



New members as party modernisers: The case of the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland



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ABSTRACT

Amid the literature on members of political parties, surprisingly little has been written on the potential or actual impacts that can be made upon party strategy or policies by a rapid influx of new members. New joiners may have different outlooks and desires than long-standing members. Although already sympathetic to the party they are joining, new arrivals, if signing up in large numbers, may hold sufficiently revisionist views to be able to re-orientate a political party in a direction not previously taken. Using data from the first-ever membership survey of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in Northern Ireland, the largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly since 2003 and the fourth largest UK parliamentary party since 2005, this article analyses whether more recent joiners of the Party have brought greater pragmatism and moderation to an organisation previously dominated by hardline political, religious and ethnic attitudes. Modernisation from outsiders who become insiders can be a key aspect of party development. The DUP offers one of the stiffest tests of modernisation, given its history of opposition to moderation. This article shows that newer members have tempered beliefs in one of the most robustly ethno-religious parties in Europe.

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1. Introduction

The extent to which an influx of members can change political parties is a surprisingly under-researched subject, given the importance of the interplay between voters, party members and political leaders. New members provide parties with the possibility of renewal, fresh ideas, ideological adaptation and policy modernisation. They may reinvigorate a party, increase its organisational professionalization and force a rethink of dated existing orthodoxies (e.g. Panebianco, 1988; Katz and Mair, 1994). New arrivals may possess the capacity to challenge party leaderships, shift ideas and restructure the relationship between party leaders and followers, as well as changing a party's relationships with its political opponents.

Given key roles of sustainability and renewal, a political party's membership and the capacity to attract new recruits are vital to its survival and prospering. In particular, a party's membership – and changes to that membership – may significantly alter the political direction undertaken by its leadership. If new members bring

particular aspirations to a party, it may be difficult for its leadership to cling to previous verities. Equally, new influxes of members may threaten the internal cohesion associated with long-standing, loyal party memberships. Much depends upon whether joiners seek group solidarity and strong ideological compatibility, or wish to reshape the party through the use of internal voting powers, including, increasingly, the choice of party leader (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). Rohlfing's (2015: 1) cross-national study, covering 61 parties across 11 western democracies, suggested a weak but nonetheless significant policy effect from membership change. As Rohlfing contends, 'only a few quantitative studies have focused on the influence of members' and, he insists that general research on party membership change 'should be complemented with in-depth case studies' (Rohlfing, 2015: 18–25).

This article thus offers one such case study, assessing whether the arrival of new members in a party historically seen as an uncompromising ethno-religious entity – the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in Northern Ireland – has helped bring a new relative moderation. The piece draws upon the first-ever membership survey of the DUP to examine whether a different type of member has joined the DUP since the 1998 'peace deal', the Good Friday Agreement. This newer member may have helped change the Party from a bastion of protest into a more mainstream political actor,

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one readily participating in political structures and leaving behind its earlier religious and political ferocity. More recent joiners may facilitate actual and potential policy change via divergence of views from longer standing members. Given the DUP's distinctive history of a robust ethno-religious outlook, barriers to moderation and pragmatism were considerable. As such, the DUP offers a useful test of the importance of new members in allowing change and adaptation, in this case towards new political realities of power-sharing with 'enemies' and movement of the party from religious vehicle.

2. New party members as potential agents of change

Various studies have indicated how political parties, as holistic entities, respond to the priorities and concerns of voters and have demonstrated how electoral contexts affect the level of responsiveness (e.g. [Stimson et al., 1995](#); [Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008](#); [Spoon and Kluver, 2014](#)). We also know that there are considerable tendencies towards party convergence in respect of social and economic cleavages, diminished class identity and shared voter preferences (e.g. [Mair et al., 1999](#); [Evans, 2000](#); [Elff, 2009](#)).

What though of changes in the outlook of political parties as they attract new recruits? Party members may be important in shaping the attitudes and policies of political parties, notwithstanding considerable variation between parties in the amount of internal democracy and membership influence granted by leaders ([Strom, 1990](#); [Scarrow, 1994](#)). There are three dimensions in which members can shape parties: organisation; policy and inclusivity of outlook ([Gunther and Diamond, 2003](#): 171). Crucially for our study, the second and third aspects of membership include 'the strategy and behavioural norms of the party, specifically, whether, the party is *tolerant and pluralistic or proto-hegemonic* in its objectives and behavioural style' ([Gunther and Diamond, 2003](#), italics in original). As meso-level actors, party members may offer important mediation between the concerns of ordinary electors and elite-level party leaderships. Yet new members may bring problems, with differences evident between the 'arrivistes' and the 'old guard' and the risk of damaging internal factionalism.

