

Chapter 5 – Why and how do members participate?

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Introduction

In the previous chapter we have identified and explained the reasons behind populist radical right parties' (PRRPs) adoption of the mass party model. By talking to party representatives, we elicited accounts of organisational practice and modes of activism. This allowed us to identify what really mattered to party representatives, as far as maintaining complex (and cumbersome) party structures reliant on the activism of members was concerned. We found that the communities that the 'mass party' is able to shape are considered to serve the functional and electoral goals of PRRPs and safeguarding their organisations' longevity, while giving members the opportunity to bond with like-minded individuals. Rootedness on the ground and a widespread organisation were seen by representatives to be a source of legitimacy for their parties, by strengthening their claims to be 'the voice of the people'.

In this chapter we turn our attention to party members, and in particular those members who are actively involved in their organisation. In our study, it is these 'activists', who spend considerable time and effort in trying to make their organisation function, whose perspectives we are interested in, given our overarching aim to clarify what PRRPs can offer today, in terms of engagement and participation.

Therefore, on the basis of the analysis of one hundred interviews conducted in the four countries under study, we answer the following key questions:

1. What are party members' routes into activism and their motives for joining?
2. What activities do they engage in, and to what extent do these activities and lived experiences signify the parties' mass party character?
3. What are their evaluations of party life and reasons for staying?

With respect to answering the last question, one key puzzle to be addressed will be why grassroots activists are happy to participate in party organisations that, as we have established in previous chapters, grant relatively little decision-making power to their members – what has been called: 'participation without power' (Albertazzi and Vampa, 2021). We sought inspiration from Peter Clark's and James Wilson's (1961) categorisation in our analysis, as further developed by Daniele Albertazzi (2016). This categorisation allows us to analyse the activists' motivations to join and stay and determine what they perceive as the (dis)advantages of party membership. Accordingly, we distinguish between:

- a) **Material** incentives, referring to material gains from party membership, including e.g. political career opportunities and (financial) benefits for members' businesses. In this category, the gain must come to the individual member or close associates/family, and not to a wider community or society as a whole.
- b) **Purposive** incentives, referring to the belief that membership serves a wider purpose. In this category, members may express agreement with specific party policies or the motivation to shape/change politics in ways consistent with a certain ideology.

- c) **Personal** incentives, which do not relate to specific material gain, but rather to seeking and finding personal gratification, growth, intellectual development etc. As in the material category, the gain comes to the individual rather than the community.
- d) **Communitarian** incentives, on the other hand, refer to motivations or advantages related to being part of a certain community, e.g. a ‘winning team’, a circle of friends or ‘family’ of like-minded people.

The chapter will proceed as follows. First, in Section 2, we will provide a brief overview of the party members’ routes into activism. This will be followed by a more extended discussion of the typical life of active members within the party, focusing on their roles, activities and experiences (Section 3). In this section we assess whether, in line with the mass party model, the parties managed to integrate their activists into a community of like-minded individuals, through organising activities aimed at shaping a collective identity (Panebianco, 1988). We then turn our attention to PRRP party members’ evaluations of their parties and the way they function (Section 4), as well as their perceptions about the (dis)advantages of party membership (Section 5). Here we also discuss what motivates individuals to *stay* in the party. While there are few studies on why people choose to become active within PRRPs (e.g. Ammassari 2023a; Klandermans and Mayer 2006; Whiteley et al. 2021), the latter topics have hardly attracted scholarly attention (but see Ammassari 2023b). By asking members in interviews to explicitly reflect both on reasons to join as well as to stay, we offer a more dynamic account of what motivates PRRP members to remain active within the party in comparison with most existing studies (Gauja and van Haute 2015: 200). The chapter concludes (Section 6) with some reflections on the *significance* of what we have learned from members, leading us to the concluding chapter of our volume (Chapter 6), which pulls together the threads of the preceding chapters and reflects on the broader theoretical implications of our work.

Section 2. Party members and activists and their motivations for joining

Existing studies have consistently revealed that party members are not representative of the population at large with regard to demographic characteristics such as gender and age. Research based on survey data has pointed out that, generally speaking, party members tend to be older and more often male (e.g. Bale et al. 2019a; Cross and Young 2004; Gallagher and Marsh 2004; Pedersen et al 2004; Van Haute and Gauja 2015). We find a similar skew in our four samples consisting of 25 PS, SVP and VB members, and 26 LSP members. We interviewed party members from all age groups, with a particularly strong representation for the age group 45-55 years old. The average age of interviewees across our parties fell in the lower end of this age bracket (SVP interviewees, with an average age of 50.5, tended to be slightly older). In terms of gender, male interviewees form the majority in all four party samples (VB 75%; LSP 73%; PS 60%; SVP 56%). While we consciously aimed to include female interviewees in our sample, we found that there was much more reluctance among women to be interviewed.

Asking interviewees about routes into joining the party generates some interesting comparative data (for details on our holistic checklist method of content analysis see Chapter 4). Members of all parties revealed that joining the party was often encouraged or motivated by people close to the interviewees. Interviewees frequently mentioned family members or acquaintances played a role in their decision to join (PS 68.0%; VB 62.5%; LSP 53.8%; SVP 44.0%). As Klandermans and Mayer (2022: 270) previously found, family tends to be ‘the most important socialization agency’ for far right activists in several West European countries, most of whom were ‘exposed to the same kind of ideas and values since their childhood’. Besides such narratives about spontaneous recruitment through social

connections, around half of interviewed LSP and SVP members revealed that the party has been actively reaching out to them, and this answer was even more pronounced among VB and PS members (68.0% and 79.2% of interviewees, respectively). In other words, many members of the selected parties highlighted the role of social networks and parties' conscious networking activities, for instance through organised events, in their routes into activism.

Apart from the role of social contacts and party recruitments, interviewees of three parties frequently mentioned specific political events as a starting point of their routes into activism (PS 72.0%; VB 50.0%; SVP 52.0%). This Finnish interviewee, for example, noted that 'the parliamentary elections in 2011 [...] made me see that there are so many people thinking the same way that it is also worth joining' (PS M27). Interestingly, only 7.7% of League members explicitly refer to political 'events'. Instead, much more so than in other cases, the role of the leader appears to have been essential to get people to join the League. Several older members (LSP, M35; M38; M45; M46) mentioned the party founder Umberto Bossi when reflecting on key reasons for joining, while younger ones mentioned the new leader Salvini (LSP: M37; M44, M52, M56, M58). However, it is important to point out that the personality of the leader 'works' in several cases to attract people to the organisation because leaders are seen by ordinary members as perfectly *embodying* the values and ideas of the party. Extended studies of the League published in the 1990s already stressed how members of the party would argue in interviews that 'Bossi is the League' (Biorcio, 1997 : 237–248), to signal the extent to which what the party stood for could be identified with its founder. In our interviews, purposive reasons for joining are often again associated to the role-model example of the leader Bossi (LSP, M35; M38, M41, M43) and Salvini (LSP, M39; M40; M58).

Across our four cases we also find many idiosyncratic answers, some of which refer to personal experiences (such as being mugged by persons deemed to be foreign, PS M41).

Table 5.X: Reasons for joining the party

| | LSP n=26 | PS n=25 | SVP n=25 | VB n=24 | Total n=100 |
|----------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|----------------|
| Purposive | 22 (84.6%) | 21 (84.0%) | 22 (88.0%) | 21 (87.5%) | 86 (86%) |
| Personal | 3 (11.5%) | 6 (24.0%) | 13 (52.0%) | 4 (16.7%) | 26 (26%) |
| Communitarian | 3 (11.5%) | 8 (32.0%) | 2 (8.0%) | 1 (4.2%) | 14 (14%) |
| Material | 1 (3.8%) | 0 (0%) | 9 (36.0%) | 4 (16.7%) | 14 (14%) |
| Other | 9 (34.6%) | 16 (64.0%) | 8 (32.0%) | 4 (16.7%) | 37 (37%) |

Note: values indicate number of interviews (and percentage of interviews per case) in which category was coded at least once.

When asked more concretely about motivations for joining their party (see Table 5.X), the overwhelming majority of our interviewees mentioned purposive reasons, that is: incentives related to the belief that membership serves a wider political and ideological purpose.¹ This is in line with previous research on key incentives explaining participation in party life, which has stressed the centrality of purposive incentives for joining political parties of varying ideological kinds (Bale et al.

¹ When it comes to reasons for joining, respondents were free to mention as many as they felt relevant. Hence the inductive categories originating from our analysis are not mutually exclusive.

2019a; Fjellman and Rosén; Gallagher and Marsh 2004: 410; Pedersen et al. 2004; Sundström 2021; Van Haute and Gauja 2015). Moreover, recent research has also shown that many members of PRRPs ‘are driven by a strong sense of political efficacy’ (Ammassari 2023a: 2): in other words, joining a PRRP is the means through which they can ‘most effectively redress’ a series of perceived grievances and ‘improve their situation and that of “their” people’ (ibid: 13). This again points at the crucial role played by ideology and, more generally, purposive incentives to explain political participation in the life of these parties.

Klandermans and Mayer (2006: 271) previously observed that far-right activists were typically characterised by ‘in-group favouritism’ and the conviction that foreigners posed a ‘threat to the integrity of their people and their culture’. The willingness to do something about migration was indeed mentioned in several of our interviews too (e.g. LSP M40, M48; M51; VB M40, M46, M48, M51, M55, M56; SVP M39, M51, M58). These members’ answers illustrate well how purposive incentives for joining are directly related to the nativist ideology of the PRR:

I want things to go well in my country. And I notice that there are large streams of foreigners coming to us and a lot of replacement of our norms and values. Also the government isn't working as it should. And I thought the best way to do something positive is to make sure that the Vlaams Belang keeps growing (VB M48).

I thought that the SVP is the only party that addressed problems such as overpopulation because of immigration...and if you look closer, there are several villages where people don't have Swiss names anymore. This was the reason...this was my motivation. That was the main point (SVP/UDC M51).

[I joined] with the aim of [...] being masters in our own home. [The moment came] when we started having this invasion of illegal immigrants" (LSP M51).

