / Con Seat	n.s.			.938	(.257)	***	n/a		
Lab / Lib Dem Seat	n/a			n.s.			n.s.		
Lib Dem / Lab Seat	n/a			n.s.			n.s.		
Lab / Nat Seat	n/a			1.162	(.417)	***	n/a		
Candidate Sex	.291	(.175)	*	.343	(.130)	***	n.s.		
Candidate Race	n.s.			n.s.			n.s.		
Level of Preparation	.130	(.034)	***	.197	(.028)	***	.195	(.025)	***
Target Seat	.752	(.223)	***	n.s.			.596	(.328)	*
Adj. R^2		**.268**			**.410**			**.417**	

Note 1: Coefficients are unstandardised b values.
Note 2: *** p<.01 ** p< .05 * p< .10 n.s not statistically significant; n/a not applicable

In order to directly compare the predictors of member and supporter activity, we re-run the supporter activity models without the variables measuring the size of local parties and local activism (since these were not included in the predictors of member activity). The results are shown in Table 10. There are similarities and differences for all three parties – for all three, local preparation is a spur for both member and supporter activity. In short, active campaigns require strong organisation. The same is broadly true in terms of targeting. If we accept coefficients significant at the 10% level, then targeting prompts both member and supporter activity for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. Two other political prompts are similar. For the Liberal Democrats, both supporters and members were more active when challenging the Conservatives, while Labour supporters were also active in seats where the party was challenging the Conservatives as with members (albeit at the 10% level). All of these similarities suggest a complementarity of supporter and member activity.

However, there are also some key differences between the predictors of member and supporter activity. There are differences in demographic predictors for all three parties. In the case of the Conservatives, different demographics are relevant for members (proportions of graduates and owner occupiers) compared with supporters (proportion of manual workers). For Labour, while a more ethnically diverse population is a predictor for member activity, it is population density that helps predict supporter activity. And, for the Liberal Democrats, none of the demographics that predicted levels of supporter activity are relevant in the case of members.

Perhaps the most interesting differences are in the case of variables, which come under the heading of *politics.* In the case of candidate characteristics, we find that BME candidates boost supporter activity but not member activity, while the reverse is true where Labour fielded women candidates. This boosted levels of activity by Labour members, but not Labour supporters. Equally interesting is the finding that in seats that Labour was defending from the Liberal Democrats, supporter activity was higher, but had no impact on member activity. Given the surge in Liberal Democrat popularity in the run-up to the campaign, this may help explain why Labour was successful in depressing the Liberal Democrat votes through its constituency campaigning (Fisher, Cutts & Fieldhouse, Forthcoming). Left to party members alone, Labour may not have been so successful in these seats, suggesting that in this case at least, supporter activity certainly substituted for that of members. Given that member activity was greater is seats where Labour was challenging the Conservatives (where the chances of success were slim), there is also a case to suggest that supporter activity was distributed more efficiently than that of members. Overall, coupled with the

findings in respect of the impact of candidate characteristics, there is some evidence that the efforts supporters in general can substitute for those of members.

Table 10. Predictors of Supporter Activity (Model 2)

	Conservative (n=204)			Labour (n=284)			Lib Dems (n=301)		
Constant	n.s.			n.s.			11.173	(2.784)	***
% White	n.s.			n.s.			-.029	(.010)	***
% Manual Workers	.101	(.042)	**	n.s.			n.s.		
% Professional & Managerial	n.s.			n.s.			n.s.		
% No Qualifications	n.s.			n.s.			n.s.		
% Students	n.s.			n.s.			n.s.		
% with Degree	n.s.			n.s.			-.056	(.027)	**
% Owner Occupiers	n.s.			n.s.			-.049	(.022)	**
% Council / Housing Association	n.s.			n.s.			-.051	(.023)	**
Persons Per Hectare	n.s.			.015	(.006)	**	n.s.		
Con / Lib Dem Seat	n.s.			n/a			.341	(.197)	*
Lib Dem / Con Seat	n.s.			n/a			n.s.		
Con / Lab Seat	n.s.			.409	(.218)	*	n/a		
Lab / Con Seat	n.s.			.836	(.284)	***	n/a		
Lab / Lib Dem Seat	n/a			.639	(.314)	**	n.s.		
Lib Dem / Lab Seat	n/a			n.s.			n.s.		
Lab / Nat Seat	n/a			1.628	(.462)	***	n/a		
Candidate Sex	n.s.			n.s.			n.s.		
Candidate Race	1.054	(.342)	***	n.s.			n.s.		
Level of Preparation	.171	(.039)	***	.106	(.031)	***	.120	(.025)	***
Target Seat	.439	(.253)	*	n.s.			.790	(.333)	**
Adj. R^2	**.192**			**.294**			**.308**		

Note 1: Coefficients are unstandardised b values.

Note 2: *** p<.01 ** p< .05 * p< .10 n.s not statistically significant; n/a not applicable

The Electoral Impact

Finally, we consider what, if any, electoral impact supporter activity may have had on vote share and, how any effects compare with those of activities undertaken by party members. This is done through an OLS model which controls for vote share in 2005 and personal incumbency. Using vote share at the previous election not only captures prior electoral performance, but also a variety of demographic variables that may have influenced vote share in 2010. Personal incumbency is included as it is well established that this can have a significant impact at constituency level (See, for example, Fisher, Cutts and Fieldhouse,

Forthcoming). Our two key variables are the level of supporter activity and the level of member activity in those seats where supporters were recruited. As such, we are seeking to test both whether the level of supporter activity had any electoral impact, and if it did how it compared in terms of impact with the level of member activity.