Whilst there is a reasonable assumption that members of a political party at least share its basic ideological outlook ([Katz, 1990](#)) even the most ostensibly united and uniform parties will contain some divergence of opinion. Internal debates over the appropriateness of ideological or policy change may be shaped by a number of factors, including the strength of party leadership; the degree of internal democracy; the background and perceptions of members; prospects for internal advancement up the party hierarchy; future recruitment; electoral constituencies; and the nature of party competition. The extent of division around these variables has led scholars to debate whether parties see their members as assets, helping drive and replenish their organisation, or liabilities, ideological brakes, isolating their party from the realities of electoral competition. This debate over the influence of members needs to be accompanied by a more specific focus upon the impact of new joiners of a party. In an era when memberships of political parties have, with significant exceptions, generally waned in Western Europe ([van Biezen et al., 2012](#)) what can new members do to reinvigorate a party and steer it in a fresh direction, recasting appeals to voters? A further important question to be asked of new members is whether they are 're-treads', previously members of an alternative, rival political party? Will they bring at least some of the values and ideas of their former party with them, reshaping the outlook of their new party? Large numbers of defections from one party to another may recalibrate party positions. We now apply some of these questions to the DUP, which has been subject to sizeable intakes of a) new members and b) former members of a rival party.

3. Case study: from oppositional religious cult to party of government: the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland

The question of how political parties change is particularly important in the Northern Ireland case, a party system still beset by acute ethno-national and ethno-religious faultlines. In an era of assumed western secularism and movement away from religiously-oriented political parties, the DUP, historically one of the most fundamentalist Protestant parties in Europe, has markedly improved its position. It has been the largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly since 2003 and the fourth largest in the UK parliament since 2005, currently jointly with the Liberal Democrats.

Motivation for substantial party adaptation can appear slight in Northern Ireland, where, effectively, two separate elections take place, one within the Protestant-Unionist-British bloc and the other within the Catholic-Nationalist-Irish bloc. Electoral appeals within the Unionist bloc have historically focused predominantly on the need to maintain Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom. The formation of the DUP in 1971 was in response to the onset of armed conflict amid challenge from Irish nationalists to that position. The DUP created intra-bloc electoral rivalry with the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the dominant Unionist party from 1920 until supplanted by the DUP from 2003, amid Unionist anger over aspects of the Good Friday Agreement. The DUP's more working-class base introduced an element of social cleavage into unionist bloc politics, but the contest within unionism was principally over which party best defended the union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

However, the DUP also heightened the religious component of unionism. The Party was led from its creation until 2008 by the Reverend Ian Paisley, who had also founded his own hardline Protestant Free Presbyterian Church in 1951 (see [Bruce, 1986, 2007](#)). Often, the divisions between Church and Party were blurred, as the DUP offered politicised Protestantism. The legacy of that era remains. The largest single denominational category within the party, at almost one-third of the membership, is Free Presbyterian, even though that Church accounts for merely one per cent of Protestants in Northern Ireland ([Tonge et al., 2014](#)). The DUP was long seen as a vehicle for assertions of Protestant fundamentalism. Free Presbyterian strictures on alcohol, smoking and even line dancing were also accompanied by controversial DUP-backed campaigns to prohibit Sunday opening of amenities and to 'Save Ulster from Sodomy', with Northern Ireland the last region of the UK to legalise homosexuality, in 1982.

Based upon Paisleyite religious strictures, DUP ideology was akin to theocracy: the Protestants of Ulster were a 'chosen people', to be saved from being trundled into a Roman Catholic Ireland. The Party opposed any compromise with the Irish republican 'enemy'. Thus, in consideration of the [Gunther and Diamond \(2003\)](#) typology outlined above, the strategy and behavioural norms of the DUP were largely intolerant and non-pluralistic, instead favouring unionist hegemony and the supremacy of a particularistic regional Protestant British loyalism. The Party operated as a top-down, organisationally limited, cadre, distinguished by religious exclusivity, social conservatism and a fusion of moral and political strictures. The rarity of an anti-modernist, religiously-dominated western European party, whose leader drew upon Biblical inspiration to devise party policy, made the DUP difficult to conceptualise within existing party typologies. [Kirchheimer's \(1966\)](#) denominational mass party came closest, although the DUP was a more close-knit, tiny organisation than his conceptualisation might suggest. The DUP did attempt to broaden its appeal beyond its very small and narrow membership, operating as a 'catch-us' party

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