Now that I give it more thought, that was the most important point for me to even join the Finns Party in the first place. Because the Finns Party opposes this so-called humanitarian immigration, and now we have already seen the problems it has brought, the rapes and such.[...] The main reason I joined the Finns Party was to resist immigration [...] the reason why I joined politics eight years ago, in that, the immigrants have come in and they take a lot of money from our social services, and so on, and in Helsinki there are the youth gangs and things like this" (PS M26).

More generally, interviewees such as this PS member emphasise their agreement with their parties’ ideas and policies on local and national issues.

The most important thing for me is my family and my children, that is the top priority, but in the current situation, the way I see the ideologies and values the Finns Party represents, I consider them consistent with my personal views and my family. So, with my own actions I want to make my children's future better, and the current development is not at all what I would hope, not for my family, or for Finland or even Europe (PS M27).

Personal reasons for joining – related to non-material rewards including intellectual gratification or a ‘thirst for knowledge’ (PS M31) – are mentioned regularly too by our representatives. Several Swiss interviewees revealed that they joined because they were interested in politics and working in a political

organisation – often at the local level – on topics that interested them (SVP M39, M45, M57). As one representative said: ‘What interested me was to get insights into the political domain. I knew it from my apprenticeship at the highest level but I wanted to understand politics at the lowest level’ (SVP M37). This LSP interviewee explained that a source of personal gratification was being able to connect with his past: ‘I was enthusiastic about the rediscovery of our roots [...] For me, the origins, the tradition, the culture that my grandparents, my father and so on passed on to me are important’ (LSP M45). VB interviewees did not often cite personal reasons, but where they did so, they noted that the party fit well with their sense of self and family background (VB M41, M44, M46). One VB interviewee explained, “It was actually the only party that I felt good with...For me, it was just what fit with my character and what positions just fit well with me” (VB M41).

Communitarian incentives – those related to being motivated to become part of a community – are not as common across our interviews. Nevertheless, in Finland, about a third of interviewees mentioned communitarian reasons. This PS member argued that ‘the whole party scene fascinated me, because the people seemed very welcoming and that it is fun to do things with them’ (PS M48). Another said that ‘there are good people there [in the party] and I thought that I’d like to be a part of that group’ (PS M30). Some other examples are provided by this 21 year old Italian interviewee, who argued that ‘being able to join a community was personally making me feel less alone (...) I finally felt like I belonged somewhere’ (LSP M54). Similarly, this fellow member was ‘driven by the idea of being close to the people, to listen to their opinions. And that’s what I got: I had the chance to meet a lot of people (...)’ (LSP M50). Within the SVP, communitarian reasons played an equally marginal role. Two members mentioned that they joined the SVP to meet like-minded people with whom they could debate certain topics (SVP M40, M45). Only one VB member referred to communitarian incentives as their reason for joining. They said: ‘I’ve really come home, because I love the Vlaams Belang. I love the camaraderie and the friendships of all those people’ (VB M36). While, across our four cases, only 14% of interviewees mentioned communitarian reasons for joining the party, this does not mean that our interviewees showed a lack of appreciation for the party community *after* joining, as we will see in the remainder of the chapter.

Our results further indicate that material incentives are hardly mentioned as a key motivating factor for joining the selected PRRPs, which is also in line with existing studies on the membership of political parties in general (Gallagher and Marsh 2004; XXXX). Whereas interviewees sometimes acknowledge certain material benefits of being a party member, such as being kept up-to-date with events in their local and national communities, these are very rarely mentioned as being instrumental to their decisions to *join* the party. More substantial benefits – such as enhanced career opportunities brought about by membership – are also hardly mentioned. To the contrary, as we discuss in more detail later in this chapter, a considerable number of our interviewees reveal that joining a PRRPs has in fact had a malign impact on their professional and personal lives.

Section 3. Roles, activities and experiences

As we discussed in Chapter 2, among the key characteristics of the mass party model as we define it are rootedness on the ground and the provision of a variety of activities to members (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015), and the preservation of ‘collective identities through ideology’ (Panebianco, 1988: 268). In our interviews with grassroots members we intended to gauge whether our chosen parties indeed meet these particular criteria. In other words, did the parties appear to seek and manage to create close-knit political communities of activists, promoting social integration among them and shaping their

interpretations of political developments? The following part of this chapter focuses on answering this question.

Engagement in different types of party activities

PRRP members partake in a rich variety of activities, both within and on behalf of their party. Table 5.X shows the activities mentioned by the members of the four selected parties (please see Appendix X for elaborate description of the categories).²

Table 5.X: Member involvement in different types of party activities

| | LSP n=26 | PS n=25 | SVP n=25 | VB n=24 | Total n=100 |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| In-person political activities | 20 (76.9%) | 20 (80.0%) | 21 (84.0%) | 17 (70.8%) | 78 (78%) |
| Online political activities | 19 (73.1%) | 24 (96.0%) | 11 (44.0%) | 16 (66.7%) | 70 (70%) |
| Campaign activities | 22 (84.6%) | 20 (80.0%) | 7 (28.0%) | 15 (62.5%) | 64 (64%) |
| Social activities | 21 (80.8%) | 11 (44.0%) | 16 (64.0%) | 15 (62.5%) | 63 (63%) |
| Training activities | 5 (19.2%) | 3 (12.0%) | 2 (8.0%) | 3 (12.5%) | 13 (13%) |
| Service-oriented activities | 6 (23.1%) | 1 (4.0%) | 3 (12.0%) | 1 (4.2%) | 11 (11%) |

Note: values indicate number of interviews (and percentage of interviews per case) in which category was coded at least once

When we turn our attention to ‘traditional’ in-person meetings and events, the data across our cases is fairly similar, but we also observe some notable outliers. A majority of respondents in our total sample engage in in-personal political activities, campaign activities and social activities organised by their parties. On the other hand, training activities provided by parties (e.g. on public speaking or preparing for public office) and service-oriented activities related to the management and functioning of the party organisation are mentioned rarely.

Campaign activities are mentioned particularly often by LSP members, especially the street stalls held to canvas the public. As LSP M45 explains, ‘we talk to people, we organise *gazebos* [street stalls], there is a strong territorial presence everywhere, especially where the League is rooted’. As explained by one member: ‘we don’t set *gazebos* up only when there is an election, we’re not present in the square only when there are elections. We have understood that you need to follow the people, the people are sovereign, the people are sacred’ (LSP M35). In addition, social activities aimed at ‘spending time together’ (LSP, M49) are popular. Respondents frequently describe convivial gatherings or other pastime activities, such as ‘a meeting to play poker at the party branch, or a simple outing in the city, or any other leisure activities’ (LSP, M48). Social activities are nevertheless interlinked with politics. Interviewees often mention the very popular annual event the party holds in Pontida (Lombardy region), seen as the climax of political and social interactions (LSP, M36; M37; M39; M53; M57; M60). As we have heard from League members, in Pontida: ‘You share two days of politics and social fun, you listen

² Similarly to ‘reasons for joining’, here again members were free to mention all the different types of activities they got involved in. Therefore, the data allows for the identification of all the most common ways through which party members get involved in the activities organised by – or on behalf of – the party.

to political speeches, you listen to the leaders you only see on TV and meet them as well'. (LSP, M37). Other in-person political activities are common and include local branch meetings (e.g. LSP, M45; M53), provincial meetings (e.g. LSP, M39), meeting of the youth section (e.g. LSP, M37).

Similar to the Italian case, answers of VB members tend to fall primarily in the categories of political, campaign and social activities. Political activities include speeches and informal visits to local members by party representatives (for example, in local pubs or cafes), and larger events, such as the culture-specific, COVID-era 'protest drive' from each area of Flanders to Brussels. The party's branch structure provides a basis for regular activities. For example, local branches typically hold monthly meetings, which are 'requested by the higher ups' in the party ranks (VB M38). These, alongside national Congresses, are regular 'set pieces' for the party. Recurring campaign activities in the annual schedule include delivering and distributing leaflets or small party-branded trinkets at markets (VB M39, M46, M49), campaigning on the Flemish national day of 11th July (VB M37, M51, M52), and door-to-door canvassing (VB M51, M52, M54).

Social activities are of great importance to the VB, too, and include barbecues, guided walks, cycles, family friendly events with fun-fair style activities, etc. Most members reported that their branch, sometimes in collaboration with nearby branches, organises both an annual dinner party and an annual new year's reception. Like in all other cases, these predominantly social activities usually include some limited political element, for example a short speech by a national level politician or local representative, thus using entertainment as a wedge for the introduction of serious themes and the reiteration of the party's position on specific issues. As we also see in other cases, culturally specific events are important to members. These include Flemish painter 'Breughel'-style parties, which use the traditional settings offered by the works of this painter to strengthen the feeling of community among party members (VB M41).

More attuned to the cultural customs in Finland, social activities mentioned by Finns members include going to the sauna (PS M36, M37, M43, 46) and sausage and barbeque parties (PS M34; M37). Notably, however, social events as part of PS activities are mentioned only by less than half of the respondents (44.0%) – which partly appears to be a function of the cold Finnish weather in the winter months. Yet also in this case, it is not always easy to distinguish neatly between in-person political and campaign events (both mentioned by 80% of PS interviewees), on the one hand, and social events on the other. During campaigns, for example, so-called tent events stand out as prominent activities (PS M25, M26, M30, M32, M40, M42, M46, M48). PS M40 explains that 'during the elections, we are at the tent and work for the party, distributing newspapers and such' (PS, interview M40). Yet another interviewee explains that these events amount to more than work alone:

the tent activity is really fun, it is our soul, really. There we meet people and have a chat [...] we agreed who makes coffee and brings thermos flasks, and who'll get the snacks, and arranges our barbecue... stuff like that (PS interview M26)

Typical in-person political activities referred to by PS members are similar to those in other cases and include party meetings at various levels and party congresses.

As for the SVP/UDC, in-person political activities rank highest on the list. These come mainly in the shape of committee meetings (SVP/UDC M36, M50, M51, M58) and delegate assemblies (SVP/UDC M45, M54, M55, M59). Culture-specific social activities mixing politics with socialising and entertainment are also very common in Switzerland. Hence 'farmer's breakfasts' (*Buurezmorge*) or

‘brunches’ (SVP/UDC M41, M43; M44, M56) are frequently organised by party members or representatives to provide opportunities for representatives, members and sympathisers to meet in an informal environment. Moreover, in Switzerland, too, it is not always easy to draw a line between political and social activities. An obvious example is the ‘Albisgüetli convention’ taking place every year in Zurich, in which political speeches, music, and conviviality are all combined. SVP/UDC members say that the event strengthens feelings of belonging to the community among members (cfr. SVP/UDC M45, M57).