As we might expect, however, the levels of supporter and member activity are themselves correlated, though perhaps not as strongly as one might expect. [4] As a consequence, we initially ran two separate models, one only featuring supporter activity (alongside the controls) and one featuring only membership activity (alongside the controls). These suggested that the level of member activity had electorally beneficial effects for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, but that supporter activity was only electorally beneficial in the case of the Liberal Democrats.

Table 11 illustrates the full model. The evidence is mixed, but suggests that supporter activity can be electorally beneficial, and was so for the Liberal Democrats. It terms of member activity, the only significant effects were found in the case of the Conservatives and only then at the 10% level. In sum, even when controlling for past vote share and personal incumbency, recruiting active supporters would appear to have the potential to lead to electoral payoffs. And, these results would seem to suggest that higher levels of supporter activity may lead to greater electoral payoffs than activity undertaken by members, at least for the Liberal Democrats. The impact of Liberal Democrat supporter activity may be explained by the very successful recruitment of active supporters in the party's target seats (see Tables 3 and 6) and would point in this case to supporter activity substituting that of members. Of course, the scale is simply an additive one of whether certain tasks were undertaken by members or supporters and does not capture how *much* activity was undertaken. However, the central message of this paper remains unchanged – supporter activity matters to parties and that the previous emphasis on members has not captured a significant aspect of party activity.

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[4]   Levels of supporter and member activity correlated at the .511 level for the Conservatives, .566 for Labour and .598 for the Liberal Democrats.

Table 11. Relative Electoral Impact of Supporter and Member Activity

	Conservative			Labour			Lib Dems		
Constant	2.311	(.940)	**	-5.475	(1.163)	***	3.133	(.819)	***
Vote Share 2005	.986	(.025)	***	.932	(.028)	***	.800	(.036)	***
Level of Supporter Activity	n.s.			n.s.			.638	(.247)	***
Level of Member Activity	.434	(.236)	*	n.s.			n.s.		
Incumbent Candidate	n.s.			2.933	(.788)	***	3.671	(1.130)	***
Adj. R^2	**.945**			**.877**			**.842**		

Note 1: Coefficients are unstandardised b values.

Note 2: *** p<.01 ** p< .05 * p<.10 n.s. not statistically significant

Conclusions

Most previous research on volunteer activity in political parties has focussed exclusively on formal party members. As such, the decline of party members has often been regarded as being an indicator that party organisations are in difficulties, with many associated negative consequences. However, recent trends suggest that parties are increasingly open to (and indeed are encouraging) the involvement of party supporters who are not formal members. This paper has shown that the extent of supporter activity at elections is much more extensive than was commonly thought. Around three quarters of all constituency campaigns recruited supporters and on average, supporters engaged in around two thirds of the activities of members. Supporters are clearly therefore an extremely important aspect of parties and have previously been overlooked. We refer to the exclusive focus on formal members as the sole source of voluntary activity as the Fisher, Fieldhouse and Cutts Member Fallacy.

Supporters matter then, but what drives their recruitment? On the one hand, it is organisation. Well prepared election campaigns are more likely to lead to the recruitment of supporters to work alongside members. But politics matters, too. Supporters are more likely to come out if their party is under attack, or if they are fighting a traditional political enemy. What's more, the evidence presented here suggests that the efforts of supporters can be electorally beneficial. For the Liberal Democrats, the more activities their supporters engaged in, the better the party performed.

It may be tempting then to suggest that members may be much less important to parties than many have argued. First, the growth in technology has meant that many of the jobs that members used to engage in at elections can be down with fewer people. Second, as Fisher and Denver (2006a) have shown, the strong management of a campaign may be more

electorally beneficial than having high numbers of members. And third, this paper suggests that supporters do much of the same work that members do, and that this can lead to electoral payoffs. However, to suggest that members are unimportant would be a rather partial view. This paper shows, for example, that for the Liberal Democrats, supporters are more likely to be recruited where there is already a strong local party. Supporters in this case enhance strong parties rather than compensating for weak ones. But supporter activity can also be a substitute for that of members. The case of Labour supporters, whose level of activity was higher in seats being defended from the Liberal Democrats (which was not the case for Labour members), is a case in point. Coupled with the especially strong Liberal Democrat supporter recruitment in the party's target seats, there is indicative evidence that supporters may be more responsive to electoral shifts than party members.

Overall, although members clearly still matter, they are not the only source of voluntary activity – to coin a phrase; *members are not the only fruit*. Political parties seem to have grasped this point with all three main parties tacitly accepting the role of supporters, introducing measures such as primaries and even proposing their involvement in policy and leadership selections. This suggests that new models of party organisation may also emerge. For example, a growth in the use of supporters coupled with a decline in members may indicate the development of an enhanced form of cadre party – Cadre Plus. Whatever the implications, it is clear that the focus on members as *the* source of voluntary labour in parties is outdated and does not reflect the actual situation on the ground.

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Appendix

Responses

The numbers of responses for each party by target status were as follows:

	All	Held Not Target	Target	No Target Not Held
Conservative	287	120	56	111
Labour	388	129	74	185
Liberal Democrat	353	*	50	303