Where the Swiss case stands out, however, is in the lower number of interviewees engaged in actively campaigning for the SVP/UDC. A few members engage in campaign activities like distributing leaflets (SVP/UDC M43, M46), but several others appear particularly apprehensive about the stigma associated with being an SVP/UDC member – a topic which we discuss in more detail below. The most frequently mentioned reason for not campaigning is that members feel exposed and faced with negative reactions and hostility within their community (SVP/UDC M37, M45, M48). As one member said: ‘I often thought about putting up one of the SVP’s campaign posters in my garden. And then I did not do it because I thought of the neighbours that live close by’ (SVP/UDC M42). Some even mentioned specific verbal and physical attacks they had personally encountered (SVP/UDC M59, M58).

Swiss interviewees also stand out in terms of their more limited engagement with online political activities – fewer than half mention they actively engage online. Several members are open about not participating in online activities at all (SVP/UDC M36, M39, M47, M52, M56, M57, M60), while only a few say that they spend a considerable amount of time promoting the party online (SVP/UDC M44, M45, M50). This is consistent with what we found when interviewing party representatives from this party (cfr. Chapter 4), who often pointed out that many of their members showed a preference for engaging with the party via more traditional means. The fact that the average SVP interviewee was somewhat older relative to participants in the other countries may play a role here. Frequently mentioned explanations for steering clear of online activities are a general disinterest in using social media (SVP M36, M45, M53), and the higher importance of social face-to-face activities (SVP M51, M57).

Answers of SVP/UDC members stand in stark contrast with those of PS members, virtually all of whom engage in online political activities, albeit with a varying degree of commitment. One interviewee declared that ‘social media is very important in my activism. I haven’t been so much present physically’ (PS M36). Others are much more reluctant, with one member pointing at the relevance of generational gaps:

younger people consider [social media] a lot more important than older people. We have grown up surrounded by social media, so it is a natural environment for us. That is how I see it. Maybe the older people are more used to leaflets and street posters and going to market squares to talk to people and grill sausages (PS M36)

Even though about three quarters of LSP interviewees engage in online political activities, we see similar mixed feelings about this type of activism. For instance, a member in his 30s argued that ‘I don’t like it. Online activities are quite limiting. I do it, though’ (LSP M37). A member in his 70s lamented that ‘now people meet up and everyone’s on their phones’ (LSP M38).

Finally, about two-thirds of VB members reported having engaged in online activities, which seems to be driven partly by the party’s shift towards social media campaigning (Sijstermans 2021). Several members expressed the feeling that online social activities cannot be a full replacement for in-person

engagement – in fact, the former activities were sometimes described as ‘boring’ (VB M41). Yet other members primarily stressed that social media were ‘impossible to avoid’ (VB M43). Facebook is a space for members to share information and ‘proclaim the line of the Vlaams Belang’ (VB M37). For the most involved individuals, this is a time consuming activity, with one respondent explaining: ‘[I] run two Facebook pages’ and ‘administer seven other pages, and I have to fill them up with content’ (VB M44).

Mixed to negative feelings about online activities also came to the fore in reflections about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. During this period, parties were evidently incentivised to organise meetings online. VB members involved in the party’s organisational structures reported moving meetings online as well as organising online social events such as quiz nights and a new year’s reception (VB M35, M38, M41, M45, M46). This was not necessarily seen as a positive evolution in the party. One younger member said, ‘We did one online event. But, it’s boring... People want to chat close together, you know, let’s go smoke a cigarette and talk outside with a pint. It’s different than being online [talking] to a screen’ (VB M41). However, another member added that they expected meetings to remain online: ‘I think there are many things that will stay digitised and that the contacts will just happen based on necessity and the needs of the moment itself and much less structured’ (VB M35).

In the case of the League, strict COVID-19 restrictions in Italy also forced the party to temporarily move all its activities online. As one member explains ‘With Covid-19, for obvious reasons, social media activity became the predominant, if not exclusive, activity because, trivially, you can’t do anything else.’ (LSP M39). This trend was generally perceived to be a bitter, yet necessary, pill to swallow. For instance, this member argued that ‘because of the pandemic the meetings are done online: I’m not particularly excited about this, because I like human contact, while online is a bit depersonalised’ (LSP M45). Another similarly maintained that it’s important to meet in person because the human contact is different [online] there’s a stark detachment. Human contact, instead, is fundamental to understand who it is you’re dealing with and grasping their feelings’ (LSP M44). However, another member said that he did ‘not notice the difference’ in the levels of attention of members between online and in-person meetings (LSP M35).

Virtually all the PS activists lamented the negative impact of the pandemic on their life within the party: for instance, this interviewee lamented that before ‘it was a lot more of a community, but during the corona time it has been miserable’ (PS M26). Various PS activists discussed the restrictions Covid imposed in terms of organising party activities without mentioning online alternatives, suggesting that many activities were frozen (PS 25, 34, 37, 49). A few others did mention online party meetings, but noted these were relatively infrequent (PS 26, 39). One activist remembered the Covid period to be ‘very draining’ given the lack of physical meetings (PS M26); and another remarked: ‘[online] meetings are always a bit awful, to begin with. So there has not been much of building a community, because we have had very few things together, the face-to-face meetings’ (PS M32).

Similar to other parties, SVP/UDC members often explained how Covid changed the nature and scope of party activities. In-person political and social events largely came to a halt, and this was seen to have a negative impact on the community spirit (SVP/UDC M40, M49, M51, M56). The relative lack of interest in online activities among SVP/UDC members made it even more difficult to stay connected as many of them did not become more engaged in online activities. As one member outlined:

I just moved here a year ago and did not meet anyone personally because of Corona. I called some people but I did not participate in the online general assembly because I do not have the necessary technical devices (SVP/UDC M60)

This increased difficulty to stay in touch and connect was also echoed by members involved with administrative tasks and the organisation of events (SVP/UDC M48). They mentioned more practical issues, such as the more time consuming organisation of events during the pandemic (SVP/UDC M69). As one member outlined in detail:

It is a bit difficult with our members. There are many who are older. It is hardly possible [to communicate] online. [...] In October we had an event planned and sent written invitations. And then the measures against Corona were tightened and we cancelled again in written letters. That is quite a task. Because normally, you just write an email and that is that. But for us, it is a lot of work (SVP/UDC M40).

In the end, our data show that in all of our cases there are mixed feelings about social media, and still a strong appreciation for in-person activities and the personal fulfilment these tend to generate. In that sense, the party activities of our selected parties resemble quite closely those of the traditional 20th century mass parties, and the Covid-19 pandemic has hardly increased a desire among grassroots members to shift the focus to more online activities.

Level of engagement in party activities, party identification and community

A next question to consider is whether the described party activities fulfilled their role of creating close-knit political communities: did we see high levels of engagement among our interviewees in party activities and can we speak of a collective party identity in our four cases? In terms of the frequency members contribute to party activities, League respondents appeared to be the most active, with the vast majority of the interviewees (73%) being active at least once a week or more, and 15% being active at least once a month or more. While one LSP member claimed that ‘We always work’ (LSP M35), another provided a more balanced assessment: ‘There were months in which I wasn’t doing much besides meetings. In other months, there were extra activities like street stalls, leafleting, event organisation, participation in meetings. There’s no typical month’ (LSP M37).

SVP/UDC interviewees are, on balance, the least active. Data for this party show that the majority of interviewed members (58%) engage only a few times during the year and less than once a month in party activities. Only 16% were more active than this (by engaging at least once a week or once a month). This explains why many members usually referred to a whole year as a time frame when asked how a typical month in the party looks like (SVP/UDC M39, M45, M47). As one member said:

I would say it is difficult to reduce it to a month because most of the time, nothing happens. Generally, nothing happens. We have two municipality assemblies and two orientation meetings [meetings that provide information on specific topics]; we have a general assembly (SVP/UDC M37).

VB and PS interviewees fall somewhere in between with more than half of them indicating that they participate in party activities at least once a month. Within the VB we find that the experience of regular engagement and commitment is not universal among members. One joked it took up to ‘80% of my time’ (VB M41). This member noted that they regularly answered calls for the party at 10 PM, or brought their laptop to the pub to work on party business. Another said, ‘I’m busy with it from day to

night' (VB M54). Some members, however, perceived party membership more as 'a hobby' (VB M46). As another interviewee put it to us: 'If I see something on the TV, or I hear someone speak, or Tom Van Grieken is on the TV, I think everything he says it's correct. But actively going to everything, I don't have time for that anymore' (VB M50).

The typical month of PS activists seems shaped by the specific needs of the party at a given point in time. Asked about more specific details on the typical month, one member said that it consisted of 'Talking about the elections, we tried to be visible in the market square, did the kind of communal work [...] It's hard to say directly what kind of tasks, we just did what was needed at a particular moment' (PS M34). Nevertheless, respondents often report that having a monthly meeting is part of their typical month (PS M27, M29, M34, M36, M45).

The different levels of engagement in party activities shown across our cases also translate into the extent to which party members believe their activism defines who they are. League members, in particular, identify strongly with the party (e.g. LSP M35; M36; M39; M42, M49), which is in line with findings from previous research (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015). As was the case in party elite interviews (see Chapter 4), the party is talked about in very enthusiastic terms by its members and often likened to 'a family' (e.g. LSP, M40, M42, M49; M46; M53). The following quote captures well the kind of answers we have received on the topic: 'More than a party, it's a family. Like in all families there are arguments, bad days, joyful moments, sad moments'. Members typically argue that they have found friends within the League (e.g. LSP, M37, M42, M45, M56, M58, M59), even though 'obviously we can't all like each other' (LSP, M39). According to one member: 'the League took half of my life and for me it is my second family' (LSP M35). Another explains that 'You work and in your free time you spend time with the League, whereas others go out with friends or practice sports. My boyfriend is also a League-supporter, my friends as well. It really becomes like a second family' (LSP M36). It is also common for respondents to stress how much they are committed to the party: 'it fills [my life] up' in the words of one interviewee (LSP M43). Another maintained that 'I would feel empty without my party, I'd miss something' (LSP M55).

If SVP/UDC members appear less keen to spend a lot of time in activities that support the party, at least compared to their League counterparts, their identification with the party also appears to be less strong. For many interviewed members, the party plays an important part in their lives, but they could live without it. They mention in interviews that they are engaged in other important activities besides taking part in political activities, or have a job and a family that occupy much of their time (SVP/UDC M37, M38, M45, M48, M56). Some members even volunteer that the party only plays a marginal role in their life, which is not something one gets when speaking to League members.

Generally speaking, SVP/UDC members nevertheless appear to appreciate the party's attempts to stimulate active engagement and create a sense of community among members (SVP/UDC M40, M44, M45, M58). Many events organised by the party serve as opportunities to receive information and to meet political representatives in an informal setting, which increases the feeling of being part of the SVP/UDC community. As one member said to us: 'I think such events are very valuable... to provide an opportunity for normal members to be closer [to politicians] instead of just seeing them on Swiss Television' (SVP/UDC M49). Still, while several interviewees allude to friendships between SVP/UDC members (e.g. SV/UDCP M36, M43, M59, M60), many respondents treat fellow party members more as acquaintances or business partners than close friends. In other words, they share interests and meet at assemblies but would not invite each other to their private homes (SVP/UDC M39, M42, 54, M57). As one member put it:

The other members are people I know from the village. We say hello and see each other at municipality events but we did not develop a friendship (SVP/UDC M54).

VB interviewees' identification with the party and closeness to other members also tends to vary. For some, the party is extremely central to their community and daily life. One interviewee said plainly, 'My best friends are all in the party' (VB M40). Respondents note that these friendships are begun and cultivated at social events like barbecues and *Breughel* meals (VB M33, M38, M39, M41). Some members expressed that party members were generally 'on the same wavelength as each other' (VB M52) or even constituted 'one happy family' (VB M44). There are also members, however, for whom activities are more functional and pragmatic than identity- or community-based. As one member explained: 'I'm more of a do-er'; they noted that branch executive meetings were often 'a lot of chatter while little is done' (VB M37). Several interviewees openly discuss conflicts between members (VB M34, M38, M46, M50, M51, M52). Yet, like in the other cases, these are sometimes compared to family struggles, as this interviewee explained:

The Vlaams Belang is actually a family. A family respects you. You have concern for each other. Our father will have concern and care for the members... That's one of the values of our existence: members take care of each other. Motivate each other, boost each other's morale. Yeah, of course sometimes you can get grumpy with someone... but we are respectful of each other (VB M36).

This Finnish interviewee in fact sketches a very similar picture: 'you could say that we are a family. There are some with whom you don't get along so well, and with others it's like, one starts a sentence and another finishes it, so it's a very close relationship (PS M43). Similarly, another PS member maintained: 'I'd say that my best friends are from the party. Then thinking of the whole community, it is sort of a family. While there are 'black sheep' whose actions you don't approve of, it's still your own group' (PS M46). It is indeed common for the interviewees to consider the PS as playing a 'big' role in their lives. One reveals that PS membership 'is a hobby and partially also a lifestyle; it's sometimes difficult to separate' (PS M46). Another explains that her experience and that of other party fellows is that 'your relationship, friends, work, almost all your life is within the Finns Party' (PS M48). Members typically highlight that they have found friends in the PS (e.g. PS M28, M31, M33, M35, M37 M43, M44, 47, M48). Interestingly, this friendship is cemented by a shared sense of purpose and ideology: for instance, this interviewee explained that 'I wouldn't say that they are my close friends, but they are my ideological friends' (PS M39).

This latter answer illustrates that, also within the PS, not all interviewees paint an overly idealised image of life within the party. While a clear majority (80%) of respondents mentioned closeness and friendship to other members, an even larger majority (84%) *also* mentioned tensions and animosities (e.g. PS M27, M30, M32, M325). The reasons are well summarised by PS M29 who explains that these are 'Mostly [due to] difficult people. Of course, there are some ideological issues as well, but mainly just difficult people'. For some members the party also plays a reasonably limited role in their daily life. One member argues that life 'can't just be politics and the party' (PS M34), while others describes the party primarily as a 'channel' to express his opinions (PS M29). This member declares: 'I could live without the party [laughs]. The party as such is not essential, but instead the agenda we promote' (PS M32)

From our data, it is clear that commitment to their parties and closeness to fellow party members vary between but also within the four cases. Yet it is clear that all parties host a core of committed activists

who identify strongly with their organisations. Similar to party elites discussed in the previous chapter, ordinary party members also tend to frequently describe their party community as a ‘family’ marked by occasional conflict and difference of opinion, but also by a sense of belonging and a shared identity. From the perspective of PRRP members, it is particularly interesting to ask how their parties seek to accomplish value-infusion and member-encapsulation, as these are key traits of mass parties.

Perceptions of party elite efforts to shape collective identities

From the previous discussion it already became clear that, across our sample of parties, the League fulfils an important role in the life of many of its members in particular. Interviewees recognise that the party tries to stimulate active engagement and a sense of community through events and activities. One member explained that ‘celebrations, events, Pontida (...) , street stalls, demonstrations, everything contributes to an active community. Even social media events, now... that creates activism (LSP M39). This member noted that community building is not ‘something artificially imposed from above [...] It’s the local branches which say “let’s do the activities, meetings, debates, etc”’ (LSP M56). Only two interviewees lamented the lack of stimulation (LSP, M40; M52), basically for reasons pointing to the lack of clear communications to newcomers.

In terms of shaping the ideas of members, interviewees appear to be well aware of party elite socialisation – a practice that has characterised the party since its foundation. Few raise objections to this. For instance, one interviewee said to us: ‘For me, the fact that a person joins entails taking for granted that you want to follow those ideas’ (LSP M50). Another observed that when decisions were not shared by all members, the party sought to persuade them ‘with facts and also with internal propaganda’ (LSP M37). Yet another member explained that the party seeks to encapsulate members ‘by trying to exploit the available instruments’, including setting up political schools (LSP M47; M38 and M46 gave similar answers).

Within the VB, there is also a clear elite-driven effort to build a like-minded and rooted party community, of which members are very aware, and which they do not seem to object to. One branch vice chairman noted, ‘We come together to take a walk or an activity. We come together to drink pints, or water, or cola and that's how we build up that sense of a group spirit’ (VB M44). Interviewees felt that branch and national party meetings, house visits and organised events were all important ways through which the party aimed to communicate its positions to ordinary members so as to create a united front (VB M45, M46, M53, M56). Shaping members’ views was perceived as a matter of informing supporters, similar to the approach of the LSP. This member described that the process of socialising members often happens in a subtle way: ‘what Parliamentarians or the leader will do is go and speak at local activities, and in that way they may have a certain influence on the ideas of the members or they highlight or make explicit certain intuitions that members might have’ (VB M45).

Informing members about ‘genuine’ party positions is seen as being particularly important in the Belgian context, as members believe there is not only a political *cordon sanitaire* but a *cordon mediathique*, too (see de Jonge 2019). In other words, they see the party as being ostracised by the media. For this reason, the party’s social media channels play an important role in terms of offering an alternative point of view to what are seen as the ‘mainstream media’. One respondent explained that on social media ‘[members] come across different opinions from the ones expressed in the [mainstream] media. That really affects people and they think, yeah that's right what [the VB] is saying’ (VB M54). The party thus pitches itself as a source of alternative information which shapes members’ and supporters’ views in ways that are consistent with the aims of the party.

A similar observation was being made in the Finnish case, where an interviewee observed that party communication could be seen as a means ‘to correct what is being said in the media’ (PS M29). Responses of other activists point to the ‘attempts to create a [internal] consensus on important issues’ (PS M25), and the perception that ‘[even if there are] no clear-cut orders, there are lot of messages that include clear suggestions on things that would be good to discuss and keep on the agenda’ (PS M37). Some interviewees nevertheless feel the party does not do much to actively influence ideas and opinions (e.g. PS M30, M34). One interviewee recognised, however, that ‘if it is done skilfully the people don’t even notice they are being steered’ (PS M31).

Besides this, the vast majority of PS’ members also argue that the party tries to stimulate active engagement and a sense of community. These members maintained: ‘The party wants to feed that [sense of community], especially as in many places the local organisations are quite thin’ (PS M46), and ‘I think they encourage it. They do want to have a community, also in the online world’ (PS M49). One interviewee provided an illustrative assessment of the integration of offline and online means of socialisation, explaining that, through ‘big events’ like party congresses:

we can create a sense of community at the national level. And then, at the local level, marketplace events, street events, are ways to create a sense of community. Then, the Finns Party is quite skilled with social media, so through social media we are able to create a sense of community, too (PS M39).

However, several members also lamented a lack of top-down drive to stimulate engagement, even though they are typically not very specific in their assessment. Some spoke about the lack of ‘training’ (PS M29, M35), while another complained that from the higher levels of the party organisation ‘contact could be more frequent than just through the events or through a few individual people’ (PS M35).

As in the other cases, SVP/UDC members note that their party, through events and organised activities, stimulates active engagement among members and a sense of community (SVP/UDC M40, M44, M45, M58). However, the party seems less focused on trying to make sure members all sing from the same hymn sheet. Many of the events organised by the SVP/UDC are seen by members mainly as opportunities to receive information and to meet political representatives in an informal setting. As one member said to us, events organised by the party serve the purpose to ‘provide an opportunity for ordinary members to be closer [to politicians] instead of just seeing them on Swiss Television’ (SVP/UDC M49). Overall, in comparison with our other cases, the SVP/UDC appears to have taken a less ‘controlling’ approach to relating with its members. When asked how they feel the SVP/UDC is trying to shape their ideas and actions, some party members emphasise that the party usually provides balanced information at meetings and workshops and lets people reach their own opinion (SVP/UDC M47, M55, M56, M59). As one member put it:

At these meetings we have debates and there is a person for and one against it. We invite externals who are against the position we consider. And we debate and then we vote. It is very democratic (SVP/UDC M50).

It is very difficult to envisage a party such as the League allowing such an open debate, as party elites seek to make sure members interpret political developments in a way that is fully consistent with party narratives.

Irrespective of the different viewpoints and experiences, many interviewees from across our parties recognise the efforts their organisations make in forging bonds between members, as well as to shape

their opinions. Among our cases, the League appears to stand out as the most idiosyncratic case of a mass party, at least where it concerns the sense of community and the party's efforts in terms of value-infusion and member-encapsulation, whereas, judging from member experiences, the SVP/UDC does not neatly tick all the boxes of an ideal-typical mass party.

Section 4: Evaluations of the functioning of the party

Having established party members' motivations for joining and their lived experiences of the life within their parties – assessing to what extent these were typical of what could be expected in mass party organisations – we now move to the third question central to this chapter. In this section, we ask what are members' evaluations of party life, in particular their views on their voices being heard and their ability to exert influence. In the subsequent section, we analyse their more specific reasons for staying within their parties.

The party's general functioning

It may not come as a surprise that members across all four cases appear quite satisfied overall in terms of how the selected parties are functioning as organisations. The literature has shown that if an individual is well embedded within their party as a social network, this person 'forms a positive impression of the way it conducts its business and feels comfortable with its general ideological outlook, [and] he or she will be significantly more likely to campaign for it at election time' (Bale et al. 2019a: 672).

This description certainly applies to most of our League respondents; an emblematic opinion was expressed by this interviewee: 'I don't think we could do better' (LSP M36). In Belgium, on the other hand, members tend to note that the party is better organised under leader Van Grieken (in post since 2014) than under previous leaders (VB M37, M40, M44, M48). For example, one respondent noted, 'I can't really say anything negative about Tom van Grieken's approach to party politics... It's never gone as well as now, you see that in the polls. That system works' (VB M40). One of Van Grieken's changes to the party was hiring more local staffers after their strong electoral results in 2019, which members argue has benefited transparency and party operations (VB M36, M50, M52). Only a few members questioned the party's organisational structure and their alleged complexity (e.g. VB M35, M49).

In the Finnish case, various PS members similarly showed their appreciation for the party leader at the time (2021), Halla-aho (e.g. PS M28, M30 M31, M33, M41). As this member explained: 'I think the party leadership works as well as it can in a big party like this (...) the personality of Halla-aho unifies the field, and I see him as being an extremely popular party leader' (PS M28). In general organisational terms, the functioning of the PS is generally positively evaluated. One interviewee explained: 'I am quite happy with how it is managed now. And it is great that the members get to pick the party leader, that's great' (PS M26). Some more critical voices point at the need to have more paid personnel to support the work of the lower territorial levels of the party organisation (PS M27, M40, M42). Others point at the perceived need to update the party rules and regulations now that the party has become so large (e.g. PS M32, M35, M48, M49). This member argued that 'the party's rules and regulations are in need of a reform (...) [they] are designed for a small party, and the number of members is growing hugely so not all the meeting protocols work all the time (PS M32).

In Switzerland parties are networks of cantonal organisations, and this was reflected in the answers we got in interviews. Generally speaking, respondents from the very successful Zurich branch expressed satisfaction with how their cantonal organisation functioned (SVP/UDC M47, M54). This contrasted to some less positive appraisals from Berne and Geneva (SVP/UDC M46, SVP M50, SVP M58). A criticism that is not uncommon within the SVP concerns a communication style that is said to be too radical and ‘aggressive’ (SVP M 45, M54, M57). This also relates to cantonal differences between the Zurich branch – which has imposed a more outspoken and radical style on the party as a whole (see Chapter 3) – and the traditionally more moderate Berne branch. Overall, while we see most interviewees recounting positive evaluations of their party organisations, there are some idiosyncratic reasons underlying less positive appraisals.

Relationship with party elites and perceptions on grassroots influence

Some of the previously presented views already touched on the evaluation of party leaders and the influence of ordinary members. Given that, in reality, the four parties offer ordinary members few opportunities to influence decisions about internal affairs and policy (see Chapter 3), what are our interviewees’ views on these issues in particular? How do they perceive their relationship with party elites and their own ability to influence decisions and the party course?

LSP members again tend to provide the most optimistic views on this matter. All LSP interviewees reported to be close to the party elites, and no one mentioned the existence of distance or animosity. Even the leader Salvini is considered as being very approachable and friendly (e.g. LSP M38, M40, M46, M51) and ‘like us’ (LSP M35). Other party representatives, too, are almost universally seen as affable and viewed as close to the ordinary members. It is typical for ordinary members to remark that representatives have not forgotten where they come from and the importance of maintaining a link with their territory (e.g. LSP, M60). However, there was also a sizable minority (about one in four respondents) that criticised the LSP’s degree of centralisation. As discussed in Chapter 3, the League has gone through an exceptional period in which it basically reinvented itself (see Chapter 3). There is no doubt that its leadership has exercised strict control of this process, also by appointing several special commissioners to run local branches. Some members lamented this and called for the restoration of party congresses (hence more internal democracy) at all levels, clearly not happy about not being heard. As explained by this member: ‘It’s very important that we resume the internal debate. At the moment, under the current leadership of Salvini, it is very limited’ (LSP M47).

In the Flemish case, almost half of VB members express that party elites are accessible to them, usually naming specific individuals such as leader Van Grieken (VB M36, M41, M45, M49, M54) or their area’s representative in the Chamber of Representatives (M33, M36, M37, M46, M54). However, one in five interviewees reports that some distance exists with representatives, sometimes related to ideological disagreements (VB M36, M50) or members’ newness in the party (VB M38, M47).

In Finland, more interviewees perceive distance (almost half) than closeness (just over a third). Among those perceiving closeness, one recalled: ‘it’s always nice to receive Christmas cards from Halla-aho and our MPs’ (PS M39). Members who perceive distance explain that they are primarily in contact with the local level of the party rather than the national party (e.g. PS M32, M45). One member was so open to proclaim: ‘it’s not nice to say this, but the party feels quite distant, it feels more like it’s in Helsinki and in Parliament [...] Somehow it feels pretty foreign compared to my life’ (PS M26).

SVP interviewees paint a similar picture as those in Finland. Some mentioned being close to regional or national representatives (SVP M47, M55, M57), but several others felt more distant (SVP M43, M45, M53), especially when it comes to federal – as opposed to local - representatives (SVP M36, M42, M43). Some members also felt that national representatives are uninterested in getting in touch with them. As one put it:

At events you realise that there is a distance between national councillors and us because they don't really care a lot about the grassroots. They are not as much with the people as you would expect from a people's party (laughs). (SVP/UDC M38).

While members' perception about closeness with party elites thus tend to vary, an arguably more crucial question is whether they believe the latter lend their ears to members' ideas and concerns. In other words, how do interviewees perceive their ability to influence their parties' ideological course and decision-making procedures? Across our cases, we notice that individual members have mixed thoughts on this matter. As many as 88.5% of League interviewees and 92% of PS interviewees, and three quarters of those from the SVP and the VB mention at least once in their interviews that they believe members can exercise influence within their parties. However, 20% of interviewed PS members, 25% of VB ones, and about half of League and SVP interviewees also lament that, at least in certain areas, members do not have enough power to shape what happens within their organisations. These are often the same people at different moments within their interviews.

When we consider members' specific statements it becomes clear that official party channels and institutions are seen to provide some opportunities for influencing the party. Various LSP members, for instance, stress the importance of taking part in local branch meetings and discussions to exercise some impact on the party (LSP, M38, M39, M42, M45). Others mention party congresses (e.g. LSP, M37; M39; M45; M47; M49) or other party organs (e.g. LSP, M42; M44). As one member explained:

Certainly [the way to obtain influence] is the congress, starting with the local congresses and then the provincial, regional and federal congresses. [...] And it is being part of the meetings and discussions of the branches. We start from the micro level; we start from the municipal reality (LSP M39)

As we have mentioned before, however, national party conferences have been an extremely rare occurrence within the League since the turn of the century. This has been true under both its leaders so far: Umberto Bossi and Matteo Salvini.³ PS members also cite official party bodies as a key way to exercise influence. This interviewee explained that 'the traditional route is of course the party Executive Board, the Party Council, going through the regional level. And then of course through personal influence, if you have the time and energy, I'm sure you can make things happen' (PS, M25). Various members stressed the importance of taking part in meetings (e.g. PS M32, M35, M36, M43), to enter in personal contact or submit direct feedback to representatives (e.g. PS M26, M31, M32, M35, M36). More generally, the most typically mentioned tool is the Party Congress (e.g. PS M27, M28, M31, M32, M35, M39). This member argued that: 'I can say that the Finns Party is an actual democracy, we are electing a new chairperson next week, so the party membership is the one who makes that decision' (PS M25). Another explained that:

³ The leaders cited above are the only people who have ever led the League, a very short stint by interim leader Roberto Maroni in 2012-3 notwithstanding.

when you go to the Finns Party congress, each member has one and only one vote, so you can say that there is a democracy for the members, more than in any other parties. And in my opinion the Finns Party would not accept anything less, it comes with a certain kind of working class mood, a degree of hatred for the elite [laughs], if you could call it that. To have a party elite, which alone can vote, that would never fly, there would be so much resistance. In that sense we are in pretty good shape (PS M28).

In the case of the SVP/UDC, too, party representatives are said to be fairly willing to listen to members, but mainly at the local level, where members and representatives live close to each other. Interviewees especially highlight the role of the local party president:

Sometimes people who have an idea spontaneously approach him at the assembly and ask how it could possibly be implemented. And then he has a look and checks how to best do it (SVP/UDC M40).

Most of the SVP/UDC members' statements had two aspects in common. First, members emphasised the need to show initiative and stand up at assemblies to express their opinions if they wanted to address an issue. Second, representatives were said to be fairly willing to listen if members presented solid arguments but there was never any guarantee that further action would follow (e.g. SVP M41, M48, M54, M60). Yet in national and cantonal delegate assemblies in which several hundreds of members attend, a single voice was sometimes seen to be ignored (e.g. SVP/UDC M37).

Across our cases, VB members similarly mention *informal* contacts with representatives, for instance through email, phone or social media, as being potentially useful to exercise influence (45% of interviewees). One member explained to us that: 'We can email them. There are all sorts of social media channels...there are plenty of channels to reach people' (VB M48). As for more official channels, a minority of members mention the opportunity to join the local party executive boards, as well as the provincial and national ones (VB M40, M56) or attend national Congresses organised around each electoral manifesto and ad hoc policy-focused conferences (VB M35, M40). While VB interviewees thus tend to see informal processes as the best way to reach out to party elites, they are not necessarily convinced that communicating their opinions inherently translates into a change of approach on the part of the leadership – which is similar to the views of many SVP/UDC interviewees in particular. For example, one respondent explained: 'If something happened that really wasn't okay, I would let them know. And I know I would get a response. Whether they would then take that into account, that is something different. But I know for sure that I would get a response' (VB M39). Only one respondent (VB M33) explicitly judged internal power distribution to be a problem. Members thus generally express that party representatives were accessible – 'really among the people, as men of the people' (VB M54) – but also that party elites do not necessarily act on members' ideas (VB M42, M50).

As we will discuss in more detail in the following section, such responses suggest that exercising actual influence within their parties may not be a key objective for many PRRP members. According to this VB member: 'I also think that our members don't expect that. I notice that too if I myself do a local survey that very few people respond...when we get a new member I say, let's go get a drink. Then you can discuss all your concerns. That's actually the best form of participation and people very rarely respond' (VB M34). They argued that those who did engage in these types of conversations were often those with minor complaints or 'no one to talk to'. Another considered that members followed rather than determined the party line (VB M46). As such, some VB members noted and accepted a lack of power in the party as obvious and unproblematic.

In other cases we also heard more sceptical, and even cynical, voices too. For instance, this LSP member maintained that: ‘There is no interest in listening to the grassroots’ (LSP M41). Moreover, Salvini is often accused by his critics of ‘dictating the agenda’ (LSP, M46) and urged ‘to listen to activists’ more (LSP, M59). Some members lament what they see as the top-down and hierarchical management of the party under his leadership (LSP, M38 M46; M50). They see the shelving of the old Northern League and the creation of the new LSP as a period during which ordinary people have not been consulted enough.

Some SVP/UDC members, too, are outspoken about the party not listening to them (e.g. SVP, M39, M46, M54). Members likened this to running the party like a company, where the board of directors ultimately decides (SVP M37, M50). As one member summed it up:

Some people determine the course of action and that is what we do. Members are not involved and their view are seen as subjective. Ordinary members can't really influence anything (SVP/UDC M38).

Despite some pessimistic opinions on influence, there were also members accepting that, ultimately, it is the majority of members at the National Assembly that decides, which necessarily limits a single member's influence. This interviewee, for instance, argued:

We do have the assemblies and members who come and say what they think and are in the majority, they feel represented. And we hope that the others don't feel rejected and badly treated. But that is life. Some lose, some win and sometimes you are in the first group and sometimes in the latter (SVP M36).

PS interviewees seemed, on the whole, most satisfied with the workings of internal party democracy, but also in this case a small number deemed members to have no or too little influence (PS M26, 28, 33, 39, 44). One maintained that ‘A regular party member has to climb the party hierarchy to be able to influence [...] But a normal person cannot have any influence’, while M33 lamented that: ‘there are instances where you consider that it is very Helsinki-centred’ (PS M44).

Generally speaking, although most members across our cases say that they can influence their party, some digging reveals several problems and even feelings of frustration. This in itself should not come as a surprise given that we have previously shown that our selected parties offer members few real opportunities to influence internal decision-making and ideological course. Therefore, while previous research has found that members of PRRPs are often driven by feelings of political efficacy, that is: ‘the belief that by joining the PRR party they could bring about the changes needed to improve their situation and that of ‘their people’ (Ammassari 2023a: 13), our interviews show that this does not mean that they necessarily feel that they can also exercise considerable impact *on their own organisations*. In other words, the party is judged to be having a positive influence on issues members care about, however this is due to the implantation of strategies that are ultimately decided by party elites. A final key question we thus ask is, if members are aware of their limited influence, what do they see as the advantages of party membership, and what motivates them to *stay*?

Section 5. Perceived advantages of membership and motivations to stay

Perceived advantages of membership

If many members recognise the limited influence they have within their parties, what do they consider as the advantages of membership? When directly asked this question it is interesting to observe that, across our cases, a (small) minority of interviewees mention ‘purposive’ advantages related to an individual member’s ability to have an influence on political outcomes (see Table 5.x). This is again a sign that many members certainly do not overestimate their *own* level of influence within the party and, in turn, political outcomes (even though they might well feel the party as a whole does have a large impact in the latter regard – as we will discuss later on). It is similarly interesting to observe that many interviewees contend there are no advantages at all – which can also be seen as a socially desirable answer. This applies to three quarters of interviewed LSP members. They are often keen to stress that what they do comes at great personal effort or even sacrifice. This member ironically maintained that ‘The only advantage is that you spend a lot of money! There are absolutely no gains from it’ (LSP M51), while another stressed that ‘we don’t do it for opportunistic reasons’ (LSP M49). In Finland, too, two-thirds of interviewees typically emphasise the lack of advantages of being a member of the PS. Within the SVP, many members similarly said there were no real advantages of being a party member (44 per cent), and some specified that party membership did not come with personal and material benefits (SVP M36, M37, M50, M52). In the Flemish case too, it was very common for VB members to express that there was no real personal advantage of membership (42% of interviewees). One interviewee noted that ‘if you want to be a militant, then you have to give without taking.’ (VB M43). Membership is thus seen as an ‘investment’ into the party (VB M50). Another noted: ‘I didn’t become a member with the idea, “What do I get in return?” That wasn’t the approach for me. My approach was more, by becoming a member I give some kind of symbolic support to that party’ (VB M34).

Table 5.X: Perceived advantages of party membership

| | LSP n=26 | PS n=25 | SVP n=25 | VB n=24 | Total n=100 |
|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Material | 7 (26.9%) | 7 (28.0%) | 15 (60.0%) | 5 (20.8%) | 34 (34.0%) |
| Purposive | 7 (26.9%) | 2 (8.0%) | 3 (12.0%) | 6 (25.0%) | 18 (18.0%) |
| Personal | 11 (42.3%) | 4 (16.0%) | 9 (36.0%) | 7 (29.2%) | 31 (31.0%) |
| Communitarian | 11 (42.3%) | 6 (24.0%) | 6 (24.0%) | 7 (29.2%) | 30 (30.0%) |
| Other | 3 (11.5%) | 6 (24.0%) | 4 (16.0%) | 9 (37.5%) | 22 (22.0%) |
| No advantages | 20 (76.9%) | 17 (68.0%) | 11 (44.0%) | 10 (41.7%) | 58 (58.0%) |

Note: values indicate number of interviews (and percentage of interviews per case) in which category was coded at least once

It seems evident that many interviewees narrowly interpreted ‘advantages’ in terms of practical or material benefits, or saw it as a word denoting (socially undesirable) self-interested motivations. Scholars have pointed out how activists rarely admit to seeking ‘material’ advantages when participating in political activities, including starting a political career - which in fact can come at the cost of hindering a career *outside* politics (Fjellman and Rosén Sundström 2021).

When taking a closer look at the interview material, however, it transpires that many do recognise immaterial and personally gratifying aspects of party membership – and these could be the same individuals who at another point in the interview denied there were any advantages to party membership at all. Many of the League members mention advantages related to non-material personal fulfilment and being part of a community (in 42.3% of interviews the categories ‘personal’ and ‘communitarian’ were coded). In line with the analysis above, being a *leghista* is often associated with having made good friends within the party (LSP M36, M37, M39, M46, M53, M54, M58). As explained by LSP M36: ‘I found my boyfriend, a lot of friends, a lot of people from different ages with whom I get along very well’. In terms of personal incentives, members often mention a feeling of fulfilment, satisfaction or reward originating from their activism (e.g. LSP M36, LSP M42, LSP M45, LSP M51, LSP M47). This member explained that ‘The League has given a purpose to my life’, and added: ‘Mine was a life with no great ideals except for the basic ideals of the common man, [...] so the advantage has been to find an ideal in life. It was no small advantage (LSP M45). Another declared: ‘you know that whatever happens to you in life, whether your girlfriend leaves you or you break up with some friends, [...] you know that Saturday – morning or afternoon – you are there, at the local branch, and it’s a sort of certainty’ (LSP M54).

Similar to the League, many of the most active VB members (about a third of respondents) refer to the personal gratification and communitarian bonds (often in conjunction) as key benefits of membership. Members expressed that being part of the party gave them a sense of personal satisfaction (VB M43, M44, M46) and belonging to a group (VB M44, M45, M53, M54). One member explained: ‘It gives me satisfaction. I am happy and proud to be a member of the club’ (VB M44). A new member noted that ‘the social contacts, the social circle is increased. You get into contact with really important people. I think that’s pretty cool, a benefit of membership’ (VB M53). Members’ commitment to the party is thus explicitly tied to the relationships they build within it and the sense of being bonded to others within the party community. As this member noted: ‘Generally speaking, the majority are super cool people and they’ve all become friends of mine. It’s just nice. It’s become a close group actually and it’s very nice to be part of that’ (VB M41). A long-time member echoed this feeling of closeness: ‘It’s the determination, the love, the camaraderie. We have an unbelievable camaraderie. There is no other political party that has that...the die-hards like me never gave up’ (VB M36). Others noted that membership simply provided easier access to information about the party (VB M38, M51), for example through the monthly magazine (VB M34, M47, M54, M56) and other written material (VB M50, M54).

In terms of a sense of personal reward, some VB members suggest that party membership does provide them with a sense of efficaciousness. One noted, ‘There are always...people walking around the street a bit messed up because they can’t achieve anything. Now that I’ve gotten that chance in the party, I’m actually really happy that I can accomplish something. That’s important for me. That I can really stand up for the people’ (VB M54). The member noted that the desire for accomplishment is ‘an itch that really motivates you’ (VB M54). This sense of accomplishment can also come from being part of a larger whole (i.e. a community). One member explained, when asked about the party’s functioning: ‘It’s going well now as it is. And that also strengthens me. And that also strengthens other party members. That it’s going well now. And a winning team, you should change as little as you can’ (VB M52). Being in the ‘winning team’ of the party provides members with the feeling that they can be efficacious on their own as well.

Among SVP/UDC interviewees, advantages related to personal gratification (mentioned in 36% of interviews) and being part of a community (mentioned in 24% of interviews) also play a considerable, albeit less prominent, role. Some respondents said they appreciated ‘fighting for Switzerland’ together

as part of a well-functioning team of like-minded people (SVP M39, M52, M54), or stressed the importance of having honest exchanges with other members (SVP M43, M57), and a moral sense of duty towards their organisation (SVP M36, M39). As one member put it to us:

I don't want to let the party down. It sounds a bit stupid because I would still support them even if I am not secretary anymore. Including small work tasks. They can always approach me if needed. (SVP M40).

Interviewees also showed appreciation of the opportunity to meet political personalities such as party figurehead Christoph Blocher, and the effort representatives take to mingle with ordinary members at party events. As one member said to us:

I like these big events where we meet national councillors. I like that at these events...it is very relaxed and people are down to earth. If Ueli Maurer, the federal councillor, shows up, it is like your friend is sitting next to you (SVP M45).

Somewhat related to the opportunity to meet party representatives are certain members' recognitions that being active in the party allows them to get better and faster access to information about politics, and specifically about what the party does (SVP M37, M40, M54, M55, M60).

In the case of the Finns, we also see communitarian advantages being mentioned in 24% of interviews, while advantages concerning personal fulfilment only by 16% of interviewees. Several interviewees refer to a 'community spirit' (PS M26), such as the possibility of making friends (PS M33, M41, M43, M44) or, more generally, meeting new people (PS M35, M41). For instance, this member said that 'I have made a lot of friends all over Finland' (PS M33), while another maintained that he had met 'a lot of people who have the same ideology, [and] you don't even have to discuss those topics every time, because you can already tell by the expression on their faces that they're on the same wavelength' (PS M41). Whilst clearly mentioned less often, a good example of non-material personal benefits is provided by the interviewee who argued that membership 'has matured my own thinking a lot' (PS M28). According to another:

[party membership] has given me a kind of energy. And since I have made friends there, I have also got power and resources and help for my everyday life. It is not just doing politics, but it is also about relationships and a feeling of community, and that has improved. So I do see that it has given me new opportunities in my life (PS M43)

Interestingly, in comparison with other parties, SVP/UDC members stood out in often listing *material* advantages of party membership, too (in 60% of interviews). When given the opportunity to expand on the topic, quite a few respondents admitted to having enjoyed the opportunity of starting a political career thanks to their activism (SVP M36, M53, M58); others mentioned having encountered new networking opportunities (SVP M38, M43, M44), and even have gained support for their businesses (SVP M40, M49, M51). To hear such answers particularly often in our Swiss case does not come as a surprise, given the business-friendly nature of the SVP/UDC (see Chapter 3). More generally, it is fair to say that – when pushed – some members (albeit not all) will admit that party membership can bring some (potentially considerable) material advantages.

Similarly, around one-fourth of League interviewees mentioned material advantages to party membership. The potential for pursuing a political career, even if just at the local level, was the most

popular theme (LSP M37, M38, M39, M47, M49, M50, M52). Material advantages are mentioned in a similar share of PS interviewees. We find that some members identify as an advantage the possibility of being elected (e.g. PS M31, M36, M43), while this parliamentary aide underlined that ‘I wouldn’t have gotten my job If I wasn’t a party member’ (PS M46). In the VB, material advantages are downplayed and tend to be more about the ability to be involved in party life, rather than substantive financial advantages. Some members mention fairly mundane benefits such as small gifts from the party, such as Covid face masks, or access to social events and meetings with Tom van Grieken (VB M47, M40, M41, M54).

Perceived disadvantages of membership

We naturally also asked interviewees about the (potential) disadvantages they associated with being a member of their party. It is common for interviewees to stress the *costs* (social and practical) that, they say, often originate from activism, either to them directly or to the people they know. Recent research has shown how large numbers of PRRP members, and especially the better educated, often feel stigmatised for having joined one of these parties (Ammassari, 2023b: 723). As Klandermans and Mayer (2006: 273) observed, stigmatisation acts as a double-edged sword, given that it also ‘becomes the cement that holds [activists] together because of the feeling of injustice and discrimination it generates’ (Klandermans and Mayer, 2006: 273). From the perspective of party *elites*, therefore, stigmatisation may have an important silver lining, although it may also deter some people from activism.

Our findings generally corroborate the above observations. About three-quarters of League interviewees (73.9%) mention problems with social relationships originating from their membership, and around a third (34.6%) speak of having experienced practical problems. Interviewees mention a variety of anecdotes and incidents to back up their claims, ranging from ‘losing followers on Instagram among classmates’ (LSP M48), to being seen as ‘extreme’, ‘blunt’ and ‘mean’ (LSP M40). As we heard in one interview:

Unfortunately, even my daughter who is 10 years and attends 4th grade, often comes home saying that the teacher was saying bad things about Salvini [the League leader] and I always tell her not to speak about politics at school (LSP M40).

In terms of practical disadvantages, activism within the League is said to take a heavy toll in terms of the energy and time the party expects members to dedicate to politics (e.g. LSP M39, M42, M45, M46, M53, M50, M57).

Along the same lines, about two-thirds of SVP/UDC members also said that they were criticised or negatively labelled for their political views (e.g. SVP/UDC M43, M50, M58), and regarded as ‘right-wing extremist’ (SVP/UDC M51) or ‘racist’ (SVP/UDC M41). And again, some reported to us that their activism had caused problems to their children at school (SVP/UDC M57). Some members even recalled to have fallen out with family and friends over their political views and party membership (SVP/UDC M37, M43, M50), while others felt they had to avoid conflict by being very careful about exposing their political affiliation (SVP M36, M42, M59). As one member said:

I was hiding it first and did not tell my friends, and only told them later when I saw that they share my way of thinking, and with others I did not dare telling (SVP/UDC M44).

Social exclusion was also mentioned by about two-thirds of VB interviewees, from censorship on social media (VB M55) to challenges in their family (VB M35, M45, M46), to antagonistic responses from friends and colleagues (VB M37, M39, M44, M46, M50). This social exclusion is seen as a result of the *cordon sanitaire*, as one interviewee explained: ‘Because we are always kept from the government, we’re always kept small. There is always a sort of strict stigma about us. We’ve always been pariahs, evil people of society, angry people who don’t think anything is good’ (VB M40). Related to this, and more so than in other cases (e.g. in three quarters of interviews), Flemish interviewees tend to highlight practical or legal disadvantages of membership. Answers centred on the exclusion of Vlaams Belang members from trade unions (VB M36, M37, M38, M43, M44, M45, M51) and on specific cases of members being fired or rejected from jobs as a result of their membership (VB M33, M40, M45, M48, M53, M54, M56).

Practical or legal disadvantages are also most prevalent in the interviewees from Finland (68%), whereas only one-fifth of Finns interviewees identify a social disadvantage. A good explanation of practical disadvantages was provided by this member:

if you even express views that agree with the Finns Party’s views, let alone openly showing that you are a party member, it does close many doors in this society. There is a risk of it having an impact on getting a job, even keeping your job, there is a risk of being “cancelled” (PS M28)

Similarly, this member observed that ‘political activism has already closed some doors for me in working life’ (PS M38), while another interviewee argued that ‘When applying for jobs [...] being a member of the Finns Party is riskier than being in some other party’ (PS M29). Another reportedly ‘lost at least one client because they learned that I’m a member of the Finns Party’ (PS M32). Finally, a respondent told us about the experience of some business owners in ‘a very red town’, in which they alleged the prevalence of a ‘mentality whereby if you are a Finns Party member, you may lose your business’ (PS 43).

In terms of social disadvantages, respondents mentioned pretty disruptive consequences originating from membership, such as the breaking of relationships with family members (e.g. PS M28, M48), and an especially negative impact on friends and acquaintances. This member recollected: ‘When I made it public [i.e. PS membership], almost immediately I became a ‘racist’, and some of my friends immediately vanished’ (PS M41). Another maintained that ‘buddies or acquaintances cut ties with me because I was all of a sudden a fascist or a Nazi’ (PS M28). This interviewee similarly noted the risk is that ‘you get labelled with the Finns Party and for being a racist and a fascist’ (PS M31). Another common perceived downside of membership is the demanding impact of activism on free time (e.g. PS M32, M47). In this respect, this interviewee argued that ‘With politics, the family life suffers unavoidably because you have to attend meetings and so on, but of course that isn’t to do with the Finns Party alone, I think that everyone who is involved in politics suffers from the same problem, I would think so’ (PS M49).

However, there were also several members within each party who could not recall having ever been disadvantaged because of their activism (e.g. SVP/UDC M40, M46, M48, M53; PS M35, M39; VB M34, M35, M41) and/or stressed that family and friends shared their ideology or at least respected their views (e.g. SVP/UDC M42, M49, M52, M53; PS M30, M31, M47, M48). Hence, it would be wrong to suggest that all members have personally encountered problems due to their activism.

Motivations of members to remain active

Given the sometimes serious drawbacks of membership that members perceive, either because of personal experience or observing problems that their fellow partisans face, why do members ultimately choose to stay active within their organisations? Why is it worth having to face the practical and social difficulties that come with membership of parties that are apparently often treated as pariahs, especially when one’s influence within the organisation is limited? Answers to the specific question of why individuals stay in the party are often similar to observations about the advantages of membership. One important difference is that, across all our cases, *purposive incentives* were mentioned most frequently (see Table 5.X). What this implies is that the reasons why many people *joined* the party remain relevant: members continue to believe that their activities, at least at a collective level, serve the purpose of changing or shaping politics according to their views of society. It also suggests that, while members may not consider their individual influence within the party very large, they *do* believe membership of a party serves a real (collective) purpose. Our combined findings indicate that, while political efficacy appears crucial to explain members’ reasons to join, as well as to stay (Ammassari 2023a), this has to do with whatever *the party* is believed to be achieving, and does not necessarily imply a belief that it is the members who decide what is to be done in the first place, and how.

Table 5.X: Motivations to stay in the party today

| | LSP n=26 | PS n=25 | SVP n=25 | VB n=24 | Total n=100 |
|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Material | 2 (7.7%) | 5 (20.0%) | 1 (4.0%) | 0 (0.0%) | 8 (8.0%) |
| Purposive | 20 (76.9%) | 21 (84.0%) | 17 (68.0%) | 17 (70.8%) | 75 (75.0%) |
| Personal | 19 (73.1%) | 17 (68.0%) | 7 (28.0%) | 4 (16.7%) | 47 (47.0%) |
| Communitarian | 15 (57.7%) | 19 (76.0%) | 7 (28.0%) | 2 (8.3%) | 43 (43.0%) |
| Other | 10 (38.5%) | 16 (64.0%) | 8 (32.0%) | 4 (16.7%) | 38 (38.0%) |

Note: values indicate number of interviews (and percentage of interviews per case) in which category was coded at least once

Three quarters of interviewees in Italy pointed to specific party ideas and goals that members want to see implemented (e.g. LSP M36, M37, M39, M56, M58), or else a vague desire to change ‘something’ (e.g. LSP M42, 55, 59). One member noted that ‘I’m still motivated by the fact that, if there’s will, things can be changed, things can be done, from the smallest thing to the biggest thing’ (LSP M42), another revealed that ‘today I am motivated, above all, by the idea of carrying on my ideas and principles in politics’ (LSP M56). One interviewee’s answer interestingly suggested that their continued membership hinged purely on purposive (and not communitarian or other reasons): ‘Why am I still in the League? Well, I don’t know. Because there is no alternative. If there was an alternative political actor addressing these issues, I’ll greet everyone and leave’ (LSP M41).

Despite any disadvantage this might bring to themselves, members of the VB also express the willingness to help the party keep spreading its ideas and implement policies that are seen to address a deeply felt sense of injustice (e.g. VB M33, M37, M42, M44, M45, M48, M55). These members express their reasons for staying thus: ‘A hope for the future that it will get better, that we can turn the tide. That’s my constant motivation. Yeah. To work together for a better future’ (VB M53); and ‘To keep

working towards your ideal that you want to implement in society. So it's mostly for that ideal that I keep doing it' (VB M51). The impression that the world is heading in the wrong direction is actively cultivated by the party's rhetoric around a variety of issues. On top of the list is migration, which is felt to be changing the fabric of Flemish society without native people having been given a say in the matter. As member VB M40 said to us: 'What will be left for my children in terms of Flemish norms, our society, our European foundations?' This is linked to the second main issue that has characterised the VB since the party was founded: the idea of Flemish independence. In other words, Flemish people are said not to be in control of their own destiny. Hence for several members, their deeply felt sense of injustice originates from the desire to see Flanders break free from the embrace of the Belgian state (e.g. member VB M33, M39, M43, M47, M49, M56). This member explicitly stated this goal as a reason to remain active: 'Because we still aren't independent. [Laughs] And I hope I can experience that one day' (VB M49). Another VB member said to us: 'What keeps me motivated is that... the peaceful fight, let's say, that still hasn't been fought. Flanders still isn't independent' (VB M43). Indeed, many VB members allude to the potential for being efficacious rather than accomplishments that have already happened – not surprising given VB's continued exclusion from power. For example, one said that the party provides them with 'a hope for the future that it will get better, that we can turn the tide. That's my constant motivation: to work together for a better future' (VB M53).

Two-thirds of interviewees in Switzerland similarly refer to purposive reasons to stay. While many interviewed members did not agree with every single SVP/UDC policy, they usually argued that the party represented their views and that they fiercely supported its stated mission to keep Switzerland independent, free, and sovereign (SVP/UDC M42, M51, M54, M55, M659, M60). One member highlighted this view by saying 'for me, the SVP members are the freedom fighters of Switzerland', adding that 'I feel that I am at the right place. I do not regret [joining the party] for a minute. Maybe that changes, I can't rule it out. But so far it is great and I would do it again' (SVP/UDC M44). This member revealed a somewhat idiosyncratic purposive reason to stay: 'I want to confront the opinions of long-time members with controversial views. I want to set an opposite point. Maybe I am too confrontational but I want some discussions. But besides the elections, this is my motivation (SVP/UDC M38).

Purposive reasons also rank highest among Finns interviewees. Many members refer to the ideas or programme of the PS as the key reason for staying (e.g. PS M27, M30, M38, M45, M46). These interviewees, for instance, argued that 'I'm personally motivated by my desire for change in how decisions are made in Finland and [local area] Jyväskylä' (M39), and 'I wouldn't want our nation to slowly turn into, the same as has happened in France, that certain groups of people are starting to dominate, creating a feeling of unsafety for people, even during the daytime and so on. And that is one motivating factor' (PS M41). Another noted that the PS 'is the party that is representing my vision for the future of Finland' (PS 38). Several members also mentioned the chance to have an influence or impact (e.g. PS M26, M30, M31, M40, M42): among them this interviewee argued that she wanted to 'have an influence in getting the Finnish people's voice heard' (PS M30), while another member's stated goal was to 'take care of common issues under the flag of the Finns Party' (PS M37). This interviewee went as far as declaring: 'if nobody does [activism], Finland will be destroyed' (PS M44).

Beyond purposive motivations, interviewees across most of our cases also frequently mention personal and communitarian reasons for staying (See Table 5.x). The answers here tend to be very similar to those related to perceived personal and purposive *advantages* of party membership. Several LSP members, for instance, refer to satisfaction and related feelings of fulfilment (e.g. LSP M35, M45, M46), such as the feeling that 'your work is recognised and rewarded' (LSP M40), and that this makes

you ‘feel active, feel alive’ (LSP M43). More than half of the interviewees within this party (57.7%) mentioned communitarian reasons, and this again points to the ‘familiar’ dimension of the League and to the sense of belonging it is able to establish (e.g. LSP M36, M39, M56, M58, M60). We see similar responses about personal fulfilment and appreciation of community and camaraderie in other cases too. Not unexpectedly, given that, as we have seen, SVP/UDC members do not rely on the party to strengthen (or make) personal acquaintances and friendships to the extent we see in other cases, and such incentives are mentioned by just over a quarter of Swiss interviewees. But also relatively few VB members mention these reasons...

Evidently, our study only includes interviewees who have decided to remain active within their parties, but it is also interesting to consider potential motivations for *leaving* political parties. We did ask our interviewees to reflect on their potential reasons for leaving and about reasons why former party members left. In line with the limited research on this question, we see that ideological (purposive) reasons and disillusionment with leaders often play a role (Barnfield and Bale 2022). Various Italian interviewees, for instance, mention that many left the League in protest against the perceived abandonment of the party’s regionalist *raison d’être* (e.g. LSP M36, M37, M38, M39, M46, M49). Finnish interviewees mentioned the possibility of leaving the party due to the inappropriate behaviour of other party members or representatives (PS M33, M37, M44, M45), disagreements with specific positions taken by some leaders, especially when Timo Soini was at the head of the party (PS M41, M48), but also perceived ideological change (PS M28). Yet also a lack of motivation or loyalty may be an important incentive for quitting the party. Some Flemish interviewees discussed the behaviour of less committed VB members: ‘When we were in that black hole, when we had that [electoral] defeat, many of our members went to the N-VA. But then [the N-VA] actually got punished for it, because they were in the government and they voted for things that were not ideal, and they all came back’ (VB M46).

The main findings of this part of our research is that important incentives to *join* PRRPs, i.e. purposive incentives, the desire to stimulate political change (see Ammassari 2023a; Bale et al. 2019a; Fjellman and Rosén; Gallagher and Marsh 2004; Pedersen et al. 2004; Sundström 2021; Van Haute and Gauja 2015) also work as important factors to keep people within the party after they have joined. However, some additional advantages of party membership tend to become more important as time goes by, namely: personal gratification (personal incentives) and the benefits of belonging to a like-minded group of people (communitarian incentives). In other words, when it comes to these PRRPs it appears that the mass party structures are doing their work in forging close-knitted communities and shaping identities based on ideology.

Conclusions (under construction)

- In line with the literature, purposive reasons to join are paramount.
- Our data show that party elites generally seem to succeed in creating a closely-knit mass party (but can discuss that it’s partly a matter of degree, with LSP and SVP on the ‘extremes’ in our sample)
 - In all of our cases there are mixed feelings about social media, and still a strong appreciation for in-person activities and the personal fulfilment these tend to generate. In that sense, the party activities of our selected parties resemble quite closely those of the traditional 20th century mass parties, and the Covid-19 pandemic has hardly increased a desire among

grassroots members to shift the focus to more online activities. If anything, it is underlined a desire for traditional party activities.

- Members get a lot out of the party community but also face considerable stigmatisation
- As far as reasons to stay, the reasons why many people *joined* the party remain relevant: members continue to believe their activities, at least at a collective level, serve the purpose of changing or shaping politics according to their views of society. It also suggests that, while members may not consider their individual influence within the party very large, they do believe membership of a party serves a real (collective) purpose. What's important is the sense of being part of a collective, an organisation of like-minded and politically invested people that can make a collective difference at the local and national level.
- Purposive motivations are of course often intertwined with personal gratification (about the very fact that collective activism has a worthwhile purpose) and enjoyment of social activities. These other motivations should not be underestimated. Our 'dynamic approach', aimed at considering what happens after joining the party shows that for many party members additional advantages of party membership have become more important as incentives to stay during the course of membership, namely: personal gratification and the benefits of belonging to a like-minded group of people. It is a clear sign that the mass party structures are doing their work in forging close-knitted communities and shaping identities based on ideology.
- Some quotes from Klandermans and Mayer:
 - 269: interviewees diverse but on the whole 'normal' people who are socially integrated and connected [also didn't interview violent extremists]. They avoid openly blatant formulations
 - 273: Stigmatisation as badge of honour. Rarely a reason to quit: '**Stigmatization may deter people from activism (...) but once they are in it becomes the cement that holds them together because of the feeling of injustice and discrimination it generates**'
 - 273: Collective identity: 'If we were to ask people why they stay engaged in right-wing activism, despite its adverse consequences, it is probably these loyalties and collective identifications they would refer to'

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